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**A Room With a View**

by **Persnickety**

**Summary**

Severus Snape has returned to Magical Britain a changed man after a long absence. He resumes his old position at Hogwarts, only to discover that he is not the only one who has changed in the seven years since Voldemort's fall.

All hail J. K. Rowling, creator of the Harry Potter Universe and owner of all contained therein. (This is a fan work; I own nothing. The only payment I receive is in the form wonderful reader comments!)

**Notes**

Updates once a week (more frequently if I can manage). This is my first fic, so constructive feedback is welcomed! Thanks to B.L. for beta reading.
A(nother) New Beginning

May 3, 2005: The Charm’d Pot, Edinburgh

“Surely, Minerva, there is a better alternative to your staff shortage than bringing me back into the Hogwarts fold. I sincerely doubt that anyone wants to see me flapping through the halls again.”

Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, straightened in her seat and considered her drink for a moment. She was not fooled by the bored cadence of Severus Snape’s objection. Nearly anyone else would have taken his drawled response as a rejection of her offer, but Minerva knew her old friend and sometimes-adversary better than that. She could spot the slight telltale lift of the left corner of his mouth. If he’d decided to reject her offer outright, he would’ve said so.

“Nonsense, Severus. It’s been seven years since the Battle of Hogwarts. You’re a national hero now and there are no students left in the school who ever witnessed your former, erh, teaching style. You’re a school legend, to be sure, but you can disprove their assumptions when you return and teach as yourself, not Snape-the-spy” she responded in her no-nonsense Scottish brogue.

He sneered and sipped his at his glass of Ogden’s before replying. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Minerva. I’m tired. I’ve been tired for what feels like three decades. Between Dumbledore, the Order, and the last few years of travel, I feel like I’m about as ancient as Merlin himself. Not to mention I’m hardly up on the latest advances in potion making. For heaven’s sake woman, there must be someone else to replace Slughorn!”

The older witch sighed with exasperation. “If you’d actually responded to my first four owls instead of forcing me to floo you, you’d know that Horace isn’t going anywhere. He’s far too happy collecting students and rolling about the castle like an overgrown walrus. I’m not asking you to return as Potions Master, you stubborn man! I want you to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. We’ve no one qualified to fill the post and the rest of the staff is stretched too thin as it is. You’re the foremost expert in the Dark Arts and the defense against them. I would be a fool to ask anyone else now that you’re back in Britain.” She raised an eyebrow at the grumpy man.

“I don’t doubt your enthusiasm, Minerva. I’ve been ‘back in Britain’ approximately 30 hours. You certainly didn’t waste any time launching owls my way.”

“Hogwarts needs you” she huffed a bit desperately. “I know you’re tired, but you’re forty-four, not four-hundred. It’s a good age for a third career. Please don’t make me beg.”

Severus considered the headmistress speculatively. It was true, he wasn’t quite as tired as he’d implied and the prospect of returning to the comforts and routine of his former home were...appealing. After nearly seven years--the first of which had been spent in slow and painful recovery from multiple magical viper bites--thoughts of Hogwarts had an almost nostalgic sheen to them. He schooled his face so it didn’t reflect any of the very real temptation to accept the offer outright.

“If I accepted your offer, and I’m not saying I will, I would want a few guarantees. I’d like to have my choice of rooms within the castle; I find I’m tired of being a dungeon-dweller and I have no desire to have my classroom attached to my private rooms again. I’d also like a small space, preferably within my quarters, to use as a potions and defense lab so that I can continue my personal research. And I would like--no, I would demand --the freedom to design my own curriculum. I won’t use that standard ministry syllabus. You know it’s rubbish as well as I do.”
His terse demands were greeted with an indulgent smile. “I think I could accommodate you on all counts there. You never saw the updates to the castle after the battle. We added in several suites of rooms during the repairs, so you can have your pick of any of the vacant ones. I can offer you total freedom in your curriculum so long as your students can pass their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. And as long as they aren’t put in harm’s way unnecessarily, of course. Oh, and I’ll even sweeten the deal.” She paused dramatically. “The Ministry has approved a substantial raise over your former salary should I secure your appointment. The position includes a separate fund for training materials, your continued field research, which you can use on potions ingredients if you desire, and the development of interdisciplinary lessons with the other professors at the school. The Ministry--and I really should be saying Kingsley here as he’s the one who spearheaded your recruitment--wants no more unprepared young adults in Magical Britain should another threat come to our shores. We want you to redesign the curriculum. Heaven knows it needs it!”

Severus’ eyes caught the erstwhile Transfiguration professor’s at the mention of a new threat. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Is there something here that I don’t know? Why wait seven years to revamp the defense courses?”

“The Minister isn’t exactly sitting on his backside, Severus. He has completely overhauled the Ministry in the past seven years; D.A.D.A. education is simply next on the list for overhaul. I suspect he may have also been waiting for you to return from your travels...though Kingsley hasn’t confided as much in me, of course. In our conversations, he’s spoken about a desire to change not just the governing process of Magical Britain, but reshaping how we think about the Dark and the Light. I think he’s ashamed that Magical of Britain was saved only by the bravery of outlaws and teenagers. Teenagers trained by teenagers, even.”

“It is shameful! Shameful that we weren’t prepared because Ministry chose to hide its head in the proverbial sand. It left only a handful of us to fight, with the children bearing the brunt of the casualties. Voldemort should never have been able to reach the castle because the rest of the bloody country should have been standing in his way!” He slapped his hand on the table, rattling the charmed ice in his glass.

“We are not in disagreement,” she said with a snap. “There were too many young lives lost, my friend, and the Minister will not have it happen again. This generation will graduate prepared to protect themselves, but you and I know that it’s about more than training Severus. They need the will to stand for what is right and the courage to carry on against the odds. They need to understand the risks and the temptations of the Dark and still choose the Light in the end. And they need to hear it from someone who did it every day for nearly two decades.”

Severus sneered at his friend. “So I am to be both Defense professor and resident philosopher? Shall I show them my mark? The scars on my neck? Warn them of all that can befall them if another civil war were to befall us? Whatever raise you offer me won’t be enough if you want me to exhibit me as some bloody romantic hero.”

“Severus, I don’t want you to pretend to be anything you’re not, though you are a heroic legend whether or not you like it. I want you to speak to the students about the reality of all you faced and prepare them to be vigilant. I want you to show them that even human frailty can become a powerful weapon in its own right.”

Severus considered his former colleague for a moment as they lapsed into silence. While he didn’t relish the idea of returning to Hogwarts as some sort of hero-turned-instructor, he did relish the idea of shaping a new generation of students to lead Magical Britain. In a way, a return to Hogwarts would allow him to reclaim the parts of himself that he hadn’t managed to heal during his travels in the past six years. I can finally teach as myself, not under the cover of the evil potions master.
Slowly, Severus shook his head and sighed. “Fine. Minerva, if you think Hogwarts can survive my return who am I to protest?”

Green flames flared and died, signaling Severus’ return to his house in Spinner’s End. The small town in The Midlands offered nothing if not obscurity, and Severus breathed a sigh of relief as he removed his boots and placed his frock coat on the hook by the door. He flicked his wand toward the fire to ward against further disturbances for the night and banished the soot from his clothing before letting out a sigh of frustration. Trunks and boxes still filled his living room, waiting to be unpacked from his travels. I suppose I’ll need to choose what will stay here and what will go with me to Hogwarts in August. So much for that grand household reorganization I’d planned. Rather than face the task immediately, he made his way up the stairs to his bedroom, not bothering with the lights as he went.

Complete freedom over the curriculum, Severus mused as he made his way into the W.C. to run a bath, tossing a handful of charmed bath salts under the spigot to mix with the hot water. And the responsibility for inspiring...what? Patriotism? Not quite that. Bravery and steadfastness I suppose. How very Gryffindor. He chuckled as he removed the wand holster on his arm and elastic from his hair before shedding his clothing in preparation for a good soak.

Severus paused at the mirror as he made his way toward the slowly filling tub. He tilted his head and studied his reflection as it studied him back. If I’m not Snape-the-spy anymore, then I certainly shouldn’t look like Snape-the-spy. I’m not going to be the bloody bat of the dungeons. Yes. Time for a change. He removed a pair of scissors from the medicine cabinet and studied the long wisps of lank hair on his shoulder. He drew a deep breath. I certainly don’t need this to hide behind anymore. No time like the present! With a quick move, he sliced through the long locks and dropped them in the sink. He leaned in to grimace at himself in the mirror.

Well, fuck. Now I look like a damned page boy.

He moved the scissors back toward his head and began snipping a bit more judiciously. His grimace lifted a bit as the face-framing locks rose above his ears. A bit more hacking removed the hair from his neck, but he still thought it generally looked like a Death Eater had attacked his head with Sectumsempra. Perhaps I should have waited until morning and simply gone to a barber. He made a mental note to take care of that in the morning, resigned to spending one more night with terrible hair.

With a sigh, he waved his hand and banished the stringy mass in his sink and let his thoughts wander as he made his way back to the tub. A new wardrobe is probably in order before I return to Hogwarts. Unrelieved black isn’t really a necessity anymore and my things are decidedly travel-worn. He added a trip to his tailor to the rapidly expanding to-do list in his head. Yes. A proper haircut, some new clothes, and a trip to Flourish and Blotts to start looking at textbooks. Might as well get started on that curriculum now. It will be nice to be back among the civilized, he mused as he sank into the bath water.

The bath had been a necessity installed during his recovery seven years ago, when his recovering muscles had needed heat after his daily sessions with the thera-witch and when the small muggle bath had proved inadequate for his lanky frame. Now his soak tub was an indulgence--one he had missed during his time on the continent. He grimaced with the realization that a private bath of this
type and size would be a rare occurrence once he began teaching again. *Perhaps one of those new suites will have better bathing accommodations than my old quarters, or something I can transform to suit my needs.*

Leaning back, he rested his head against the edge of the bath and allowed his body to relax into the gently scented water. He had mixed the scent himself after suffering through the eucalyptus and camphor scented stuff available at the local apothecary during his recovery. His well-honed olfactory senses had rejected the overly medicinal smell, so he had brewed his own mixture with aconite and arnica for his muscle pain, scenting it with mahogany, amber, and whiskey extracts. Eventually he had ended up brewing all of his toiletries with the same scent profile; while he wasn’t a perfumer per se, he did enjoy using his skills to develop his own signature scent. After years of smelling like (and often being covered with) some of the fouler potions ingredients, smelling *good* was a novel experience.

He washed himself slowly as he sat in the tub, concentrating more on physical relaxation than the actual act of cleansing. He couldn’t help but ponder what the following fall would hold for him and started making a mental list of things to accomplish in the three months before returning to the castle. *Obviously, I’ll need to sort my acquisitions from the continent and decide what will come with me to the school. I’ll need to prepare a syllabus and lesson plans... figure out what “interdisciplinary” projects can take place between the various courses. Hmm...I’ll definitely have to team up with Potions and Muggle Studies--I wonder who took those over?--Charms and Transfiguration as well. Maybe there’s a way to combine all the courses together in a field trip? Survival training? That bears further thought. Heaven help me, I’m actually excited about this!*

In a deliberate attempt to prepare for sleep, Severus shelved his swirling thoughts for the fall. He inhaled deeply and began the process of intentionally relaxing his muscles and moving into a meditative state. Starting with his toes, he deliberately clenched his muscles tightly and concentrated on completely releasing them bit by bit. It took a nearly ten minutes to work his way from toes to neck, and at the end he sank lower into the tub to allow the heat to permeate his loosened limbs. He visualized a white wall as a focus for his energies and studiously thought of nothing until the water began to cool.

Later he slid between the cool cotton sheets of his bed, reveling in the crisp cotton bedding and the cool spring breeze coming in through the open window. He fell asleep with thoughts of his first home--the site of so many triumphs and failures-- in his head and a slight smile on his lips.
The Prodigal Returns

Chapter Summary

Snape returns to his Hogwarts home and gets to see the changes to the school first-hand.

Chapter Notes

Early chapter tonight. Feedback always welcome!

August 15, 2005 - Hogsmeade

The loud pop at the far end of Hogsmeade High Street signalled his arrival. The streets were deserted, the residents inside enjoying their suppers or doing the washing up. Gathering his work satchel closer, Severus began the short walk toward the Hogwarts grounds with his trunk scampering behind.

He took his time walking through the gates and down the gravel path that led to the castle entrance. Severus enjoyed his stroll; he’d forgotten just how good it felt to breathe in the highland air and how magnificent the scenery was in the peaceful pre-term period. Birch and oak trees rustled gently in the breeze and the rowans were just beginning to show their fall finery. Hagrid -- he assumed Hagrid was still groundskeeper -- had allowed thistles to grow wild at the borders of the manicured lawn. Their showy blossoms were still bright in the setting sun. He supposed they must have been charmed as they should have long ago gone to seed, but they likely continued to provide pollen for the school apiary that was in the woods behind the groundskeeper’s hut. His senses overwhelmed him with a nostalgia that nearly made him grin. Severus had come home.

All too soon, he arrived at the castle’s entrance. Stones old and new greeted him as he passed from the sun and into the shadow of the castle’s gothic arches. With a sigh, Severus turned his mind to business. He wandlessly gestured for his trunk to remain in the foyer, Filch (was it still Filch?) would see that it arrived at whatever rooms he had been assigned. Severus made his way toward the familiar spiral stair that led to the Headmaster’s office.

The stone gargoyles that guarded the Headmaster’s sanctum stood to the side of the open door. Minerva was seated at a large, ruthlessly organized desk, scribbling on a piece of parchment. She glanced up at the man in her doorway and motioned for him to come in “One moment and I’ll--oh, Severus. Good you’ve arrived. Take a seat, I just need to finish this missive to Kingsley” she said.

Severus sat in the dark wood chair in front of the Headmistress’ desk, marvelling at the changes to the office since Dumbledore’s and, indeed, his own tenure. He’d banished the whirring and clicking magical devices that had populated Albus’ space to an extended closet at one end of the office when he’d become headmaster, but he had kept and enjoyed the creature comforts of the plus throne-like chair behind the desk and comfortable seating alcoves. Minerva clearly favored a more streamlined working environment, though he could see her personal proclivities in the deep burgundy fabric covering the stone walls and the sheer gold-toned curtains at the window. The room was far from
spartan, still containing the myriad portraits of past headmasters and a small collection of enchanted clocks, but her desk was a simple affair of walnut with naught but a padded desk chair behind it. A tartan shawl draped over the back of her chair for the chilly evenings he remembered all too well.

He noted that Minerva herself had changed little over the years. Her hair was more liberally streaked with grey than in years past, but the lines on her face still seemed to reflect more years of good humor than actual age. She had upgraded her wardrobe a bit since attaining the position of Headmistress, discarding the dark teaching robes of a Professor of Transfiguration for deep plum robes trimmed in maroon and gold braid. A thistle brooch rested at her neck.

Minerva raised her eyes to meet Severus’, interrupting his survey of the room and its primary occupant. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, Severus.” She blinked at him for a moment. “I’m happy to see you here again, though I’ll admit I hardly would have recognized you.”

Snape colored slightly at her comment but otherwise did not change his expression. “I thought some changes were in order.”

In fact, he was still getting used to changes in his appearance. While he hated the term “makeover”, he supposed that is just what he had accomplished. His straight hair, still black thankfully, had been styled into a simple brush cut and was held in place by a dab of his own personal pomade formula. He had chosen to dress casually for his arrival at Hogwarts, eschewing the traditional teacher’s robes for the more comfortable muggle combination of dark jeans and a button-down shirt of deep green with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. He would have been embarrassed to admit that he had sought the assistance of several muggle salespeople before settling on this simple, understated style.

“Well, I’ll say the changes suit you. It’s nice to see your face when I speak to you. And I suppose I’ll have to get used to you wearing actual color.”

“You did say that I should view this appointment as a ‘third career’. I took your advice. I’ll borrow a phrase from the muggles and call this Snape 2.0” he said with a slight smile.

Minerva regarded him with some confusion. “I’ll take your word for it, dear. So! I was just preparing to forward your final addendums for the new D.A.D.A. curriculm to Kingsley. I have to say, we’ve both been impressed with the level of thought and creativity you’ve poured into these. I don’t think you’ll have any issues gaining his full approval for your plans.”

Severus replied with a cordial nod of the head. “Thank you. I’ll admit that I’m pleased with the progress I made on the curriculum over the last few weeks. There are still issues to be worked out, of course, but assuming my plans meet the Ministry’s approval I’m well set for fall courses. Were the supplies I requested delivered to the Defense classroom?”

“Most of them, yes.” She glanced at the paperwork on her desk. “We’re still waiting on approval on some of the darker items. As I’m sure you can understand, the Hogwarts wards were strengthened after the battle; the school Head has to have explicit approval from the Ministry to lift the most top-level ones.”

“Bureaucracy is your province now, Minerva. I’ll leave the matter in your capable hands. I do have fallback plans if some of the items fail to gain approval, of course.”

“I would expect nothing else.” She paused before proceeding. “Severus, I have to ask...just what have you been doing with yourself the last six years. So few of us in the Order heard from you after your recuperation -- which is something I fully intend to take you to task for later, you know. I can’t help but think it was significant. You’re so changed from the Severus I worked with for nearly two decades, and I’m not just referring to your sartorial choices.”
Severus felt a genuine smile cross his face. “Minerva, surely you can imagine that some time away from Britain, away from having to live three lives simultaneously might have had a positive effect? I won’t give you all the details as we’d be here until end of term if I did, but suffice it to say I spent the first couple years after the Dark Lord’s fall and my subsequent recovery helping the Ministry track down those of his followers who escaped to the continent. I had been privy to rather a lot more information than any of them realized. I don’t think half of them even knew me to be a Legilimens. After I’d given the auror office all the assistance I was capable of, I decided to stay on and do what I never had the chance to in my youth: I took a grand tour. My first vacation.” He sat back with some satisfaction.

“You mean to tell me you’ve spent the last six years on vacation?”

“Not quite, six years. More like three. But yes, I spent my time seeing the traditional sites and exploring some of my own research interests. I kept the Minister aware of my travels, of course, and let him know if I stumbled across any traces of Voldemort’s followers. In fact, that’s likely why he suggested me for the post. I also collected a number of artifacts and immersed myself in the darker spells and charms of some of our European cousins. In fact, a number of the items on your to-be-approved list are likely acquisitions from my stay abroad.”

Minerva harrumphed. “So that’s what you’ve been doing. You realize that the occasional owl with a scribbled line or two about your welfare was not what I had in mind when I told you to keep in touch and tell me how you were.”

Severus raised a sardonic eyebrow at his employer “Well I could hardly send you the full truth, could I? I can see it now: Dear Minerva, Keeping well here in outer Mongolia. Found an ancient vessel in a small cave that contained a poison that puts basilisk venom to shame. Wish you were here! Love, Severus. Hardly discreet, that.”

She chuckled at his joke. “No, I suppose you couldn’t.” She met her friend’s gaze for a moment and wondered if he could see the true extent of the changes the post-war era had wrought in him. Yes his hair was decidedly less oily now that it was short and he didn’t spend the majority of his time over a cauldron, but he also seemed to sit taller and appeared more at ease with himself. Perhaps his face still settled into a scowl more naturally than anything else, but she had seen him smile at least twice today. And he’d made a joke! Would wonders never cease? She wondered how the rest of the staff would react to this polite D.A.D.A. professor.

Shaking her head to clear it, Minerva rose from her chair. “Well! This isn’t the time to reminisce. There will be time enough for that at the faculty social--don’t give me that look--later this evening. Our first staff meeting will be tomorrow morning at 8am in the staff room. Nothing there has changed. Else, there’s very little you need in the way of faculty orientation, I imagine.”

Severus smirked at his employer. No, I don’t imagine there’s much she can tell me about the school that I don’t already know.

Minerva nodded. “Good, then. How about we find you some rooms? I believe you expressed interest in the newer suites in the West tower, yes?”

“Yes, if that’s possible. I’ve always enjoyed the view of the Black Lake at sunset” Severus said with a slight nod.

“Of course. Well come along. There’s only one suite left in the tower; we have another new hire and he specifically requested rooms on the ground floor, so only the upper level suite is still available.”

Severus waited for the bantam woman to stream past him, slightly checking his stride to match hers
as she marched through the corridors toward the main staircase. She talked as she walked, barely stopping for breath, pointing out the repairs done to the castle just after the battle.

“...completely refitted the main archway and charmed it to withstand bombardment--Filius’ work of course--and then we had to commission new stone soldiers to flank it. It took over three years to repair” she prattled as they walked up the stairs. Severus felt his knees protest at both the stairs and the pace. He’d have to get used to castle-walking again now that he was in residence.

The empty school seemed sunnier and more open than it had when he’d last been in residence, perhaps because of the newer stone and mortar mixed in with the aged. The portraits, he noticed, were as curious as ever; he saw a number of their occupants following him for a few frames and heralding his return. It was a surprising and welcoming experience.

Minerva hardly paused when they entered the Western wing of the castle. “There are two suites here on the ground floor occupied by Thurston Hagen--I believe you met during your recovery?--and the Ministry appointment for a new department on international magical cultures. He’ll be arriving shortly. I’ll venture a guess that you’d prefer the upper room for its view of the lake anyway”

Without waiting for him to agree, she began to mount the stairs.

“This will be your suite if you like it,” she said, gesturing to the door to the left of the stairs. “I think you’ll find it both more comfortable and more aesthetically pleasing than your former rooms.” She gestured wandlessly to open the door. “You’ll be free to ward it as you see fit and make minor adjustments if needed.”

Severus preceded the Headmistress into the airy room and widened his eyes a bit at the sheer amount of light. The front door had opened into a small foyer with a cloak closet table before branching into a cavernous sitting room/library space. The vaulted, two-storied space featured a wall of windows with their pointed arches on the right, a set of massive (and blessedly empty) floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in dark cherrywood to the left, and a stone fireplace in the center. A deep sofa and two leather reading chairs flanked the fireplace, above which hung an intricate tapestry depicting the wizard Aesop speaking to his fabled animals. A wrought-iron chandelier loaded with charmed no-drip candles dangled above a lovely rug of intertwined russett vines on a cream background. Everything was cream and cherrywood, espresso leather and faded elegance. It was, in a word, stunning. And far more luxurious than his former quarters in the dungeons.

Severus peered to the left of the shelves and saw a hallway leading into what appeared to be a dining space and (he assumed) a kitchen. Following his curiosity, he walked past a spiral stair and into a small dining room with space that was large enough to accommodate six. Doors on either side of the room led to a half-bath and surprisingly spacious galley kitchen. He would have to check that a silencing charm was placed on the bath door--what an odd place to stick a toilet.

Climbing the spiral stair with its polished cherry railing, Severus found himself in a hall with three doors. The closest door on the right led to a room that was clearly meant to house a workspace or lab. The door next to that led (Gods!) to a bathroom of nearly sumptuous design. A large tub nestled on the far wall with shelves built into the tile for bath products. The entire space looked like a high-end muggle bath complete with slate tiles that warmed to the touch, a large vanity counter, and window sconces charmed to emit soothing light.

Severus turned to Minerva in amazement. “What on earth? This is the most stunning set of faculty quarters I have ever seen. The headmaster’s quarters didn’t even come close to matching this!

The proud Headmistress laughed lightly at the professor’s ill-concealed astonishment. “The headmaster’s quarters far exceed this now, actually. A great deal of the castle was destroyed in the Battle of Hogwarts. The Ministry allocated an astronomical sum of money from war reparations --
many of which I believe came from your old friend Lucius -- toward its refurbishment and volunteers from around the country helped with the rebuilding. We upgraded all of the faculty quarters since they were universally antiquated and added in some features that our muggle-born friends insist improve overall quality of life. I have found that they were not incorrect. You won’t believe the number of witches and wizards who helped with reconstruction and re-warding.” She twinkled at him.

Severus ran his hands through his hair (coming up short when his hand abruptly ran out of hair to run through--would he never get used to that?) “Minerva, this is amazing. I can’t imagine not being content here.”

“You haven’t even seen the best part! Open the door on your left.”

Severus did as she bade and walked into a lofted bedroom with an open wall overlooking the sitting area. More windows graced the far wall and a small door led to what appeared to be a private balcony. A large canopied bed sat at the center of the room. A wardrobe and magical mirror (blast, he preferred the muggle ones) sat by the door. Despite lacking a wall, the space was...cozy, he supposed. Inviting.

He heard Minerva’s chuckle over his shoulder again. “The windows are charmed to keep out the worst of the morning light in the spring and summer months, so you can even have a lie-in on the weekend without dealing with the bed curtains.”

Peering to his left, Severus looked out into the sitting room, taking note of the library ladder and narrow supported walkway that allowed access to the upper level of the books. For the first time in a very long time, Severus felt completely at a loss for words. This space was comfortable, welcoming, warm. It was a space that could be a retreat and a home during the school year, and the amount of care that went into its creation made him feel...valued.

“So will it do, Severus?”

“You know damn well that this is a sight better than my old quarters and far more comfortable than my house. Yes, Minerva. This will do very well indeed.”

“I’ll leave you to settle in for a bit. We have another new professor joining us this term and he’s due to arrive shortly, so I should make my way downstairs to give him a tour. Please do join the rest of the staff for the start-of-term social in my quarters at nine this evening. Just drinks and welcomes, very casual. The password for the evening is ‘shortbread’. Oh, and welcome home Severus.” With a smile and gentle pat on the arm, she moved toward the stairs.

“Minerva?” Severus called over the balcony railing. “It’s good to be home.”

He didn’t see the witch’s broad grin as she closed the door behind her.

Severus made short work of warding his rooms (password: Chrysopogon zizanioides -- let someone try to guess that!) while he waited for his trunk to arrive. He unpacked the essentials in his work satchel -- ink, syllabi, some of his rarer texts that he didn’t dare leave sitting in his trunk unattended, a change of clothing, a bottle of Ogden’s, and his toiletries -- then set to work making small alterations to his new abode. The stone walls of the bedroom were quickly covered in forest green fabric and
the bed hangings changed from cream to jade. He transfigured the small floor rug into a large Persian of the same shades and considered the job done.

He was just putting the finishing touches on his bookshelf charm -- an elegant piece of wandwork that would automatically sort and shelve his texts -- when the knock on his door heralded the arrival of the caretaker (yes, still Filch). After thanking the man politely (and entirely missing Filch’s look of shocked surprise) he immersed himself in the task of filling his new quarters with his personal belongings. The next hour was spent with objects whirling past Severus’ head. A tea service flew to the kitchen, books scurried onto the shelves, clothes appeared in the wardrobe, shoes and boots walked themselves into the cloak closet, and spare linens appeared in a trunk at the foot of the bed. With a quick tempus charm, Severus saw that it was closing on nine. He sighed; setting up his office and laboratory would clearly need to wait.

Grabbing a light blazer from his wardrobe -- really, these muggle clothes were more comfortable than his teaching robes would be, particularly against the scars on his neck -- he made his way down the stairs and walked briskly back toward the Headmistress’ offices. Blast. I’m going to be late.

As he moved through the empty castle, Severus couldn’t help but wonder who he would find in the staff gathering. He’d been seriously out of touch with the goings on at Hogwarts since leaving the country six years before. Surely most of the professors had remained? I know Slughorn is still here and Longbottom had just begun his apprenticeship with Pomona when I left the country, so it seems likely that he’ll have taken her place by now. Bathsheda, bless her, perished in the battle...I’m fairly sure Thurston took her position. Only an exorcism would rid the castle of Binns and I doubt Filius is ready to retire yet. He curled his lip a bit at the worry that he wouldn’t be welcomed by his former colleagues, despite his pardon and Order of Merlin. I must remember to be polite. Try to smile, but not that ghastly smile that scares people. Try not to snark too much. Compliment people. Don’t be an arse.

His mental instructions were cut short by his arrival outside Minerva’s personal rooms. The door was already slightly ajar, negating the need for the password. Severus slipped in quietly in order to observe the crowd and breathed a sigh of relief that he recognized most of the faces in the room. Filius was ensconced on the couch with Minerva, apparently engaged in a deep conversation. He spotted Hagrid (how could he have missed him) near the window apparently conversing with Sybill and Septima. On the balcony Neville Longbottom was speaking with two witches whose features he could not make out against the dark Scottish hills, though both seemed to have long hair. Aurora and Slughorn -- who was fatter than ever -- stood in the kitchen, the former mixing what appeared to be a Buck’s Whiz while Slughorn picked over the hors d’oeuvres.

Rather than interrupting Minerva, who was beginning to gesticulate broadly -- a sure sign that conversation was heating up -- Severus chose to move toward Neville and meet the new professors. It mightn’t be a bad idea to put the poor sod at ease around me. The last thing we need is a Herbology professor who jumps whenever I come near. He caught Longbottom’s eye and noted that the man jolted, but did not shy from his gaze. Good. He extended a hand toward the young professor as he moved onto the darkened balcony.

“Neville. I’m glad to see you–I assume you’ve taken over for Pomona now?”

Longbottom drew himself up a bit and responded in a voice that had deepened a bit over the past two years. “Professor Snape? Is that really you? Welcome back sir. Yes, I took over Herbology three years ago, in fact. I’m also heading Gryffindor house this year.” He gave his former Potions master a sheepish smile.

“Well congratulations. I can’t think of anyone better suited to the role.” He watched as Neville’s eyes widened in surprise at the compliment.
“You’re looking very well, Professor Snape. I had wondered if Minerva was going to convince you to return. I’m glad she did.” His voice rang with Gryffindor sincerity.

Severus rolled his eyes a bit. “Please, Neville. We’re going to be colleagues now, call me Severus. Won’t you introduce me to your--Miss Lovegood? Miss Granger?”

He stared in astonishment at the two women who stood by Neville. As he’d turned toward Neville’s companions to introduce himself, he’d suddenly realized that the two women he’d failed to recognize where also his former students. (Though to be fair, Severus had quite a few former students these days.) While he knew that there had to have been some changeovers in staff in the past seven years, the last two people he expected to see at a staff gathering were Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger.

Severus laughed in astonishment. “Never tell me you’re both teaching here too!”

Luna recovered first, “It’s Luna Longbottom now, actually, and yes we both are after a fashion. I teach writing part-time and will hopefully be starting a journalism club this year. I still write for the Quibbler too. You’ve cut your hair. Did you lose your magical strength at the same time?”

Severus’ eyes crinkled at the corners as he remembered Luna’s rather unique conversational style. “Erm, no. Or, not that I know of. I have to admit it’s a recent change. I’m glad you’re teaching writing courses; it’s about time we had proper writing instruction at the school. Some of the essays I had to read in my last tenure were worse than a bout cruciatus. Those from present company are excepted from this statement, of course.” He turned to Hermione. “And you, Miss--is it still Granger? What are you teaching?”

Hermione stared at the former Potions teacher with a strange expression on her face. “Yes,” she bit off stiffly. “Still a Granger. I took over for Minerva last year. I also do the occasional lecture in Muggle Studies, at Mistral’s invitation of course. She took over after Professor Burbage...disappeared.”

Severus caught the small flash in Hermione’s eyes at that last and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement. His failure to save Charity Burbage was one in a long line of regrets from his past, one that had become public after Voldemort’s defeat. He was not complicit in her death, but that didn’t seem to stop him from feeling guilt over his presence at her execution. He scrubbed a hand over his hair. He was glad Minerva had coaxed Mistral Jarsdel out of retirement to teach muggle studies the next year. The long-retired teacher had been a great favorite when he’d been in school. He’d have to make sure to speak with her as her expertise as a muggle-born witch would be invaluable in the implementation of his planned curriculum. She was smart to have Granger guest lecture on occasion, though he wondered on what subject. He realized that Hermione was still staring at him with a hard look on her face.

He cleared his throat slightly. “Well congratulations to all of you on your appointments. And to you, Neville and Luna, on your marriage.” He nodded his head cordially toward each of them and ventured another compliment. “I’m looking forward to working with each of you this year.”

He sighed a bit at the look of absolute incredulity on each of their faces. Clearly ingratiating myself with the staff is going to take a bit longer than I thought. He glanced at the empty glasses in Neville and Hermione’s hands.

“I’m going to get myself a drink. Would either of you care for a fresh one?” He attempted to school his voice to avoid obsequiousness, wincing internally as he slid just past the mark of gracious. Hopefully none of them caught that.
Hermione glanced at her empty glass. “Yes, actually. But I can get it myself. Neville?”

“I’m good, thanks.” Neville smiled and turned Luna toward the balcony rail to take in the night air.

Snape followed Hermione back into the living room and toward the bar. *Blast. Forgot Horace was standing there. Well, no help for it.*

“Severus, m’boy! Damn me for a pixie but you’re a sight for sore eyes. Come on, come on, grab yourself a drink. Minerva’s put out quite the spread this year. Pleased as punch you’ve come back to us, dear boy. Just pleased as punch!” Slughorn’s bear hug nearly lifted Severus off his feet, causing his back to twinge in protest.

“It’s good to see you too, Horace, but please gentle your greeting. I’m afraid my body isn’t quite up to those terrifying hugs of yours.” Severus took a cautious step away and straightened his blazer.

(Of course, of course! My apologies.” He slapped Severus on the back with a wallop that made his neck protest. “Ah, there’s Thurston. Excuse me, dear boy, I need to confer with him on the timing for a new brew I’m trying. I shall return!” Slughorn waddled off to greet the Runes professor with an equally exuberant (and apparently unwelcome) hug.

“They never work, you know.”

Severus paused in the midst of pouring a measure of Ogden’s over ice and looked at Hermione questioningly.

“His experimental potions. They never work. Oh, Horace is competent, but he doesn’t have your hand at potions. Gives up on it most of the time...not enough Slytherin tenacity to see it through.”

Severus made a sound in his throat and raised the bottle of Ogden’s. “Miss Granger?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Neat please. Thank you Professor Snape.” Somehow she made his name sound like a spoiled pie.

Severus raised an eyebrow as he took her empty glass. “Severus.”

“What?”

“We’re colleagues. You, Luna, and Neville should call me Severus.” He tried smiling again and imagined he could see if falling flat on the floor.

“I--yes, alright. Thank you. Severus. You should probably call me Hermione. The rest of the staff does.”

Severus simply nodded his thanks and handed her the refilled glass, looking into the young professor’s face. He found himself intrigued by the changes he saw there; the coltish girl had somehow become a woman in the past few years...and not one to be easily charmed. He wasn’t sure why this annoyed him.

“I didn’t take you for a fan of Ogden’s, Hermione. I’m afraid that I’m still thinking of you and your friends sipping Butterbeers in the Three Broomsticks during Hogsmeade weekends.”

“Tastes change Severus. Most of us grow up, if we’re lucky, and I find that there are things that suit me better than Butterbeer these days. Just as I’m sure you don’t prefer the choices of your youth anymore.” She met his eyes squarely and raised an eyebrow in return.
“How right you are” he murmured.

“I have to admit, I’m finding it rather disconcerting to talk to you without your hair obscuring your face. Whatever possessed you to cut it?”

“Ever heard of a clean break, Hermione? I thought that my return to Hogwarts might herald a new chapter in my life. I wanted to start that chapter differently than the rest of the metaphorical book. Though I’ll admit I find it disconcerting too. I keep reaching up and finding myself shocked that nothing is there.”

“I like it, actually. Much less menacing.”

Severus barked out a laugh. “Ouch. Once a Gryffindor...haven’t you ever heard of pulling your punches, Hermione?”

“What’s the point? My ability to prevaricate was usually outmatched by your ability to find to the worst possible interpretation anyway. Unless that’s changed too?”

“I hope it has. Um…” he grasped for a way to continue the conversation politely. “I could say that I’m not the only one who has changed his hair. I distinctly recall you having a mop that looked like it was chasing you half the time. What on earth happened?” He gestured to the fall of tamed curls down the back of her robe.

Hermione gave him a sarcastic half-smile. “Yes, I recall. You rarely missed an opportunity to insult my teeth or my hair. Luckily, growing up as an insufferable know-it-all included researching the proper way to care for curls. I threw out my brush and invested in a quality muggle conditioner.”

Severus simply rolled his eyes at that.

Seriously, are we going to stand here talking about hair care the rest of the evening while she rehashes every horrid thing I said to her in her youth?

“Well, I’m um, glad that worked out for you. Then. At least Horace won’t have to ban you from his classroom for fear that you contaminate his students’ work.” He ventured a chuckle.

Hermione simply blinked and tilted her head. “I used a stick-fast charm on my hair during potions class. All of the girls did after you screamed at Hannah Abbott second year. We were all terrified you’d hex our cauldrons if we shed in class.”

“That was probably wise of you. I would have. Back then, I mean.” Wrong move, dimwit. Now you’re not just talking about hair, you’re still talking about what a horrible bat you were a decade ago. Chage. The. Subject. You were supposed to be ingratiating yourself to your colleagues this time ‘round, not giving them reasons to continue hating you! Of course it might have been nice for Minerva to tell me that half the bloody staff was former students! He was saved from further attempts at small talk when Minerva moved to the center of the sitting room.

“If I can have your attention, please. Neville, Luna--pop inside for a moment. I wanted to say a few words of welcome now that we’re all back to start the new term. First, I want to welcome our two new faculty members this term: I’d like to welcome Mohinder Bhatti, who will be teaching our new Magical Cultural Studies courses as well as sponsoring the Orchestra. I’d also like to welcome back Severus Snape to the Defense Against the Dark Arts post; Severus will be launching a new interdisciplinary initiative that he will explain in further detail in tomorrow’s faculty meeting.” Severus watched as shocked eyes swiveled from Mohinder’s face to his as Minerva plowed on.

“Now, I won’t try your patience or keep you away from my good whiskey too long. I just wanted to state how terribly excited I am to see you all after the long summer holidays. You were sorely
missed, of course, but more importantly I believe this is going to be one of the best years in Hogwarts history. I’m grateful to work with such a talented lot of intellectuals. We have two new programs to explore thanks to Mohinder and Severus and I’ve received word from Kingsley that we have approval to expand our efforts to train better magical communicators by adding a journalism club and a school newspaper to our writing curriculum. Well done, Luna.” She nodded at the young witch with approval.

“I’ll have more details on our plans for the year at our first faculty meeting. We’ll only meet in the mornings tomorrow and Wednesday so that you have some time to settle into your living quarters and set up your classrooms. We have two weeks before the start of the semester, so let’s prepare to work hard and make magic happen. Welcome back to Hogwarts one and all! Go make merry and I’ll see you all at eight tomorrow morning in the staff lounge. Severus--a word.” Minerva began making her way through the group to where he stood with Hermione.

“I just wanted to let you know I received final approval from Kingsley just an hour ago. Your field training idea was approved, so I want you to explain the basic outline at the end of tomorrow’s meeting. Is that alright?”

“Most satisfactory, Minerva. I’ll charm copies of the plan’s outline this evening when I return to my rooms.”

“Excellent! Oh, Hermione. I want you and Neville to work with Severus on this initiative. It’s going to be an important focus of our curriculum for the next few years, but this first year will likely be a bit of a to-do.”

Hermione shot an enigmatic look at Severus. “Of course I’m happy to help in whatever way I can.”

”Good, good. Excuse me, I should rescue Mohinder from Sybill.” With that she whirled with a sweep of her tartan leaving nothing but the slight trace of lavender oil behind her.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, but for the exclamations from some of his former colleagues. Filius had batted his hip and reprimanded Severus for not telling him sooner that he was returning to Hogwarts whilst a bemused Sybill breathed that she had “of course seen this coming” but hadn’t wanted to influence the actions of her colleagues over the summer by revealing the truth. Rolanda and Sinistra had, of course asked him to join them for their customary tot in their quarters at the end of the first week of courses, which Severus gladly accepted.

Mohinder had turned out to be quite a surprise. Severus found himself discussing some of his travels on the continent with Mohinder and promising to show him some of the magical items he had returned with. Severus found the man to be both charming and intelligent, and thought it likely that he’d enjoy his friendship. And so it was that Severus took his first step toward what he hoped would be normalcy in his life and invited the younger wizard to join him for luncheon the next day and continue the conversation. He was greatly gratified when Mohinder accepted.

As the hour drew nearer to eleven, the gathered began to disperse. He waited as Sinistra and Rolanda, Hagrid, and finally Hermione bade farewell to their host before making his way to take his leave. He found himself surprised by the swift hug that Minerva gave him as she bade him good night and bemusedly began to make his way back to his own rooms, calling out his own good nights to those he passed. He found himself trailing behind Hermione as she began to walk toward the West tower. He stayed slightly behind Hermione, not wanting to force his presence on her as they walked in silence.

As they approached the stairwell, Hermione suddenly spun toward him, causing Severus to walk straight into her shoulder. He grunted and reached up to rub his bruised sternum.
“Why are you following me?”

“What? I’m not. My rooms are here.”

She looked surprised. Again. It was actually starting to annoy him. “You took the upper room in the West tower?”

“I...yes? Was I not supposed to? Minerva indicated it was unoccupied.”

Hermione deflated a bit. “No, I’m sure it was perfectly available. I assumed you’d just move back into your old rooms.”

He sneered a bit at that. “After nearly seven years living above ground I find that I’m loathe to return to the dungeons.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Well I rather liked the privacy of having the floor to myself. No help for it, I suppose. It would appear we’re...neighbors.”

Severus blinked at her, unsure of how to respond. “Neighbors?”

She huffed. “Yes, you know. People who live in close proximity to one another? My rooms are across the hall from yours.”

“Oh. Well. I can promise I’m not the noisy sort, so I shan’t disturb you overmuch.”

“Oh, I’ve no doubt you will.” she muttered as she turned to climb the stairs.

Severus was confused by her annoyance. He knew that the golden trio, while grateful for his war efforts, had never really warmed to him but it wasn’t as if he’d known that she was the other resident on his floor. And even if he had, he didn’t have any intention of invading her privacy or waking her with loud noises. He watched as she stomped her way up the stairs in front of him and found his own annoyance rising to match hers. Well if she doesn’t like it she can bloody well move! I don’t know why she’s in such a snit about it, but I like these rooms and I’m not going to live in the dungeons just to appease some immature bint who can’t learn to share her little fiefdom. He kept climbing, glad that she was at least climbing at a fast enough pace that he didn’t get stuck behind her on the narrow stairs.

He felt her wards release and heard her door click open as he neared the top of the staircase and her door.

“Good night Hermione,” he said politely.

The door clicked shut and her wards slammed back in place before he heard a barely audible snort through the wood.
A Long Day's Journey into Knight

Chapter Summary

Severus explains his grand plans for the year and attempts to make amends with a tetchy witch.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 3 is finished earlier than I thought, so you get an extra chapter! Thanks for reading :)

August 16, 2005 - Hogwarts

Severus woke with a groan to the chiming of the alarum charm he’d cast the night before. He’d never been much of a morning person, and years away from the rhythm and routines of Hogwarts had left him ill-disposed to rise before nine. Sadly, his body was slower to wake now than it had been before the battle, and the lingering effects of multiple snake bites, years of torture, and middle-age had left his muscles tight at the start of each day. With a sigh, he rolled out of bed and padded his way to the sitting room to begin his stretches and strengthening exercises for the day.

The medical staff at St. Mungo’s had recommended a daily course of pain-potions and relaxers to keep his body working as it ought, but Severus had loathed the idea of relying on magical medicine to keep himself in good working order. In the months post-recovery, he had sought help in the Muggle world and had discovered that an exercise regimen of regular walks and something called Pilates kept him feeling fit and fairly pain free. Now that he was back in the castle with all its bloody stairs, he could likely get away with a few brisk walks a week. However, the limbering and strengthening exercises would remain a necessity. Not that he enjoyed them. And he’d cheerfully murder anyone who caught sight of the blue foam mat and inflatable ball he placed on the floor. He checked the wards on the door of his quarters before bending down to begin his morning routine.

An hour later -- and considerably damper -- Severus made his way into the luxurious bath. He’d been too tired and frustrated the night before to take advantage of the sunken corner bath and there was certainly no time for it this morning. He moved toward the glass-walled shower stall opposite and completed his morning ablutions, pausing to stretch his back and neck under the hot spray. Bathing rituals complete, he quickly finger combed his hair and dabbed a bit of pomade into it to tame any flyaways. He still felt faintly ridiculous using any kind of hair product, but the reactions he’d gotten to his new “look” the night before -- even from the decidedly taciturn Transfiguration professor -- assured him that the choice to cut his formerly lank locks had been the right one.

Moving into the bedroom, he selected another simple black button up and dark jeans from his wardrobe, deciding to take advantage of the less-formal atmosphere of the studentless castle for the next two weeks before consigning himself to the formal teaching robes of a Hogwarts professor. He’d be moving boxes and preparing his classroom all afternoon anyway, so the dark, casual clothing would both hide dirt and allow him to move more freely.
At a quarter to eight, Severus set off toward the staff room, work satchel in tow. He grimaced at the slight grumble in his stomach; he’d not eaten anything after his early supper last night and his morning exercises had left him ravenous. He jogged a bit through the corridors (no one to stop him!) to arrive at the staff room a few minutes before the start of the meeting. He quickly snagged a plate from the small buffet set up for the faculty breakfast and served himself some eggs, toast, ham, and blessedly hot tea before sliding into a seat between Luna and Sybill and tucking into his breakfast.

He was halfway through his second piece of toast before he looked up and noticed that he was seated directly across from Hermione. She caught his eye and regarded him without expression, and Severus found himself recalling their interaction from the night before. He schooled his own face to reveal none of the confusion he had experienced at her obvious animosity and regarded her as balefully as she did he. Why on earth is she so upset with me? I’m not sure of what I could have done in the twelve hours that I’ve been here that would inspire such enmity. She was almost friendly just after the war. What changed?

He thought they were broken by the chime of the hour and the sudden disappearance of his plate. He grunted at that -- he’d still had the better part of his ham slice left -- and polished off his piece of toast. At least the tea had remained behind. He wasn’t sure how anyone could be expected to survive a faculty meeting without a steady stream of caffeine on hand.

Minerva swept into the room and took her place at the head of the table. “Good morning! It’s time to get started on our plans for the year. We have a number of items on our agenda today, so I’m going to dive right in.” She waved a wand behind her and quickly transfigured a portion of wall into a chalkboard with agenda before continuing. “Filius will continue to serve as Deputy Headmaster and head of Ravenclaw. Neville, Hagrid, and Horace will continue as heads of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin respectively. For extra curriculars, Filius will be overseeing the choir, Mohinder will sponsor the orchestra, and Luna will oversee our school newspaper. I owled badges to the prefects and Head Boy/Head Girl this morning. Here is a comprehensive list of all.” Pages flew from her end of the table to each of the faculty members in front of her.

“For the first portion of the morning, I’d like to discuss the upcoming Ministry changes to O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. level examinations, after which we will have a short tea break, and then continue with a discussion of Mohinder’s curriculum and Severus’ proposals for interdisciplinary collaboration. Let’s begin.” Another flurry of pages followed her business-like introduction, and Severus sighed and settled back into his chair. He let Minerva’s words wash over him for the next hour and a half as he glanced at the proposed changes to each curriculum. He paid little attention to many of the changes, well aware that the powers-that-be within the Ministry delighted in making minute adjustments each year. He found himself glancing up at Hermione frequently, pondering her inexplicable anger. He noted that she was studiously avoiding his gaze.

At long last, Minerva indicated that it was time for a break and that their work would resume in 30 minutes. Severus rose from his chair and winced as his back cracked in protest. Too much sitting generally caused him to stiffen up, so he made use of the break to take a brisk walk to the loo at the far end of the administrative wing and back. When he returned he brewed another cup of tea. Inspiration struck when he saw Neville enter the room from his own break. Taking note that Hermione was in deep conversation with Septima -- hardly surprising, she’d always been a favorite of the Arithmancy professor -- Severus drew Neville to the far side of the room.

“Neville, is there something that I should apologize for saying last night? Did I offend you and Luna in any way?”

Neville blinked with surprise at both the sudden tête-à-tête and the unwarranted question. “No, not that I know of. You were exceedingly polite. Luna commented on it too.”
Severus huffed. “Alright. Then can you tell me why Professor Granger was glaring daggers at me all evening? I’m at a loss as to how I might have upset her and I’d like to establish good working relationships with my colleagues during this tenure at Hogwarts.”

Neville’s brows drew together a bit. “Sir -- Severus. Do you still read the Daily Prophet?”

“Usually, yes.”

“The gossip pages?”

“What use do I have for gossip, Longbottom? I’ve been out of touch with wizarding society for years...not that I was ever much in touch with it anyway. Why?”

“I don’t think it’s my place to say why she might be upset, but I’d read through Skeeter’s columns for the past month or so.”

Severus sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Right. I appreciate it Neville. I’ll catch up with you later.” Damn Skeeter woman. What the hell has she done now?

Severus stalked back in his chair and contemplatively sipped his tea. He’d have to make a quick trip to Irma’s domain and glance through the last month’s gossip columns if he was going establish a decent working relationship with Hermione Granger before the start of term. Considering how large a role she would need to play in his plans for the students this year, it would be best if she didn’t actively want to shred his face each time she saw him.

Minerva returned to her place at the table, signalling that the meeting would resume. “Is everyone appropriately caffeinated? Yes? Good. Mohinder, would you mind walking us through some of your plans for the new classes on international magical cultures?”

“With pleasure, Professor McGonagall. I was invited to join the Hogwarts faculty this summer to design and implement a new curriculum on international magical cultures to be called Magical Cultures Around the World. I have had the good fortune to spend a great deal of time traveling the world, first with my mother, who served as a diplomat to several Magical governments over the years, and later as a sort of Wizarding anthropologist. I consider myself lucky that my personal research interests have attracted the interest of Magical Britain.

I will offer four courses in Magical Cultures. The first two courses will be required for fourth and fifth year students. In subsequent years, the course will be an elective. It is the Ministry’s hope that a greater understanding of the magical cultures of other countries will help Britain join with the rest of Europe. I know many of you have traveled on the continent, and I will be asking each of you to contribute to the class by giving short lectures throughout the semester. This need not be anything onerous -- simply speak of your experiences in encountering other magical peoples abroad and share your observations with the class. I will be there to direct the students through analyzing and using the information you provide.”

Severus was intrigued by this ethnographic approach to wizarding culture. He wasn’t entirely sure of its application, though he supposed that the lack of outside help with the war against Voldemort was the impetus for this change. It made sense that Minister Shacklebolt was attempting to build connections with other countries. Regardless, it wouldn’t hurt to have a more worldly wizarding population coming of age in the next few years. He nodded in approval as Mohinder concluded his outline of the curriculum and made a mental note to offer to help the man with the development of his courses.

“Wonderful, Mohinder! I’m very excited to see what your courses have to offer this term. Severus,
would you like to bring us up to speed on the transformation of the Defense course for the coming term?”

Severus nodded and reached into his satchel for the copies of his outline for the end-of-year project. **We’ll see how the rest of the faculty feels about my plans.**

“As the Headmistress has indicated, the Ministry wants to entirely reconceive the Defense Against the Dark Arts programme. Their aim is to teach the students defense, but also inspire within them the need to defend. As such, my plan for this year will play upon their house and personal loyalties. Starting with the first years, we will begin training students not only in defense but in evasion, survival, and critical judgment -- the last of which I feel was often neglected in previous offerings of the course. By the time a student reaches his or her sixth year, they should be able to recognize dark magic, evade surprise attacks, hide successfully, and live away from magical communities for brief periods of time. It is my hope that they will learn to appreciate the world that we work so hard to protect and begin to feel a sense of obligation to protect that world as a result.”

Severus paused to look around the room. He was greeted with looks that varied from cautious approval to outright skepticism. **Alright. Let’s see how they react to their roles in this business.**

“Naturally, our current sixth and seventh years will not have had this advantage in their education. As a result, I will be assigning extra lessons and training to those students to get them up to speed. Within five years or so, these extra lessons should not be necessary. I hope you’ll all be accommodating with the extra burden of work this will place on your older students.

This new curriculum will also require input and assistance from every other faculty member on staff. The Ministry wants to create an interdisciplinary D.A.D.A. program -- this means my course will require students to employ their knowledge of Astronomy, Transfiguration, Herbology, Charms, Muggle Studies, and likely Magical Cultures into their lessons in my classroom. I will be asking to collaborate with each of you on specific lessons that I have outlined here. Mohinder, I would appreciate your help in developing a plan to incorporate Magical Cultures into the curriculum as I did not know of your program when I made these plans.” Copies of his lesson plans floated to the other occupants of the table.

“These lesson plans are in draft form as I’m hardly an expert in most of your disciplines. Please feel free to make notes or suggest changes if you feel my ideas can be improved. Headmistress, I’m hoping that we will have some time to finalize some of the early lessons before courses begin, perhaps during our faculty retreat time next week?” He received a nod from Minerva at that.

“Finally, there is to be a large project in the middle of the spring semester which will require help from each of you. I’ve taken a page from the book of our Golden Trio.” He shot a look at Hermione and was pleased to see her wary look in return. “We’re going to be taking the students out for a week of survival training.” He smiled a bit at the confused murmurs around the table.

“I realize that this is a long period of time for students to be away from Hogwarts and their courses, but I believe it is the best way for them to learn appreciation for the comforts that magic and magical communities provide them. It will also test their fortitude and their commitment to one another. We will be taking the students for a week long camping trip at an as-of-yet undecided location. I will be working with the Ministry and the Auror’s office to construct an arena of sorts where students will need to evade ‘snatchers’ -- who will be Aurors and other Ministry officials. The students will need to practice remaining hidden, procuring food, keeping themselves healthy, avoiding a few small obstacles, and attaining goals. It’s an elaborate set-up that should be both fun and highly educational. Several professors will need to accompany me on this trip to supervise the students; we will be able to follow the students actions and assist if they encounter any real trouble. This project, an
accompanying reflection essay, and classroom discussions will constitute a third of their final grade.” He paused for a moment and took a sip of his tea.

“Hermione, I would like to ask that you, Auror Potter, and Mr. Weasley come to my sixth and seventh year classes at the beginning of the spring term to discuss your experiences while on the run from Voldemort. Potter has already agreed to the proposal and I have no doubt that he will be able to convince Mr. Weasley to attend as well.” He watched as Hermione visibly paled at this and wondered at the fact. Perhaps she does not enjoy recounting that year after the endless interviews post-battle. “Several other Aurors and Ministry officials will also be delivering lectures to my advanced classes; I expect we’ll see a number of familiar faces around the castle as a result.

I believe that the packet I’ve given each of you will explain my plans in greater detail. Please don’t hesitate to speak to me with any concerns or suggestions.” He turned back to Minerva and nodded, signalling the end of his explanation.

“As I said to you all last night, it’s going to be a very exciting year! Please take this afternoon to think on the changes that Mohinder and Severus’ plans will have on the school as a whole. We’ll spend tomorrow morning’s meeting listing the changes necessary to accommodate these new programmes and the rest of the week drawing preparing for their implementation. For now, I’ll draw this meeting to a close. I’ll see you all tomorrow morning at eight to continue our conversations!”

Minerva rose and smiled at each of her faculty members before turning to make her way back to her offices.

The rest of the staff began making their way to their respective classrooms, glancing back in Severus with somewhat wary expressions.

Mohinder begged off their lunch appointment in favor of seeing his classroom for the first time, so Severus ordered a light lunch from the house elves before heading to the library. One of the first orders of business was to figure out what Longbottom’s cryptic “Read Rita Skeeter” comment meant and make amends with Hermione so that he could work with her. Transfiguration would play a large part in his advanced classes, particularly as he had some rather spectacular plans for his most able students that would require her help.

He entered the Hogwarts library with a happy sigh, inhaling the slightly floral, almond smell of aging parchment and ink. Some of his happiest hours as a child and adult had been spent in this cavernous room. He noted that Irma was not at the front desk, so shrugged and moved to the periodicals section to glance through back issues of the Prophet.

He decided to take Neville’s suggestion and start with an issue a month back and work his way forward. Two issues in, he found what Neville must have been referencing.

July 18, 2005:

“...Our favorite lovebirds were spotted today in Diagon Alley, though they were neither billing nor cooing. Miss Granger was seen to physically accost the manager of Weasley Wizard Wheezes after a verbal altercation. No word yet on whether a slap on the face is
considered muggle-born foreplay..."

July 25, 2005:

“...Miss Hermione Granger was seen arriving at the annual Orphan’s Fund Ball unescorted. The lovely young witch wore a gown of pale blue, which seemed to match her overall mood throughout the evening. Miss Granger spoke little during the evening and refused all offers to dance; is it any wonder her paramour refused to accompany her?...”

July 27, 2005:

“...Wizarding Hero Ronald Weasley was spotted outside his fiancé’s flat, attempting to gain entrance. This author notes that he was standing amidst a suspicious pile of clothing and other sundried belongings. Has love flown the coop for this famous duo?...”

July 31, 2005:

“...It is confirmed that two of our country’s greatest war heroes are not to wed after all. The engagement between Ronald B. Weasley and Hermione J. Granger has been called off. Miss Granger has asked for privacy during this difficult time. When approached for comment, Mr. Weasley told this journalist to ‘sod off or you’ll vomit slugs for a week.’ One cannot help but wonder why Miss Granger ended the affair...”

August 12, 2005:

“...In a surprise turn of events, war hero and Order of Merlin recipient Ronald Weasley has wed! His choice of bride may surprise us all as it is not his erstwhile fiancé, Hermione Granger, but local musician Prunella Caraway, niece of the acclaimed songstress Celestina Warbeck. No word yet on whether Miss Granger was invited to the nuptials. Our sincere congratulations go out to the happy couple...”

Severus bit off an oath. She actually got involved enough with Weasley to want to marry him? Surely she could do better. He could guess the cause of the separation and smirked at the idea of Weasley’s belongings littering the street. What on earth could have possessed Hermione to stay with that pitiful excuse for a -- shit.

Shit. He started replaying his conversation with Hermione the night before. ‘Is it still Miss Granger?’ And she thought I was making fun of her hair. Again. She must have thought my questions were some kind of oblique jab at the disintegration of her love life. No wonder she tried to take my head off! Clearly he would have to apologize, but how? He couldn’t just offer her an apology for a slight he didn’t know he had given without explaining himself, could he? Perhaps he should offer her some token as an apology. That bore further thinking…

Severus made his way out of the library, barely pausing to offer Irma Pince a greeting as he passed.

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He had spent the remainder of his day organizing his classroom, clearing off dusty desks, setting up a sparring area, shelving books, and arranging some of his newly acquired artifacts onto charmed
shelves that disallowed the objects’ removal without his express permission (a handy charm if for any teacher). It was a dust-covered and exhausted Severus Snape that arrived back at the West tower that evening. He paused at the top of the landing and heard some sort of pulsing, melancholy muggle music from his justifiably-angry neighbor and sighed. Dinner could probably wait until he had apologized.

He went into his own apartments and cast a quick scourgify before moving to his bookshelf. He selected a vintage tome of transfiguration wandwork translated from German into English that he thought Hermione might enjoy. It should at least make a suitable peace offering for an accidental slight.

With his apology running through his head, he made his way to the hall to knock on her door and was startled when the door burst open before he could raise his hand. It was a toss up as to who was more startled, but Hermione recovered first.

“What do you want?” she growled.

Severus stared, momentarily nonplussed. She wasn’t wearing robes, but rather a pair of blue jeans and a floaty cream blouse that left it in no doubt that she was no longer a girl. *Stop staring at her tits, you dolt. You came to apologize, not anger her further!*

She huffed out a breath. “Nevermind, it’ll have to wait. I…I have an appointment.” With that she turned and began to race down the spiral stairs to the ground floor.

Regaining his equilibrium, Severus followed her down the stairs. “Hermione, wait. Stop, dammit!” She kept moving.

Severus found himself jogging, but finally caught up with her two corridors away. He reached out to catch her elbow. “Hermione, a moment. Please.”

She rounded on him, trying to shake his hand off her arm. “What do you want?! Didn’t you say enough to me last night? Or do you want to use me to kiss Minerva’s arse some more? Just leave me alone!” Severus tightened his grip and shoved the book he was holding into her free arm.

“I wanted to *apologize*, Hermione. I don’t read the gossip columns, or I didn’t until today. I don’t follow what that bitch Skeeter says. I didn’t *know* any of it! So I didn’t mean to insult you last night though it’s clear I did and I want to apologize and if you’d stop swearing at me for two minutes I can do just that!” His voice had risen to a shout and he felt thoroughly frustrated with the witch’s ability to make him feel wrong-footed.

Hermione looked him in the eyes for a moment and narrowed her own. “You want to apologize for what you said last night. Fine. I accept. What about the rest of it?”

Severus was dumbfounded. “The rest of it? Oh Gods, did I do something else? Was it something I said this morning?”

“You don’t even know, do you? What *is* it with your kind? You left, Severus. You fucked off and left and you never said a damned thing. Where’s my apology for that?”

Severus was beyond understanding what he had done to enrage Hermione Granger so. He debated half a moment before taking advantage of their locked eyes and delving into her mind to find out just why she was in such a snit. Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

*Hermione, Harry, and Ron, sitting in the waiting room of St. Mungo’s waiting as the doctors attempted to save his life.*
Hermione and Harry at his bedside as he lay in a coma, recuperating from his wounds and their treatment.

Hermione and Harry visiting him each day as he remained in a coma, fighting the lingering effects of Nagini’s bite.

Hermione sitting with him and reading aloud as he slept, no longer comatose but certainly not lucid.

Hermione, reading silently as he woke from a nightmare, screaming and insensible.

Hermione, calming him again. Reading aloud. Holding his hand.

Hermione and Harry again, listening as the healers reported on his slow improvement.

Hermione suggesting that light physical exercise might help his atrophied muscles.

Hermione holding his hand as he wept through the first bout of therapy.

Hermione delivering him to his home in Spinner's End after his release from the hospital.

Hermione and Harry paying him a visit, arms loaded with books.

Hermione clearing the dust out of his home.

Hermione suggesting he remodel his bathroom.

Hermione bringing him takeaway so he wouldn't have to cook. Talking to him over dinner. Smiling at him on a walk.


“Why don’t I remember?” he asked wonderingly, dropping his grip on her elbow.

The young woman blushed to the roots of her hair before blanching. “How dare you enter my mind without my permission! You...you...fucking pig!” Using both hands she shoved him with all of her might. She watched with some satisfaction as Severus crashed into a suit of armor and clattered with it to the floor.

With a toss of her hair, she turned on her heel and stalked down the corridor, leaving Severus in a mess on the cold stones.
All Alone in the Moonlight

Chapter Summary

Severus tries to solve the mystery of his memory loss with Minerva and Hermione's help.

Chapter Notes

I promised Sunday updates, but your wonderful comments have boosted my desire to keep writing and posting. So rather than holding this chapter until Sunday, I'm going to post now and state that while I guarantee a Sunday post, I'll also post whatever I produce during the week...

August 16, 2005 - A Hallway in Hogwarts

Severus sat on the ground with his head in his hands as he took stock of his bruises. How could I have forgotten something so important? I remember the three of them visiting once while I was recovering, but after that...nothing. Just pain and recuperation and therapy and...then the decision to travel and track down the Dark Lord's followers. Why did I have to travel? I...I can't remember.

He scrubbed his hands over his face and rose off the floor, flicking his wand at the pile of metal to restore the armor to its previously vertical state. He considered returning to his apartments, but didn’t know what he’d do with himself there. That left one solution: Minerva. He began to walk toward the Headmistress’ quarters.

Minerva answered his knock almost immediately. “Severus! What can I help you with?”

“I have a problem. Can we talk?”

“Of course. Come in, dear. What’s wrong? Was something not delivered to your classrooms?”

Severus chuckled mirthlessly. “If only. I’m afraid my problem is of a more personal nature. I could use a friend with a sharp mind to help me sort it out.”

“What’s wrong?” asked the concerned witch, gesturing her friend toward an armchair.

He sank into it gratefully and rubbed at his shoulder. “I have made a serious misstep with Professor Granger and I am at a loss as to how to fix it.”

Minerva nodded with understanding. “Ah. I had wondered. You’re not the first professor here to have to work with a former flame. After all the time you spent together during your recovery, I had rather assumed that you must have had a --”

“That’s just it! I have no memory of spending time with her during my recovery!”

Minerva stared at Severus for several moments. “You -- none? But you were inseparable for months!
“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, Minerva! I...I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, but I used legilimency on her when she was shouting at me in the hall this evening. I saw the friendship we formed, but it was as though I was watching an actor playing me on the telly. I don’t remember any of it. I only remember her visiting me with Potter and Weasley after I emerged from my coma.”

She blinked at his disregard for Hermione’s mental privacy, but decided to shelve that concern for the more immediate one. “Severus, this worries me. You spent nearly every day with Hermione and occasionally Harry during your recuperation and rehabilitation. You had, I believe, formed a tendre for her. I know that she formed one for you. She’s like a daughter to me, so it was me she came to when you suddenly left for the continent. She was devastated.”

Severus scrubbed at his face and stared hard at his colleague. “Minerva, I need your help. I need to remember what happened and I need to find out why I have approximately 9 months of false memories.”

She studied him for a moment before suggesting, “My dear, it sounds as though you’ve been Obliviated. I know you recognize the signs, though I’m surprised someone managed to ‘get the jump on you,’ as it were. I can tell you a bit of what I know of that time, but it would probably be best if you spoke to Professor Granger yourself, and soon. I’d also like to write Kingsley about this. We can have an expert from St. Mungo’s visit here at the castle and attempt to reverse the obliviation. But you know the success rate on such attempts, of course. I’ll venture Hermione is aware as well,” she said, thinking of Hermione’s somewhat distant parents. Five years later, she knew they were still receiving therapy for the obliviation that had likely saved their lives.

“That sounds like a reasonable course of action. Would you -- would you mind asking Hermione to join us here this evening? I’m not entirely sure she’ll speak to me one-on-one.” He rubbed his shoulder again ruefully. The little witch had given him a surprisingly strong shove.

She nodded. “Certainly. Marzipan?”

A house elf appeared in Minerva’s sitting room. “Yes, Headmistress?” she squeaked. “How can Marzipan serve?”

The elder witch looked at the creature seriously. “I need you to find Professor Granger and ask her to attend me in my personal quarters. We will also need tea, if you please.”

The elf nodded. “Marzipan will do as Headmistress asks!” She snapped and was gone in an instant.

The Headmistress turned back to her friend, clearly concerned at this turn of events. “I’m going to floo Kingsley immediately, Severus. If there’s a dark wizard on the loose who is responsible for your memory loss, he’ll need to open a case immediately. I’m very sorry, dear. I know you must be terribly upset.”


Minerva moved to the fireplace and tossed a handful of floo powder. She shouted “Minister of Magic’s Office” into the green flames and was rewarded with Percy Weasley’s head.

“How can I help?”

“I need to speak to Kingsley. It is a matter of some urgency.”
“I’m sorry, Headmistress McGonagall. He’s at a charity function this evening. I can have him return your call later this evening if you wish.”

“Yes, please Mr. Weasley. At whatever hour he returns as I need to speak to him tonight.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Percy’s head whirled in the flames and disappeared just as there was a knock at the door.

Severus shrank further into the armchair as Minerva moved to answer. He heard Hermione’s voice from the doorway behind him. “Minerva? Marzipan said you needed to see me immediately. Do you need my assistance?”

“Come in Hermione. I’m afraid something is the matter and I will need your help to resolve it. Take a seat, please.”

Snape felt, rather than saw, the moment that Hermione spotted him by the fire. “Headmistress, if this is about our altercation in the hall, I’m happy to apologize for losing my temper.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow at that and hummed in her throat. “No, Hermione. This is not about losing your temper, but something more serious. Please sit. Ah, tea. Just place it on the coffee table, Marzipan. That will be all.”

The little elf winked out of the room again as Minerva moved to pour three steaming cups and fix them to her guests preferences.

“Hermione, Severus came to me this evening with a rather disturbing report. He admitted to using legilimency on you without your permission -- for which he will apologize -- and finding a series of memories about your friendship during his recovery of which he has no recollection.”

Hermione shot Severus a sharp look. “So that’s what you meant.”

“Yes. I don’t remember any of the moments I saw. Minerva tells me that we had built a strong friendship before I left the country. But I barely recollect seeing you during that year.”

Hermione scoffed. “Friendship? Severus, you left the country after our first date. The inaugural Orphan’s Fund Ball -- your first public outing after your recovery. You abandoned me there and left the country the same night.” She couldn't quite gloss over the whip of anger in her voice.

“Well, that answers the question of timing for us, Severus.” Minerva adopted a businesslike tone in an attempt to keep the conversation from delving too deeply into recriminations and apologies. “You must have been attacked at the ball. That would rather narrow down the list of suspects.”

“You think he was obliviated?”

Severus regarded the witches cautiously. “It is the only logical conclusion we have, Hermione.”

“And all this time I thought you’d just cut and run. Well, I’ll apologize for yelling at you, then.”

“But not for shoving me into a suit of armor?”

She grinned with satisfaction. “No, you deserved that. Ask, next time.”

“I’ll apologize for the intrusion, though I’m not truly sorry I did it. The longer the obliviation has to take hold, the harder it will be to reverse it. I may already be too far gone to make significant progress on recovery.” The thought of missing a year of his life bothered him greatly would be the
understatement of the century.

“We’ll see what the healer has to say, but there may be a partial solution to your problem. Hermione, would you be willing to share your memories of your time with Severus? As he is a legilimens, he would be able to experience your memories through you. Through Harry too, if he’s willing.”

Hermione looked uncomfortable. “I’ll help if I can, Minerva, but I’ll admit I’m not terribly comfortable with the idea.”

Severus could well understand her hesitation. If they had had a burgeoning relationship, Hermione would likely be uncomfortable sharing the beginnings of their romance and all her associated feelings with him.

“Can I propose a compromise? Hermione, if you are willing to share your memories with me, we could make use of the pensieve rather than legilimancy. That way your thoughts may remain private. We can start at the beginning and if at any time the healers manage to reverse the obliviation or you become uncomfortable with the process, we can stop.” Severus didn’t want to push, but he was desperate to recover at least some part of the truth of that year after his injury.

“Of course, why didn’t I think of that? I’ll loan you my pensieve for the process, Severus. That is, if Hermione agrees.” Minerva looked to the younger witch with expectation.

“As long as I can stop if I become uncomfortable, I can agree to share my memories with you Severus. You may want to also collect the memories of your healer and thera-witch. I wasn’t around you all the time. They have likely seen and heard things that I have not.” She blushed a bit at that.

“Thank you, Hermione. That’s an excellent idea. I grateful for your willingness to assist. I’m...uncomfortable with the knowledge that someone has stolen a part of my life after Voldemort and -- sorry Minerva -- Dumbledore demanded so much of it already.”

“It hardly seems fair, Severus,” Minerva agreed. “I’ll go collect the pensieve from my office so you can begin straight away.” She rose and moved toward the door to the corridor. “I’ll be back in shortly.”

As she left, Severus turned to Hermione and spoke rather formally. “I truly am sorry for invading your privacy. And for any inadvertent pain my actions may have caused you. I understand now why you have been so caustic these past two days. Please know that I in no way meant to offend you and that I have the utmost respect for you as a colleague.”

Hermione looked at the man in front of her for a moment and felt the dregs of her anger begin to leech away. “I suppose the explanation of your disappearance helps, some. It hurts to know that it was the catalyst for so many of my own choices over the past few years. Please know that I in no way meant to offend you and that I have the utmost respect for you as a colleague.”

Severus nodded. “I appreciate your willingness to help. Though I can’t help but wonder...what on earth possessed you to accept a date from the Bat of the Dungeons?”

She looked him in the eye a moment before replying. “I suppose you’ll have to view my memories and work that out for yourself.”

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Severus’ stomach gave a loud rumble as he and Hermione emerged at the top of the West tower stairs. He looked back at her a bit sheepishly. “I didn’t have dinner this evening. I was in such a rush to apologize that I ran out without summoning an elf.”

She frowned in reply. “I didn’t eat either, and I’m utterly famished.”

He hesitated a moment with his hand on the door. “Would you like to join me for dinner? If you’re up to it we could extract the first memory after we’ve eaten.”

“Oh, well I don’t know if I’m ready to --”

"It’ll save the house elves a second trip.” He tried a convincing smile.

“You’re impossible. And clearly remember my school days too well. Fine, but it will have to be an early night. We have a faculty meeting in twelve hours, if you recall.”

“Of course. Please, come in.” He lifted the wards and opened his door in invitation, then followed her into the foyer.

He set the pensieve on the hall table, then bent to remove his dragon-hide boots and place them in the closet. Hermione moved past him into the open space of the sitting room and looked around curiously.

“Our apartments have the same layout, though in reverse. I helped charm some of the features in this part of the castle during the rebuilding process, but I never got to see the completed suites. Yours are nice. Very masculine.”

“Thank you. I haven’t really had time to settle in completely yet, but the apartments themselves are very comfortable. Much more so than my previous quarters in the dungeons.”

She made an appreciative noise. “Well, they’re certainly nicer than my flat. I was a bit sad to return home during the summer months.”

“I’m going to order some dinner. Is there anything specific that you would prefer?”

“They do a lovely steak and ale pie downstairs. I’ll have that. And a glass of red with it.”

Severus raised an eyebrow at her choice.

She chuckled self-consciously. “I know. I tend to want comfort food during times of emotional upheaval. Between this and the business with Ron I’ll probably be a stone heavier by the time term begins.” She turned away to inspect his bookshelves.

He chuckled under his breath at her utterly predictable behavior. “Steak and ale pie is a favorite of mine as well. Is Winky still here?”

“Yes. She’s finally kicked the Butterbeer habit, thank goodness. Oh, this is the new book in that Fizzlebrom’s Mysteries series. I’ve been meaning to read it.” She removed the book from the shelf to leaf through it.

“You can borrow it if you like. I finished it last week” He saw her nod and continue to peruse the back cover. He raised his voice a bit to call for the elf. “Winky?”

There was a small pop as Winky appeared on top of the coffee table. “Yes Headmaster Professor Snape?”
“It’s just Professor now, Winky. I’m not Headmaster anymore.”

“Winky is sorry Professor Snape!” The house elf immediately bent to smash her foot with her fist.

“There is no need for punishment, Winky! We would simply like to order a late dinner. Can you please fetch two servings of steak and ale pie, a bottle of red wine, and something for pudding after? And tea with pudding.” He glanced at Hermione and got her nod of approval.

“Winky will do this, Professor Snape sir!” The little elf disappeared with a pop.

“Would you rather eat in here, or in the dining room?”

Hermione glanced toward the formal dining room and back to the unlit hearth. “I think I’d rather eat in here. It’s less formal. I’m more comfortable surrounded by books anyway.”

“I recall that from your school days.” He gestured toward the overstuffed arm chairs in front of the fire.

“This is strange.”

He looked perplexed. “I’m sorry?”

“This is strange. For me, I mean. Because we have this whole history. And now that I’m not angry -- at you, at least -- I feel like I should just settle back into that friendship. But you don’t remember any of it. So it’s strange.” She huffed in exasperation.

“I can imagine. Some of that will likely return as we pace through your memories, but for now can I suggest we act as friendly colleagues? I’d respect you and I have no desire to be at odds with you; surely that’s a good place to start?”

“You’re right of course. I suppose I’ll simply get used to it. I’ve been your student and had you loathe me. I’ve been your friend. I’ve been your date for half an evening. And I circled back ’round to you probably hating me. Friendly colleagues seems to be a reasonable middle ground between all those.”

“I have never hated you, Hermione, not even when you were an...overly enthusiastic potions student.”

“You gave a good impression.”

“I'm afraid you were an easy target. I had to play the evil potions professor, after all. What better way to do so than to pick on the least deserving students? Why else would I torture Longbottom? Or Hannah Abbott?”

“Oh. I see. So I’m not the first insufferable know-it-all in your career?”

He snorted. “Hardly. Though you were, perhaps, the most deserving of the latter half of the moniker.”

She chuckled. “Thanks a lot.”

At that moment Winky reappeared bearing a tray laden with large portions of pie, a bottle of Cabernet, silverware, tea, and custard with raspberries under a stasis charm. The elf set the huge tray on the coffee table and squeaked a goodbye at Professor Snape before disapparating.

They were silent for a few minutes as Severus dealt with the food, keeping the stasis charm on the
tea and pudding and handing Hermione a napkin and a plate of the pie. He poured a glass of wine and set it on the table in front of her. She was just tucking into her meal when Severus looked at her. “May I ask you a personal question?” At her nod he continued. “What happened between you and Mr. Weasley?”

She swallowed the hot pie quickly and sputtered as it burned its way down her throat. She set her plate down with a clatter and grabbed for her wine, trying to cool her throat. After coughing into her napkin, she glared at him. “You weren’t joking when you said ‘personal’.”

“Sorry. I was curious. It seems incomprehensible to me that the two of you would make a match of it.”

She narrowed her eyes and took another healthy swallow of wine. “Clearly we didn't. I suppose you’ll find out eventually as it's common knowledge now, and not that uncommon a story if I stop to think about it. We were together for four years. He cheated on me once early on after a drunken night out with his mates, but I forgave him that.” She shrugged, though Severus could read the regret in the movement. "He eventually proposed and I accepted. Then he...I guess ‘acquired a mistress’ is too classy a term, but it’s appropriate. He had a girlfriend on the side. A singer he met at the local pub. She was already up the spout when he told me about her, so I ended it. He wanted to reconcile, I think if only to get Molly off his back, but I refused. I certainly couldn't spend my life with a habitual philanderer, especially not someone who had lied to me for months on end. And now they’re married. End of my sad little tale.” She took another cautious bit of her pie.

Severus frowned into his plate of pie, feeling the inexplicable urge to track down Weasley and ring his neck. “I always thought he was a dunderhead. I had no idea he was such a complete simpleton. I’m not sorry that you didn’t end up married to such a complete fucking nitwit, but I am sorry that he managed to hurt you.”

“They married less than a month after I ended the engagement,” she murmured. She ventured a slight smile after that. “Harry was furious. He threatened to hex him and when I asked him to leave it he sent Ginny instead. I understand Ron was still pulling bats from his nose as he prepared to walk down the aisle. They’re still not speaking to him.”

“Is...is seeing Mr. Weasley going to be a problem next term during the guest lecture? I can make do with just you and Harry.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s months away, Severus. I’m sure I’ll be able to spend two hours in his presence by then without cursing the arse.” Her lips twitched. “Maybe.”

He chuckled. “Let me know if you need someone to hold him down. I’m sure you can beat Miss Weasley’s dreaded bat-bogey hex.”

She laughed outright at that. “I once set a flock of charmed birds on him in sixth year. It was brilliant, if I do say so myself. He looked hen-pecked for a week after.”

He grinned back at her, feeling a sense of camaraderie that had been rare in his life. He recalled that Hermione Granger had always found exquisite ways to extract revenge. It was one of the qualities he’d always admired in her.

They lapsed back into silence as they applied themselves to their meals. Bolstered by warm food and good wine, Severus found himself beginning to relax. He snuck a peek at Hermione from beneath his lashes as she worked through her plate of pie. He could certainly see how he might have been attracted to her; she was bright and pretty and had a wicked sense of humor and a strong sense of justice. All the same, he couldn’t quite imagine himself asking her on a date. It seemed so far out of
his character as to be laughable.

Hermione set her plate down and sat back with a sigh. “Ugh. I never eat this much late at night. This is your fault, you know. If I’d just gone back to my rooms I would’ve had some tinned soup and been done with it.”

“You keep tinned soup in your apartments?”

“Of course. I don’t like to disturb the house-elves late at night. Did you know they’re up at four during the school year preparing breakfast for the students? It hardly seems fair to not let them get a full night’s rest.”

“I had no idea.”

“Few do. So I keep tinned soup and some nibbles in my apartments so I can avoid disturbing them after hours.” She shrugged.

“That’s remarkably generous of you. I’ll admit, I’m quite guilty of requesting a midnight snack if I’m working late. I don’t know that I’ll be able to do that without feeling paroxysms of guilt from now on.”

She smiled a bit at that. “Well, you should. But it’s not as though they would ever censure you. Most of the elves are quite happy to serve, no matter the time of day. I’ve had to tread rather carefully with them ever since the hats incident my fourth year. I try to respect them without encroaching on their desires to work, even if I still don’t understand it. I find that this approach reduces the amount of burnt toast in my life.” She twinkled at him a bit over her wine glass.

Oh, yes. He could certainly see the attraction.

“As much as I hate to end this interlude, we should likely get started on those memories before it gets too late. Would you like to save pudding and tea for after?”

“Likely a good idea. I don’t think I could do it justice right now. Where do you think I should start?” She regarded him curiously.

“I suppose we should start with my awakening. I was in a coma for three months?”

She nodded. “Just under, actually. Two months, 24 days.”

"And you visited me the whole time?"

"Every day,” she admitted.

"I'm honored."

Severus rose to hide his blush and moved the dinner tray to his side table before directing his wand at the door. “Accio pensieve.” He caught the floating disk and placed it on the table between them, sitting on the edge of the chair. “Whenever you’re ready, Hermione.”

He watched as she frowned in thought, then drew a whispy, silvery strand from her right temple. She placed it in the pensieve and made a go-ahead gesture.

Hermione was sitting in a chair with her feet propped on the lower rung of his bed, idly flipping
through Ley Line Practices of Druidic Britain. He lay in the bed, unmoving and sallow but for the red and purple scar on his neck. Both of the room’s occupants looked positively haggard. Minutes ticked by with only the turning of pages and shuffling feet in the corridor to mark their passage. Hermione paused to glance at his prone figure every few minutes before returning to her book. Suddenly, the figure in the bed groaned and fluttered his eyes. Hermione immediately jumped to her feet and grabbed his hand.

“Professor Snape? Can you hear me? How do you feel? Should I call a nurse?”

The shrunken figure rasped “Cease your prattling,” and lapsed back into silence.

He watched as Hermione laughed, then burst into tears. Fantastic. I make her cry even when semi-conscious. That’s a talent. He was somewhat appeased when he saw that she was smiling through her tears as she rushed to the door.

“Nurse! Oh, nurse, he woke up. And he spoke. But he's gone back to sleep. Can you fetch the healer please?”

He watched as she closed her eyes for a moment and drew her wand, summoning a patronus that looked like an...otter? “Go to Grimmauld Place and tell Harry that Professor Snape has awoken. And that I’ll be late for dinner.” The silvery weasel swam through the wall to deliver the message. She scooted her chair closer to the bed and took his hand in hers again. “You’re going to be okay. We’re going to make sure of it, Professor. We owe you that much.”

Severus emerged from the memory as though walking through a cloud of steam and looked at his companion. “Thank you. For being there when I woke, I mean.”

She blushed and gave him a tiny smile. “You’re welcome. Um. I don’t think I have the energy for another tonight. Do you mind if we continue tomorrow?”

“Not at all. You were kind to agree to begin tonight as it was. Shall we meet here after dinner?”

“Lovely. I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow morning.” She gathered the borrowed book and rose to leave.

Severus tamped down on the instinctive sense of disappointment he felt as she extracted the memory from the pensieve and touched her wand to her head. Where did that come from? She wanted to kill me three hours ago. “You should take your dessert with you. Winky will be disappointed if we leave it out overnight.”

She glanced down at the pudding and grinned. “Thanks. I’ll just take it home with me. Across the hall, I mean. Goodnight, Severus.”

“Goodnight, Hermione.”

Severus sighed as he closed the door behind Hermione. He felt unsettled and edgy -- hardly conducive to sleep. Too many revelations for one night, he supposed. Ignoring the tray with tea and dessert, he poured himself two fingers of Ogden’s and took it onto the bedroom balcony. If nothing else, he could enjoy the view in his wakefulness.
The balcony was far larger than he anticipated and he sighed with pleasure at having so much outdoor space. He stood alone in the moonlight for a moment, watching it reflect off the ripples in the black lake. He smiled a bit as a tentacle shot out of the water with a splash. The giant squid was apparently enjoying the waxing gibbous moon as well.

He looked around a bit and puzzled over what to do with the expanse of stone. Perhaps he could put in a small container garden at the far end come spring. He began walking in that direction to explore the space, but drew up short when he realized that he could hear voices through the open door at the far end. A shared balcony? Interesting. He took a chance and peeked into window and saw that the space was, indeed, a mirror of his own. Hermione was crouched by the fire, clearly immersed in a floo call. He crept a bit closer, careful to remain close to the railing so his presence would be less noticeable. It occurred to him that he could just disillusion himself, but that brought him too close to Peeping Tom for comfort. She’s probably reporting on our progress to Minerva. He found if he turned his ear away from the wind, he could just hear her end of the conversation.

“...thinks he’s been obliviated...no, that’s what makes the most sense. Minerva thinks so too.”

_Hmmm. Maybe not Minerva._

“...doesn’t remember anything except a visit from Harry, Ron and me... No, that was a mistake. He didn’t know about Ron...I don’t know, probably the same way everyone else found out. Rita fucking Skeeter.”

_Not talking to Harry either. Who, then? A friend? A lover?_

“...Ginny, it’s as if nothing ever happened. He doesn’t remember any of it, but I spotted some of the books we brought him on his shelf. I think I’ll ask him where he got them and see if that triggers any memories...”

_Ah, so she’s speaking to Ginevra Weasley. Nice to see that some friendships survive._ He heard a muffled voice reply, but couldn’t quite make it out through the crackling of the flames and the wind blowing past his head.

“No! I’ve barely managed to move from civil to friendly. I couldn’t possibly...oh, hah hah very funny...Give my love to Harry and your family. Except your oaf of a brother of course. Right...G’night Gin.” The green flames winked out and Hermione sat back on her haunches for a moment, staring into the ashes. He heard her sniffle a bit and saw her wipe at her cheek with the back of her hand.

His heart wrenched a bit as he watched her briefly cover her eyes with the palms of her hands and heave a sigh. _She’s genuinely distressed about this turn of events. Just how important was our friendship to her?_

Severus slowly moved back toward his end of the of the balcony before she could turn and see him blatantly eavesdropping on a private conversation. He gently shut the balcony door and banished the remainder of his drink, feeling entirely too morose to consume any more alcohol.

Instead he levitated the tea tray and dessert from the living room into his bedroom, then reconsidered and carried it into the bath. He turned the taps on full and set the tray on the edge of the tub.

_Fuck this night. He was eating his dessert while bathing and damn anyone who judged his choice._
A Little Help from my Friend

Chapter Summary

Preparations for the school year continue while Hermione and Snape come to an understanding.

Chapter Notes

Whew! This chapter took longer than I would've liked. Work has picked up a bit and I haven't had as much time/energy to write this week. I'll post another chapter late Sunday. As always, thanks for your wonderful feedback!

August 22, 2005 - Hogwarts

The Weasley Twins had never been great favorites of Severus while they’d been in school; he’d certainly spent enough of his time confiscating their inventions from students with too much pocket money or chasing the twins themselves out of his stores or away from secret passage entrances. However, Severus would have given a month’s salary for one of their Daydream Charms today. He was having rather a bad work day. He’d conferred with a healer from St. Mungo’s that morning and been told that reversing an obliviation that had sat for six years would risk intensifying the spell. “The only approved treatment would be a course of memory sharing, which you have already begun. There is a chance that this process may allow you to recover some of your own memories, though the results will be unreliable at best.” Severus sighed at the memory, attracting the puzzled notice of Minerva and Hagrid.

It didn’t help that the faculty meeting had ground on for nearly an hour past its allotted time as the various faculty members argued over how to best implement his curriculum. The table in front of him was littered with sliced and diced and red-marked additions to his proposed collaborations with each and he had a desperate headache brewing behind his eyes. Professors were eager to collaborate, yes, but it seemed they only wanted to do so on their terms. Every. Single. Professor. was outraged at the prospect of losing an entire week of teaching. And lo and behold, not a single one has volunteered to chaperone the training trip! Severus shot a desperate glance at Minerva, who seemed to be watching the proceedings with a slight smirk on her otherwise sanguine face. One might almost think she was enjoying his torture.

“Enough!” Severus snarled at the gathered company. “I have heard your concerns. And your questions. And your further complaints. I will review your proposed revisions to my curriculum and make some final decisions by the end of the week. However: The survival training trip is NOT negotiable. The Minister has approved it. The Headmistress has approved it. You don’t have to like it, but it’s going to happen.”

The professors regarded him silently for a moment before they all began speaking at once again, each trying to be heard over the others. Finally, Minerva rose from the table and regarded the gathered intellectuals. “Severus is correct, the trip is planned and preparations are already underway. The
Ministry and Hogwarts are committed to seeing this plan through. Everyone will need to adjust to that fact. If no one wishes to volunteer to chaperone the expedition, then I will assign volunteers. Now we are over time and the house elves will be setting out dinner in the Great Hall in half an hour. Take a few moments to yourselves and I will see you there shortly.” She bent to gather her things as most of the professors left the room in a flurry of papers and waving hands.

Severus reached into the pocket of his slacks and silently placed a vial on the table in front of Minerva. She nodded her thanks to Severus as she placed the headache potion into the pocket of her robes and turned to leave.

Neville cleared his throat. “Headmistress?”

“Yes, Neville?”

“Luna and I will both volunteer to chaperone the trip with for the sixth and seventh years. It sounds fun.”

“And you never know what creatures we might find while camping! Not that I would neglect my chaperoning duties, of course.” Luna added with a sunny smile.

“Thank you Neville, Luna. I appreciate your willingness to assist in this matter.”

Hermione spoke up as well. “I’ll go as well, Headmistress. I’ve already rearranged my course calendar to accommodate a week of missed courses; each of my students will be working on individual research projects and will be under the supervision of Madame Pince for the duration of the week.”

“Excellent, Hermione. We’ll just need two other volunteers…I’ll ask the staff individually who might be willing to participate. Now off with you. We have dinner soon and I’m sure you’d all like to stretch your legs.” She favored the three young professors with a smile of gratitude and took herself off to her quarters for fifteen minutes of much needed quiet.

Severus looked at the three professors with surprise, shocked that they’d been the first to speak up. Of all of the faculty members in the school, these three had been the most supportive of his proposed plans; it humbled him when he thought of the havoc he’d wreaked in their lives during their time at school. He uttered a quiet “thank you” before hurriedly shoving his papers into his work satchel.

He and Hermione made their way back to the West tower without speaking, each heading into their separate quarters to drop off their things and wash up for dinner. Severus tried stretching after sitting in the staff room all day, only to find that his back and neck were horribly kinked. He’d need to ask Hermione to delay their memory session for a bit this evening so he could take a brisk walk and loosen his stiff muscles.

He and Hermione were now meeting nightly to work their way through her memories. They were taking it slowly, extracting and viewing only two or three memories a night to avoid overtaxing her magic. Pensieve extraction was uncomfortable at best and painful after repeated attempts. Severus had needed to restrain his impatience as these early memories were all frightfully similar. Thus far he’d viewed nearly a dozen memories of her joining him in the hospital room and reading aloud from a muggle novel; she claimed to want to avoid burdening his recovering brain and body with news from the Prophet or overly intellectual works. They’d worked through Watership Down, which had horrified him with its descriptions of rabbits (pah!) fighting to the death. Merlin. While the book was interesting, it did nothing so much as remind him of the war he’d just finished fighting; Severus had watched as Hermione apologized to bed-bound Severus for her choice of book and instead switched to Treasure Island. He’d been enjoying listening (oh, he supposed) relistening to the tale of
adventure on the high seas...though he’d had to stifle the impulse to giggle like a twelve year-old
every time Hermione had said “Sea Cock”. He was rather looking forward to his next memory
session with her, if only to hear the next chapter of the tale.

After washing his hands and face, Severus made his way down to the Great Hall. The hall was
empty of the long tables and chairs that would fill it once the term began next Thursday. Instead, a
large round table was set at the center of the hall. It was traditional for the faculty to dine en famille in
the week prior to the start of term, and Severus had found himself enjoying the easy camaraderie of
his colleagues. He was particularly pleased that his more open demeanor -- which still felt bloody
unnatural -- virtually guaranteed that his wry comments were greeted with good humor rather than
suspicion.

Severus found himself taking the seat between Mohinder and Hermione for the meal. He’d enjoyed
getting know Mohinder over the past few days, and the two had met for a lavish tea on Saturday
while they compared notes on their travels. Severus had found the man erudite and clever with a sly
wit that matched his own. He felt that he had, finally, managed to make a friend that did not demand
his loyalty to a lost cause, his magical skills, or his subterfuge.

He greeted both Mohinder and Hermione politely, noting that they each smiled in return but that the
majority of the table was still a touch perturbed by his outburst near the end of the staff meeting. He
ignored their looks of disfavor and leaned toward the woman on his right. “Hermione, would you
mind if we delayed our meeting this evening by an hour. I’m afraid that I’ve been seated too long
today and will need to stretch my legs after dinner.”

“Actually, do you mind if I join you? I’m afraid I’m rather stiff from the day’s meeting as well and
could use a brisk walk. Around the lake, perhaps?”

Severus hesitated only a moment before replying. “That would be acceptable.”

Dinner was not lavish, but it was delicious. The elves had prepared a beautiful pot roast with carrots,
onions, parsnips, mushrooms, and an herbed gravy that positively made the mouth water just looking
at it. While Severus had appreciated some culinary experimentation on his travels over the past few
years, he was pleased to be back at Hogwarts and eating reliably scrumptious, English fare. The meal
was accompanied by a good wine (sadly unavailable at the high table during the term), and as the
meal progressed the other faculty seemed to let go of the ire that had carried them in from the faculty
meeting. Severus and Mohinder quickly became involved in a discussion of the prevalence of
parsletongues in South Asia.

Mohinder gestured with his fork as he explained. “It’s not quite common, though it isn’t nearly as
rare as it is in Europe or Britain. There’s certainly no stigma attached to the ability like there is here;
it’s neither thought dark nor deviant. It’s simply a trait that runs in some of the older wizarding
families in that region of the world.”

Severus contemplated this new information. “I find the lack of stigma fascinating. It’s long been
thought the mark of a dark wizard to have the ability to speak to snakes here in Britain. Hermione, I
believe your friend Mr. Potter experienced considerable backlash when he revealed his ability in his
second year.”

Hermione looked at Severus in surprise at his easy mention of her best friend and smiled at Mohinder
in the seat beyond. “It’s true. Harry was an absolute outcast for weeks after that incident during
dueling training. He lost the ability after Voldemort died, though. He says that trips to the zoo just
aren’t the same anymore.”

“But you see, such an ability would be quite accepted in the South Asian countries! You even see
some wizards ‘charming’ snakes for the muggle tourists in the big cities.”

“How do those wizards get ‘round the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy?” Hermione asked.

Mohinder smirked in response. “The authorities are not so terribly concerned. The muggles view it as entertainment or chicanery; there is little danger of exposing our kind to the muggle population.”

Severus listened with half an ear as Hermione and Mohinder continued the discussion of magical secrecy and international standards, reaching forward and cutting himself a piece of the lovely Victoria sponge with vanilla buttercream and some sort of currant jam that sat near the center of the table. Without thinking he cut a piece for Hermione and handed it to her before turning back to re-engage with Mohinder’s discussion of wizarding law in Sri Lanka. He missed entirely the stunned look Hermione shot the cake in her hands as he and the younger wizard debated the relative merits of loosened regulations for performative magics.

Severus rose from the table as dinner came to a close and turned Hermione. “Would you still care to accompany me on a walk?”

She quickly finished her tea and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “Yes, thanks.”

“Well then, let us depart before the sun sets too low.” He stopped himself before offering his arm and instead tucked his hands into his trouser pockets as they made their way out the castle entrance. He inhaled deeply, turning his face to the sun to soak in some of the last of its warmth. All too soon the days would be turning colder. He was grateful that at least he wouldn’t be spending the next few months trapped in the dungeons; at least he would see daylight on occasion.

They picked their way across the western courtyard toward the Black Lake and began to work their way down the path around it. A light breeze teased ringlets out of Hermione’s loose plait and Severus couldn’t help but think she made a pretty picture in the setting sun. The walked in silence for awhile before she finally spoke.

“How was your visit with the healer this morning?”

“As expected. No known course of treatment other than memory-sharing, which we’re already doing. He thinks it might jostle a few memories loose, but otherwise I’m relying entirely on your recollection of events past.” He kicked at a pebble with his shoe.

“I know you’re frustrated, but you have to be patient. We’ve been working on this for less than a week. And I think I’m already noticing some slight improvement in your memories.”

He shot her a questioning look.

“So you’re saying that because I handed you a piece of cake this evening, I’m improving.”

She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t the fact that you handed me a piece of cake. It was the way you did it.
I -- stop. Just stand here for a minute. I’m giving you permission, so I promise not to hit you. Use Legilimency and I’ll show you.” She stood in front of him and looked him in the eye.

He blinked, then did as she asked, speaking the incantation aloud so she would be prepared.

They were at Grimmauld Place, celebrating Minerva’s birthday with surviving members of the Order. The entire Weasley clan, even Charlie, Harry, Andromeda Tonks and Teddy Lupin, Minerva, Hagrid, Kingsley, and Mundungus crammed into the house’s ground floor to celebrate the new Headmistress. Eight conversations seemed to be happening at once and raucous shouts of laughter peppered the air. Severus, Hermione, Bill, and Arthur were seated at one end of the kitchen table arguing over the restrictions on enchanting Muggle objects. Arthur and Hermione were arguing pro while Severus argued against and Bill played devil’s advocate against both sides. He watched as he reached toward the center of the table and snagged two servings of almond mousse, handing one to Hermione and keeping one for himself. He never broke eye contact with Arthur as he continued to eviscerate the man’s argument, but the Severus observing the memory felt Hermione’s pleasure at the thoughtful gesture. She smiled up at him before skewering him on a detail, then popped a self-satisfied spoonful of the treat in her mouth.

He withdrew from her mind and frowned at her in consternation.

“It’s a lovely memory, Hermione -- especially as I was clearly winning that debate -- but I fail to see the significance of me handing you a cup of mousse.”

“You did it without thinking and without me asking. Just as you did this evening. It wasn’t a polite gesture, Severus, it was a caring one.”

He focused his gaze on the distant mountains as he began to walk around the lake again. “Was I? Caring?”

She snorted. “Not at first. You were your usual self -- or your old self, I guess, since you’re so different now -- for the first few weeks and kept telling me to stop pestering you with my incessant need for professorial approval. Then you told me that I needn’t help you convalesce out of an ‘overgrown and misplaced sense of Gryffindor emotional debt’. Actually, you were a right git through the end of summer and beginning of fall. But eventually, yes. You became very caring, in your way. A real friend.”

They continued their walk, turning back toward the castle in silent agreement as the sun began to dip below the surrounding hills. Hermione walked calmly, knowing that Severus was chewing on what she had shared with him.

As they moved back into the courtyard she heard him say softly, “I think I’d like that. To be your friend again.”

They walked toward Severus’ apartment without speaking. He felt as though something had shifted during their walk; suddenly his evenings with Hermione were more than sessions in memory recovery, but a friend helping him with a problem. He wanted to earn the caring that she had demonstrated in her memories and during their walk around the lake. He just wasn’t sure where to begin.
He held the door open for Hermione to enter and watched her make her way over to the pensieve. He felt...awkward. “Would you like tea?”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind a drink if you don’t mind. It’s been a bit of an evening.”

“Ogden’s?” he offered.

“No, Ogden’s makes me feel argumentative and I’m feeling rather mullish already. Do you have any muggle liquors?”

“I have some Courvoisier and wine. Would either of those do?”

“The cognac would be perfect, thanks.” She slipped off her shoes and made herself comfortable in the armchair, pulling an afghan off the back of the chair to drape over her legs and resting her head on her fist. He was pleased to see that she had become comfortable in his rooms, though she seemed to be staring at the fireplace without really seeing it.

He noted the direction of her gaze. “Sorry, were you cold? I can light the fire.”

“Do you mind? It’s gotten a bit chilly now that fall is almost here.”

“Not at all.” He handed her a snifter and lit the fireplace with a wandless gesture before sitting opposite her with his own drink. He nosed and then sipped at the liquor carefully, feeling the warmth move down his throat. “Hermione, would you mind terribly if we were to forgo the pensive for the evening and just converse? As anxious as I am to finish Treasure Island, ” he smirked a bit at that, “there are some things that I would like to understand.”

She lowered her eyes to her drink and took a contemplative sip before responding. “Alright. What do you want to discuss?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I like spending time with you and I’d like to spend an evening with you that doesn’t have anything to do with recovering lost memories or figuring out who obliviated me or anything else. You keep telling me we were friends during my recovery. I’ve never had many friends...I don’t want to lose one now, even if I didn’t know I had her until last week.”

She looked at him a long moment before replying. “I’m not sure I can just slide back into our friendship the way it was, Severus. Even though I know the reasons for it, you hurt me when you left without a word. That changed me and made me who I am today. I’m still dealing with that.”

He nodded, not terribly surprised by her response. “So what now, then?”

“Friendships have to build, Severus. They don’t just happen -- they start off on a foundation and get built up stone by stone, like a house. The foundation is still there, I think, but it’s going to take time for both of us to feel the same strength of friendship we had before. I don’t think you can expect me to feel in a week what took nearly a year to build, especially as we’re both different people now than we were then.”

“Then can I -- we -- not make an effort to get to know each other now? Otherwise our evening meetings are going to feel like a bizarrely intimate tutoring session.”

She laughed at that. “I’m not saying that we can’t be friends. I’m saying that you need to be patient and understand that in a lot of ways this is as hard for me as it is for you. Just...give it time, okay.”

“Alright. Can I ask how you’ve spent your time over the past few years? I don’t even know how you ended up teaching at Hogwarts.”
“That’s a pretty safe topic,” she said, smiling brightly. “I took a gap year after the war. We were all so tired and we needed to recover from the months on the run and the battle itself. Harry, Ron, and I needed rest and good food and our families, though it took nearly a year for me to track mine down. You helped with that, actually.”

“How did you find your parents? Are they well? Minerva said that their memories haven't fully recovered.”

Her eyes dropped to her drink again as she responded. “They haven’t, though they’re much better. They’re back here now and undergoing therapy at St. Mungo’s, but there are...gaps. It wasn’t so much the length of time they were obliterated, but that I’d taken away so much. Usually obliteration is for a specific memory or a set of memories. I erased my entire existence from their lives.” She drew a deep breath before continuing. “They remember most of my Hogwarts years now. They have the letters I wrote them, so it was really about recovering holiday memories and summers there. The hard part is that they don’t remember much of the time before I came to Hogwarts. My memories are a bit fuzzy before the age of five, so I can’t help them much there. Mum doesn’t remember her pregnancy or my birth or first birthday. It’s hard on all of us, but they’ve mostly forgiven me I think.”

Severus leaned forward and drew her eye. “You did was necessary to save them, Hermione. As hard as their loss is, they are alive because you thought to hide them. They were at the top of the list for detainment after Voldemort took over the Ministry.”

A soft sigh escaped her. “So you said after I first found them. And I know you’re right, it’s just the ongoing ache in our family.”

“What happened after all that?”

“After? Oh, I came back to Hogwarts and finished. Minerva allowed me and a few others to come and prepare for N.E.W.T.s. She even allowed us to pursue apprenticeships if we wanted, though only a few of us -- Neville included -- actually took her up on the offer.”

“So you apprenticed with Minerva.”

“And Septima. I have a double mastery in Arithmancy and Transfiguration.” She sounded more than a little proud of her accomplishment.

“Merlin. How on earth did you manage that? Double masteries are rare -- rarer still for them to be completed at the same time.”

A wry smirk was playing around her lips. “Truthfully? I knew you had a double mastery, but that you’d done them back to back rather than simultaneously. I was so angry at you that I wanted to show you up. Not terribly noble, but very very effective.”

He barked a laugh. “Never cross a scorned witch. I’d forgotten how competitive you are. So you started your mastery while you studied for N.E.W.T.s. I assume this means you passed all your tests with flying colors.”

She dimpled and nodded. “Minerva offered me the Transfiguration post as soon as my studies were complete. It was rather understood that I was training for it from the beginning. I think she was actually annoyed that I added the second mastery as it added a year to the process. Well, that and the animagus certification”

He looked away and drained his drink. *An animagus certification as well? She’s probably one of the most qualified instructors in the school with all that. Minerva didn’t even attain her animagus
certificate until well into her second decade of teaching. “Well, far be it for you to compromise when
you’ve set your mind on something. I remember well enough your tenacity during your school years;
I can only imagine that your ambitions have grown since then. Though it’s a bit sad you can’t use the
Arithmancy mastery for more than your own research.”

“But I do use it,” she protested. “I do considerable contract work for the ministry...which I’ve
actually been neglecting a bit for the past few weeks thanks to all the upheaval Ron caused.”

“Good god, witch. Do you sleep?”

“Not much,” she admitted. “At first I just wanted to keep my mind busy, but I’m afraid it’s become
habit now. I’m thinking of reducing my Ministry contract this semester; it’s going to be hard keeping
up with that, teaching, and my research all at once now that we’re adding these evenings into the
mix. At least, not without using a time-turner, and those were all destroyed anyway.”

He stiffened a bit at that. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that your help would end up consuming so much
of your time. I’m grateful for it, of course, but we should probably reduce it to once or twice a week
so you have time for your own business.”

“Oh, stuff it Severus. I wouldn’t help this much if I didn’t want to. I want you to regain your
memories. If we only meet once or twice a week, it’ll take us ages to work through this.”

He nodded curtly. “My apologies.”

She waved a hand. “Forget it. Tell me what you’ve been doing for the past few years. I’m curious
about where you disappeared to.”

“I traveled a great deal, first to help track down some of the fleeing Death Eaters and later to see
some of the world. I hadn’t had much time for traveling between or during the wars.”

“You went off hunting Death Eaters?” she asked incredulously.

“Er...yes? Is that surprising?”

“One of the first things you told me when you were allowed to return to Spinner’s End was that
Nagini’s bite had quite killed your taste for heroics.”

“I’ve never had a taste for heroics, Hermione.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You spied for twenty years, inserted yourself into Voldemort’s inner circle,
and then went off to track down the cowards that fled. What would you call that if not heroics?”

“Duty. Paying a debt.” Except for the tracking part. He was still puzzling that one out...Hermione
was right, it seemed rather out of character, though he hadn’t thought so at the time. He wondered if
his sudden zeal for justice was a part of the obliviation spell.

“So you helped the Ministry capture Death Eaters for six years?”

“I just tracked them down -- I’ve always been more useful as a spy. Then I sent off owls with the
locations to the auror’s office and let them do the hard work of capturing and extradition. After a
couple of years, I’d had enough so I just kept traveling. A grand tour of sorts, if you will, except I
was doing a bit of my own research while I saw the sites.” He felt faintly embarrassed by his
explanation; it hardly seemed adequate to explain his absence for nearly six years.

“That sounds like a wonderful way to spend some time. What was your favorite?”
He was puzzled. “My favorite? My favorite what?”

“You favorite part of traveling. Your favorite site. Whatever. I’m curious.”

“Oh. I don’t know if I can choose! I liked the oxymoron of playing tourist. I could enjoy my solitude, but also be surrounded by people who were as interested in the sites as me. It felt good to just...drift with humanity for awhile, I think. I enjoyed my time in Japan the best, I think. There are several small wizarding communities throughout the islands, but culturally they’re very distinct. Some of them have remained unbelievably loyal to the feudal structures of the 18th and 19th centuries. And the plum blossoms were beautiful in the spring. St. Petersburg in the winter was stunning too. I spent some time in the Biblioteka dlya Volshebnikov reading up on some of the more obscure Eastern magics. Apparently Catherine the Great was trained by a descendant of Baba Yaga herself, though I’m not sure that anyone can really approve of the magics she employed to rule her Empire.”

He was so caught up in explaining some of the things he’d found that he missed the glint in Hermione’s eye as she sipped her cognac. She sounded pleased when she finally spoke. “You’ve been to so many places I’ve wanted to go. I’m still angry that you left, but I’m glad that you took the opportunity to travel Severus. You’ve had little enough pleasure in your life as it is.”

He was glad that she understood. “All the same, it’s nice to come back to someplace that feels like home. Even with the rude realization that my memory can’t be trusted, Hogwarts still feels like home to me.”

She chuckled, “I understand what you mean! Except for the year running and the year recovering, I’ve never really lived anywhere else but my parents’ house. I don’t know if I could ever leave.” She drained the rest of the cognac in her snifter. “Speaking of leaving, though, I should get back to my quarters. I’ve some work to do and tomorrow is another early morning.”

“I should do the same. Thank you for staying. Will you come back tomorrow night? To work with the pensieve?”

She folded the blanket over the back of his chair and avoided his eyes. “Yes, I’ll be here. After dinner again?”

“Whatever works best for you, Hermione. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Severus.” She patted his arm as she moved through the front door.

He looked down at his arm and realized it was the first physical contact she’d made with him since his return to Britain. He hummed a little tune as he walked upstairs to the bath. Maybe a friendship wouldn’t be as far off as they’d thought.
Long Lists and Hot-Cross Buns

Chapter Summary

A trio of scenes from the day before the Hogwarts Express arrives at the school.

Chapter Notes

One of the things I struggle with in my writing is finding the balance between not enough detail and far too much. And transitions...oh how I dread transition chapters. These scenes are a bit of an experiment before we move into the school term proper. (If it's not your thing, bear with me!)

August 30, 2005 - Headmistress’ Office

Green flames rose and died in Headmistress McGonagall's hearth, heralding the arrival of Minister Shacklebolt and Percy Granger in her office.

“Welcome Minister, Mr. Weasley.” She nodded to each man in turn. “I’ve asked Professor Snape to join us in a few moments. May I offer you both some tea?”

“That would be very welcome, Minerva. I’m sorry we couldn’t meet with you before now, but you know how busy things have been.” He lifted his hands in a silent gesture of helplessness. “It it weren’t for Percy here keeping such a tight reign on my schedule I’d never get anything done!” The Minster’s moon-shaped face crinkled in a smile as he glanced at his stoically silent assistant, who was at this moment poised to take notes on the meeting if necessary.

“Of course, Kingsley. You don’t have to explain; I know how busy you are. I do hope you’re not running poor Mr. Weasley ragged.”

The younger man flashed his former professor a quick grin. “Works me like a slave driver, Headmistress. But he knows if he gets too high handed I’ll just hide his schedule book from him.”

The trio laughed at Percy’s joke -- flat as it was. At least the boy was trying for a sense of humor these days. His recent marriage to Penelope Clearwater clearly agreed with him and Minerva was glad to see the boy shift into a less-overbearing mode of conversation after all these years. Percy had always been too serious for a boy of his years.

A knock on the office door announced Severus’ arrival, and he quickly joined the round table at which Percy was serving tea into handsome jasperware mugs embossed with the Hogwarts crest.

He greeted the assembled officials curtly. “Minister, Mr. Weasley. I’m pleased to see you both in good health.” He inclined his head in thanks as the younger man set a mug of tea before him and folded his hands on the table while he waited for the sugar tongs to become available. “Is there any news of my predicament that you can tell me?”
Kingsley heaved a sigh as he returned the milk jug back at the center of the small table. “You know more than we do at this point, Severus. The healers have been unable to offer much assistance with your case, I’m afraid, and we have few details to build a case on. I’ve asked the Auror Office to open a file on the problem, of course, but unless we have more information I’m afraid they’ll stall out. Have you and Professor Granger made any progress on recovering your memories?”

“A little, but it’s slow going. We’ve been working at it for nearly two weeks, but we can only manage a few memories at a time without risking illness on her part.” He hoped that he didn’t sound as petulant or frustrated as he felt. The last few nights had seen them finishing Treasure Island and beginning physical therapy. While he enjoyed his evenings with Hermione and was glad to be gaining some perspective into his lost year, he was growing increasingly impatient with the glacial pace of memory recovery.

“These things take time, Severus,” Minerva reminded him.

“You’re right, of course Headmistress. And it’s gracious of Professor Granger to give up so much of her free time to help me, especially as she is preparing her classroom and lessons for the start of the school term.” And dealing with the residual fallout of her fiancé’s public philandering. Severus had heard more than one Howler make its way into her chambers in the past few days, thanks in no small part to Rita Skeeter’s full-throated endorsement of the younger Weasley’s marriage. On the surface, her columns over the past week had dripped with false sympathy but the underlying implication was clear: Skeeter (and therefore her readers) blamed Hermione for failing to keep dear Ronald in her bed.

Kingsley’s voice drew his attention away from his own frowning consideration of Hermione’s ongoing battle with the press. “I’m sorry this has happened to you Severus, after all you’ve done for us over the years.” The man’s eyebrows drew together, creating a furrow in his otherwise smooth forehead. “We did bring you something that might help.” He turned to Percy, who presented the Minister with a stack of parchment. “Percy here has compiled a list of those who invited the Orphan’s Fund Ball at which you suspect you were attacked. It’s quite comprehensive, so I suggest that you look for names of those who might have harbored a grudge against you. We can give those names to the Auror’s Office and they can begin following up with those individuals.”

Severus expelled a harsh laugh at the Minister’s words. “Kingsley, you know as well as I that half of wizarding Britain has an issue with me -- either from my days as the dreaded Hogwarts Potions Master or from my time as a spy.”

Kingsley granted Severus a wry smile. “True enough, but surely you can narrow the list of potential attackers down a bit. Some people just think you’re a prat, Severus, and don’t harbor a deep-seated vendetta against you.”

“Or those that do are too homicidal to even consider using an elegant obliviation. I see your point, sir.” He favored his ally with a wry smile and Kingsley chuckled in return.

“I’ll leave that for you to be going on with, then. Now Severus, let me bring you up to date on the progress with your grand training program. We believe we have found a site!”

Severus doctored his tea as he listened to the Minister’s progress with his pet project. His had to force himself to pay attention as Weasley began droning on about the regulations that they would have to deal with during the survival week, but eventually found his mind drifting toward his apartments and the helpful young witch across the hall.

As much as I’d like to have this matter cleared up quickly, I’ll at least have my continued sessions with Hermione to look forward to. He sighed and sipped his tea, preparing himself for a tedious hour of dithering over Ministry guidelines.
Severus skipped dinner in the great hall in favor of returning to his chambers and finishing his preparations for first classes on Friday. Students would be arriving on campus tomorrow evening, greatly shortening the amount of free time he had during the week. It was best that he be as prepared for the first class as possible. His biggest worry wasn’t his subject -- he wagered that he knew more about the Dark Arts and protecting one’s self from them than any wizard alive -- but on how to keep discipline in his classroom. He was well aware that, though all his previous students had graduated long ago, the “Bat of the Dungeons” would still be very much a legend within Hogwarts’ walls...and he found that he desperately wanted to avoid his previously bat-like reputation. So how could the newer, nicer Professor Snape -- admittedly still a work in progress -- maintain classroom discipline without becoming an overbearing ogre? He had no idea where to begin.

Frustrated, he moved to the balcony to get some air. He leaned against the balustrade and breathed in the cool autumn air. Suddenly he caught a whiff of something baking and moved toward the scent to investigate. He was rewarded with a startled shriek from behind the window and the sight of Hermione flinging a book in the air and pointing a wand in his direction.

Severus put his hands in air and tried a smile. “Don’t shoot! I’m unarmed!”

The witch looked at him with eyes as big as saucers. “Severus! Gods, you scared the life out of me!” She lowered her wand to the ground and poked her head out the door. “What are you doing outside my window?”

He leaned against the stone arch of her open door. “Shared balcony, Hermione. I came out for some air and smelled something baking, so I investigated.”

“Baking? Shit!” She rushed through her apartments in a flurry of curls, skidding across the floor in her socks as she ran back toward the kitchen. Severus could hear curses and the clatter of a pan from the back of the room. He looked around curiously from his vantage point by the door. He could see over the railing of her bedroom that her apartments were far more feminine than his. Flowers graced the coffee and side tables, framed muggle and magical photos sat on the mantle, and cozy knitted afghans draped over the chairs and sofa. Her bookshelves looked nearly as full as his. Her bedroom looked warm and inviting from his vantage point, lit by the sunlight streaming through the windows in a way it hadn’t been on his last peek inside her apartments. It looked like the inside of a seraglio, all reds and oranges and golds with metallic threads sewn through them. The low divan where Hermione had been reading was loaded with pillows. The entire room was uncomfortably sumptuous.

Hermione appeared in the sitting room below carrying two mugs of tea and a plate. “Well, don’t just stand there, come down here and have some pudding. I made buns and if you have some I won’t eat them all.” She set the items down and waved him unceremoniously toward the sofa.

Severus wound his way downstairs, bending to pick up the book she’d flung in the air upon his arrival. He inspected the binding as he sat on her sitting room sofa. “I’m glad to see you’re making good use of this as a projectile if nothing else,” he said, handing the German-translation back to her.

She colored a bit at that. “I finished prepping my courses for the next few weeks and thought I’d make use of the downtime. It’s an interesting read; I should’ve thanked you for it.”

“I hardly gave you the chance. As I recall, I rather forced it on you,” he said with a wicked glint in
his eye. He picked up one of the hot cross buns off the plate and took an appreciative bite as she eyed him apprehensively. When she seemed satisfied that he wasn’t going to keel over, she picked up one of the buns herself and bit in.

“Mmm. These turned out well. I’m afraid my baking skills are rather hit or miss. How have you been today, Severus? You were missed at dinner.”

He sipped his tea and leaned back into the corner of the sofa to regard her. “I needed to make some adjustments to my lesson plans for the next few weeks to suit the changes the Minister wants to make to the survival trip next term. I think I’ll be teaching the Patronus Charm earlier than I thought for my seventh years.”

“Harry mastered it in his fourth and taught the rest of the D.A. in our fifth years. The seventh years should be able to master the shield version quickly enough, I think.”

“You misunderstand me. The Minister wants them to master not only the corporeal Patronus, but to use them as messengers as well. That’s something most wizards don’t master until well after graduation, if ever. I’m told the former D.A.D.A. Professors did not teach the Patronus Charm, so I suspect we’ll have some hard going. I am going to start introducing it to the fourth, fifth, and sixth years at the same time.” He polished off his bun as he contemplated the amount of work before him there.

“You’ll wear yourself out.”

“Don’t I know it. I might wear you out too...I broached an idea to the Minister today, but I should’ve spoken to you first. Do you have any particularly talented witches or wizards who will be in your seventh form Transfiguration classes?”

“A handful. Why?”

“I think you should put your Animagus Certificate to good use.”

She considered him a moment before speaking. “Severus, I’m not sure that’s at all wise. Animagus transformation hasn’t been taught here for years, and I can only think of a few students who are up to the task. And, as you know, the transformation has the potential to go horribly wrong.”

“The Minister expressed the same opinion, but Minerva thought you would be up to the task. It would be a small number of students -- no more than a half dozen, I imagine. I can help supervise the course, though I’m not certified to teach it.”

“I had no idea you were an animagus, Severus! You never said a word.”

“You weren’t to know. I won’t be officially on the registration books until the Minister and Mr. Weasley file the paperwork.” He managed to look both smug and sheepish as he made his admission.

“You were unregistered? Well, of course you were. What better way to spy? What form do you take? No, let me guess...a bat?”

“Obvious even for a Gryffindor, Hermione. Agree to teach the class and I’ll show you.”

She smiled a bit, but refused to take the bait. “Let me think about it. I’ll let you know tomorrow morning what I decide.”

He nodded his agreement, but didn’t press the matter. Teaching a handful of students to become
animagi might not be the best use of their time, but he thought the mystery of the process might serve as an incentive to some of his sixth and fifth years to up their game, so to speak. A reward for high marks and aptitude as well as a useful skill in their adult lives. He’d always rather enjoyed the freedom of his own ability to transform, and had used it as a rare means of escape from the pressures of his life as a double agent during the last war.

Hermione seemed to understand that the subject had come to a close for the time being. “Did you want to work with the Pensieve tonight?” she asked, changing the subject.

“If you feel up to it, yes. Now?”

“Let me just put these in the sink.” She gathered the plate and mugs as she rose and moved back toward the kitchen. When she came back, Severus was in front of her bookshelves, looking through her collection with the same look a child has upon first entering Honeydukes.

“You have a number of titles here that I haven’t read before. Do you ever loan books?”

She dimpled at the man as she tugged a pair of loafers onto her feet. “Sometimes, but only for an exchange in kind.”

“How positively Slytherin of you, Professor Granger,” he said with mock surprise.

“Nothing Slytherin about it. I’m just an insufferable bookworm, as well you know.”

“You’re welcome to borrow anything in my collection that strikes your interest, so long as you let me know what you’ve borrowed.” He couldn’t quite believe he was giving her carte blanche to his collection...but then again, he knew that Hermione Granger took obsessively good care of her books. When she wasn’t startled out of her wits in her own bedroom.

“Thank you. I’ll say the offer is returned in kind.”

“Ah! If that’s the case, might I borrow this?” He held up a weathered tome entitled *Tools for Teaching*.

Hermione laughed. “Severus, that’s a Muggle book on classroom management and discipline. Surely you don’t need that!”

His face turned serious. “Hermione, you were unfortunate enough to be one of my students nearly a decade ago. I think you, of all people, might agree that I could use some outside advice to mend my classroom ways?”

“I quite see your point. Please, borrow that for as long as you wish.”

“Thank you. Shall we?” He gestured toward her front door.

“Lay on, MacDuff! Let’s see if we can’t get you through some more of the therapy memories tonight. I have a particularly good one I’ve been saving up; you tried to hex her without your wand. Priceless.” The woman had the audacity to twinkle at him as she moved out the door.

Severus rolled his eyes as he followed.

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It was well past midnight and Severus knew he should probably sleep, but he couldn’t seem to stop reading the book Hermione had loaned him. He knew that he hadn’t been the best teacher in the past. He hadn’t really tried all that hard -- he had never wanted to teach and had only accepted the position because Dumbledore had instructed him to do so. The first few years had been horrible; he’d only been a few years older than his students and hadn’t known how to communicate with them outside of scaring the living daylights out of them. By the time he’d been at Hogwarts long enough to be considered a seasoned teacher, he’d been entrenched in the preparations for another war and too used to the habits of snapping and snarling. He knew there was a better way. He’d seen other teachers use this better way...but according to this book he’d been laughably wrong.

The book was actually fairly humorous. He liked to think that he’d perfected the “Queen Victoria” face long ago (honestly, the book had to have been written by an American...what was this fascination with British aristocracy?), but he was intrigued by the methods of redirecting misbehaving students, silencing backtalkers, and using his own body language to avoid mixed messages. That last would be easiest -- after years of spying for Dumbledore and avoiding Voldemort’s attempts to invade his mind, he liked to think that he had a healthy awareness of what messages his body communicated. He might try to employ some of these techniques in the coming weeks and see how they worked. It certainly couldn’t be any worse than his previous methods.

He shut the book with a snap and placed it on the bedside table. Students would begin to arrive at Hogwarts tomorrow evening; his classroom was prepared and his lessons finalized. He’d worked tirelessly over the past two weeks to ensure that everything was prepared and now found himself restless and unaccountably nervous. He’d failed before within Hogwarts’ hallowed halls; he didn’t want to do so again. Agitated, he threw off the duvet and prowled the floor. His apartments suddenly seemed stuffy and claustrophobic, so he stomped back onto the balcony in his pyjama bottoms and faded tee. He shook himself a bit in the cool air in an attempt to clear his head of the dramatic plunge in his otherwise unshakable self-confidence.

“Bad night?” a voice asked from the other end of the balcony.

He started and turned. “Hermione. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were out here.”

“I usually come out here for a bit before I retire. I find it clears my head, keeps the nightmares at bay.” She wrapped her robe more firmly around her petite figure and leaned back against the stone wall of the castle to look up at the shining sliver of moon above. Severus could barely make out her wild fall of curls in the darkness.

He smiled ruefully. “That’s what I was hoping to find as well. I can’t seem to settle tonight and if I try to sleep like this I'll just be up and pacing at three in the morning...and be a terror tomorrow.”

“Can’t turn your thoughts off?” She asked from her end of the balcony.

“My nerves, more like. I haven’t taught in years, and I wasn’t that good at it then.”

“You were better than you think you were, Severus.” She pushed off the wall to walk toward him. “You know your material, you just tended to terrify us on occasion.”

“That’s just it! I don’t want to terrify anyone!” He paused to gather his thoughts as she drew near. “Do your students like you Hermione?”

“Some of them do. Some of them think I assign too much homework. And some of them think that I’m too strict. I modeled my discipline style off Minerva wherever I could, so I try to run a tight ship.
Transfiguration is too dangerous to do anything else.”

“I don’t need my students to be my friends, but I’m so tired of being reviled. I’ve never been particularly well liked -- not as a teacher or as a student. I’m not sure I know how to be anything but what I was.” He sighed a little at the admission.

Hermione touched a hand to his arm. “You know what to do then, don’t you? Ask for help. Talk to the other Professors. I know it’s not in your nature, but no one will ridicule you for reaching out, Severus.”

He nodded thoughtfully into the dark night. “Thank you, Hermione. I’m glad that I have a...a friend I can talk to about this. I’m not used to feeling so unsure of myself.” He held his breath a bit and waited for her to correct him, to tell them their friendship was tenuous at best.

Instead she patted his arm once more. “You have a lot of friends here, Severus, and a lot of people who care about you if you’d just pause and look. Don’t put too much pressure on yourself; you’ll find your rhythm in the classroom again and if you stumble, you can always turn to Minerva or Filius or Neville or me. By the way, Neville’s students bloody adore him.” There was just a bit of a sneer in her voice.

He laughed aloud at that. “I can only imagine. I’m sure they walk all over him.”

“They don’t, actually. He just manages them all with that genial attitude and his boyish charm. I’m fairly sure a few of his advanced students fancy him, despite Luna’s presence on campus.”

“Don’t,” he groaned. “I don’t need to imagine that!”

She chuckled. “Watch Daisy Blasbrock when she arrives. Hufflepuff fifth year. One look at Neville sitting at the high table and she might as well be confunded. I can only imagine how bad it would be if she was in his house, though it’s actually pretty entertaining to watch.”

“Neville Longbottom, slayer of snakes and witch hearts alike.”

“Hmm...something like that.”

“Have any of your students taken a fancy to you yet?”

“Not that I’ve noticed. At least, I hope not. I had quite enough of that after the press and celebration balls following the battle. There were a few last year who panicked at being taught by one of ‘The Golden Trio,’ but that mostly faded away after a few weeks. None of particularly like the fame that comes with our heroics from the war, but for some reason the fact that I’m a female seems to draw a different type of scrutiny and sycophantic hero-worship. It’s one of the reasons why I was so eager to train and work here -- I wanted to get away from all of that and just be myself.”

He nodded. He could well understand the desire to escape the press and throng of the wizarding world, the overdone accolades and Ministry obligations. It was such a tiny enclave, but sometimes he’d felt as if he was hemmed in on all sides. At least, he remembered feeling that way. Maybe those memories were planted there too.

"I spoke to Minerva a bit tonight about your idea for an Animagus Transformation course. You're going to get your wish -- she convinced me to give it a try."

His eyes shone a bit in the silvery night. "I'm so pleased. I have a preliminary plan for selecting students drawn up. I'll show it to you tomorrow before the feast."
"We should probably move our meeting up to late morning as well. The feast always runs late and we'll be herding students into their common rooms well past ten. And I have patrol duty tomorrow night."

"As have I," he intoned. He did not miss wandering the cold corridors at midnight.

"How about I pop by around ten tomorrow. We can work with the Pensieve and then have a bit of lunch. I want a chance to look at your book collection again."

To Severus it sounded like a pleasant way to spend a morning, but he was a bit confused by Hermione's sudden generosity with her time. Over the past few days they'd been spending more time in each other's company when not doing memory work. While he was pleased to have her around him, he couldn't help but wonder at the shift in her attitude after so cautiously avoiding his request for friendship the week before.

"I'd like that very much. I'll ask Winky to bring something up for us tomorrow, if that's alright."

"That'll work." Hermione shifted her weight a little before clearing her throat. “It’s getting late. You should try to get some sleep. Heaven know that will be in short enough supply once the students get here.” She moved away from him toward her balcony door.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

He drew a deep breath before continuing. “You’re one of the people who cares, aren’t you?” He felt unbelievably awkward asking, but somehow his inability to see her face made the question fall from his lips.

There was a pause as her dark figure stood still outside the door to her room, and when she responded it was in a voice almost too soft to be heard. “Of course I am Severus.” She moved inside and softly shut the door behind her, leaving Severus alone on the balcony with far too many thoughts in his head.
Welcome Home

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Snape continue to work on recovering his memory whilst preparing for the start-of-term feast.

Chapter Notes

Oof. This chapter didn't want to be written. And once I started writing it, it didn't want to end. So I'm going to post it now and move on to the next before I end up writing another umpteen thousand words of internal monologue.

September 1, 2005 - Severus’ Apartments

Severus watched as Potter and Hermione winked into existence in his sitting room at Spinner’s End, each gripping one of his arms for support. The wordlessly maneuvered him toward the sofa and gently lowered him into its worn, soft comfort.

“Welcome home, Severus.” Hermione smiled at him as she spread the throw from the back of the couch over his legs.

He was breathing heavily, the effort of the side-along apparition clear on his face. “Damn. I should’ve sent you along first so you could control that.” He winced as he leaned back against the leather cushions of his seat.

Severus had been watching himself for days now, but he was still appalled at the slowness of his recovery. His past-self was still weak as a kitten a month after waking from the coma, and he knew that he’d felt mounting frustration at his lack of progress. Hell, I feel frustrated just watching myself struggle. He couldn’t help but notice that Hermione had patted his shoulder before moving off to the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove.

“Harry,” she called, “you should probably pop out and get a few things for Severus. He has nothing in the house.”

“Please don’t trouble yourself Mr. Potter. I’m sure I can fend for myself once I recover my breath.” His voice sounded absolutely ragged.

“Pride goeth, Severus. Let us take care of you a bit, hmm? Otherwise Molly will just show up and mother you to death. And I’m not your student. It’s just Harry, yeah?”

Past-Severus grimaced a bit and gave Potter -- Harry -- a terse nod.

“What d’you think ‘Mione? Loo rolls, sandwich things, tinned soup?” The boy ticked the items off on his hand.

She handed him a piece of parchment. “You’ve forgotten milk, sugar, and a few other things. I’ve
made a list. We’ll keep it simple for now -- just necessities. I don’t think you’ll be doing a lot of cooking right away, and I know you don’t want to eat mine.” She said that with a little smirk for Severus.

Harry grinned at Severus’ past-self conspiratorily. “I ate her cooking for over six months. Trust me when I say you really don’t want to risk it.” Severus was surprised to see himself shake with silent laughter at the boy’s jest.

“Go shopping you prat!” Hermione huffed with mock-indignation as Harry disappeared with a muted pop, list in hand. “My cooking was only dreadful because I had so little to work with when we were on the run. Under normal circumstances it’s merely awful.” She smiled a little at Severus as she twirled the throw to better cover his ankles. “Do you want a book while we wait for the water to heat?”

“I don’t know if I can bring myself to read at the moment.” He watched as his counterpart leaned his head back and shut his eyes. He was clearly exhausted and in pain.

“Another headache?” She immediately dropped her voice to a low whisper and began rummaging in her little beaded bag. “Here, the healer gave me these. Probably not as good as what you’d make yourself, but it should take the edge off.” She opened a small paper sack and removed a bottle of Headache Relief Potion, placing it in his hand.

He opened an eye and downed it in a single swallow with a murmured “thank you.”

She moved off to the kitchen just as the kettle began to whistle, removing it from the heat before it could shrill too loudly. Severus saw her putting in the kitchen behind his past self, pouring the water into a tea pot and adding a healthy dose of the Assam Darjeeling mix he kept in the tin by the stove. “No milk or sugar until Harry comes back from the market. I’m afraid we’ll be roughing it. Can you manage?”

“I’ve done far worse in the past, Hermione.” His past-self scooted up on the cushions a bit as she carried a tray into the sitting room and set it on the table in front of him. He noted that she’d placed two mugs on the tray.

“We’ll let that brew for a few minutes. Is there anything else you need right away?”

“No. You don’t have to stay, you know. I’ll be fine on my own.”

She snorted. “As if I would leave you on your own your first day back home. We’ve been over this. I’m staying right here for the first few days and you’re not going to complain about it. Then we’ll see how you do.”

“You are the bossiest witch,” past-Severus said, sneering at the woman in question.

“And don’t you forget it. How’s your head?”

“Manageable.”

“Good. No magic for a bit, okay? You need to rest. If you need something, let me know and I’ll take care of it. Just pretend I’m the nurse you refused when you left St. Mungo’s.”

“I refused the nurse for a reason,” he grumbled.

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Severus. Think of it as me getting my revenge for all those snide comments you made about my teeth in school.” She smiled sunnily and gave him a peck on the forehead before
moving back to the kitchen. “I’m going to have a look at your cupboards,” she called. “Maybe you have some crisps or something to go with our completely uncivilized tea.”

Severus watched as his past-self touched his forehead, a look of utter bewilderment on his face.

She returned with an ancient packet of biscuits and moved toward his bookshelf, selecting a battered fantasy novel from the shelf. “The Copper Crown? I can’t believe you’ve read this.”

“I found it in a muggle bookshop a few years ago and found it interesting. I’ve never found any of her other books, though.” She set the book on the table and poured the tea into his plain, black mugs.

“I have two of the others at home. I’ll bring them by and we can read them together, if you like.”

Severus paused, then nodded his head. “That would be acceptable. You don’t have to read to me, though. I can just read them myself.”

“Don’t start that again. I told you, I like reading to you. You’re the only person I’ve met who reads as voraciously as I do and you never complain at my choice of books.” She tossed her hair and moved toward the couch with her tea. “Budge over and we’ll start this one over. I’ll bring the others to you later this week.”

Severus obligingly made room for her as she tucked her legs under her hips and settled into the corner of the sofa, cracking the worn spine on the book and launching into a tale of muggle space explorers encountering a lost race of magicians. Severus could see a sense of contentment settle over his past-self’s face as Hermione’s soft voice filled the room.

He took a deep breath as the now-familiar mist of Pensieve transition cleared from his vision and saw Hermione watching him from across the table. “You’re were almost obnoxiously sweet, you know.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him in a move that he recognized as his own signature. “I know. You never missed an opportunity to remind me of that particular fact.”

“Did I ever say thank you?”

She hesitated. “Eventually.”

Typical. “I’ll say it again. Thank you. You were entirely too kind to a complete grump.”

She colored, but looked him in the eye. “You’re welcome. Um...I think that’s about all I can handle for the day. You mentioned lunch?” They’d had a busy morning. Hermione had arrived with three stoppered memories so that they could work through double their normal quota, explaining that she didn’t know if they would be able to work the next day after classes. He understood her worry -- students always came to his office after the first day seeking either to impress their professor (rare) or express worry over the workload (much more common, though he was generally unsympathetic).

“Absolutely. You’ve done enough for today. I asked Winky to put a tray under stasis in the kitchen. I’ll just go fetch it.” He rose from his chair as she nodded and began the process of transferring the memories out of the Pensieve and into her own mind.

He returned a few moments later carrying a heavy tray of pumpkin juice, fish and chips, malt vinegar, mushy peas, and raspberry tart. “Winky must think I’m feeding six people! I hope you’re hungry, Hermione.”

She eyed the tray with some apprehension. “She must think you need fattening up. None of the elves
bring me that much food. There’s no way I would be able to do justice to it.”

“We wouldn’t be hungry for the feast tonight!” He laughed. “The elves always used to bring me too much, but this is really over-doing it.” Severus removed the stasis and began to dish up mushy peas onto the plates.

“It smells delicious, though -- oh not so much. I think it’s the thing I missed most in the years between the battle and beginning my apprenticeship. The food here has always been wonderful.” She eyed the fish hungrily as she accepted her plate from Severus.

They ate in relative silence, each savoring the tang of vinegar on their meal and the perfection of the peas and juice. While not terribly healthy, the food comforted Severus as he thought through what he had glimpsed in the pensieve. Over the past few sessions, he had spotted a number of casual touches and brushes that seemed to make his past-self vaguely uncomfortable in Hermione’s presence. He suspected that past-Severus was just beginning to feel an attraction to the then nineteen (Or was it twenty? He never had figured out how much time she’d gained time-turning) year-old former student...and he knew past-Severus wasn’t comfortable with the attraction. He could sympathize with his past self. The confident, assured, and yes, lovely woman across the table was beginning to appeal to current Severus a bit too much for comfort. *I just wish I knew whether this is the effect of viewing so many memories so quickly, or a response to the woman who is so hell-bent on helping me now.*

Hermione finished her meal quickly and set her plate on the tray, leaning back to look at the meditative Severus. “Knut for your thoughts.”

He looked up rather distractedly. “Hmm? Oh, nothing terribly important. Um...I believe you expressed an interest in my library? If you’re done with your lunch.” He gestured to the shelves behind her with one elegant hand.

She rose with alacrity and made a bee-line to the shelves, tilting her head to the side to hungrily read the titles he’d placed there. Severus couldn’t help but smile at her obvious fascination with his book collection; he’d felt very much the same about hers. He blushed a bit as she began running her fingers over the spines at eye-level and suppressed a sudden desire for her to touch him casually with those same slender hands as she had in the more recent memories he’d viewed. *She’s a colleague, Severus. Get ahold of yourself.*

She pulled a book from the shelf and Severus quickly recognized it as the one they’d begun in the memory. “Do you remember how this ends?”

“With a battle, I believe, and an escape from the planet yes?”

“Mmmhmm. What about the sequel? Any memory of that?”

He understood what she was trying to do; she was hoping that the memory of their time reading the first book in the series would resurrect memories of the rest. He pondered her for a moment before slowly shaking his head. “No. I feel like I should know, but it’s a blank.”

She frowned a bit in disappointment, then shrugged before reshelfing the tome. “Well, it was a long-shot. May I borrow this?” She pulled *The Dragon Riders of Pern* from the shelf.

“Of course. Borrow anything you like.”

“I’ll just stick with this for now. I could use some light reading...I haven’t been able to make it to the bookstore much lately. Too many reporters chasing after me each time I head into Diagon Alley. I didn’t want to feed the beast.” She was clearly annoyed at having to change her regular routines to
avoid the fallout from her broken engagement.

“Well, that’s an old one but I suspect you’ll like it. Especially as you’ve done your own fair share of dragon riding, yes?”

She laughed and tossed her hair over her shoulder in a familiar gesture. “Only the once, and it’s an experience that I’d like to avoid repeating.”

Their mutual laughter was interrupted by the arrival of a silvery mongoose through his front door. It turned to Severus and addressed him in Mohinder’s voice. “Severus, would you mind terribly joining me in my classroom? I need an extra wand to help finish preparing my classroom and I’m simply out of time.”

“Of course. I’ll be there momentarily.” He turned to Hermione as the patronus faded from sight. “I’m afraid we’ll have to cut your browsing short.” He felt a very real pang of disappointment at the thought of cutting their afternoon plans short.

“How about I join you? I’m sure Mohinder would welcome two wands rather than one.”

He tilted the corner of his mouth up and gestured toward the door. “After you, then.”

“A bit severe, don’t you think dearie?”

Severus sneered at his reflection in the magical mirror thinking, not for the first time, that he needed to replace the damned thing with its muggle equivalent. He adjusted the cravat around his neck so that its severe lines lay flat against the high collar of his shirt and sighed. He hadn’t worn a cravat with any regularity in years and it felt constricting now that he had the thing in place. The mirror had a point. White shirt. Black cravat. Black frock coat. He slid a glance at the black teaching robes at the foot of the bed. The mirror was right, dammit. This was entirely too severe.

With a grimace, Severus passed his hand over the neckcloth, changing it to a deep forest green. Hmm. Better, but still dark. Tilting his head contemplatively, he smoothed his frock coat across his chest and watched it transform to match the cravat. Better still, but something was still...ah. Yes. A few minute adjustments added black piping with thin pewter threads to the coat and matching buttons.

“Much better,” the mirror stated. Severus couldn’t help but agree; it was understated, elegant, and still reserved enough to communicate authority without marking him as an absolute disciplinarian.

With a twist smile, he swept his teaching robes and cast a quick Tempus to check the time. He was cutting it close -- he and Hermione had arrived back at their tower covered in dust and other unspeakable substances after spending nearly four hours helping Mohinder ready his classroom, which had required that he shower before dressing for the final faculty meeting before the arrival of the Hogwarts Express. The sheer number of items Mohinder had on display had been unbelievable. They’d spent every moment arranging, dusting, and casting no-touch charms on each item before the man had deemed the classroom ready, and that had left scant time for any of the three to return to their respective quarters and prepare themselves for the arrival of their students. But this is what friends do. I think. They help. And it gave me a full afternoon with Hermione, albeit not alone… He shook himself. Since when do I want to spend so much time alone with her?

With a swirl of his robes (oh, he’d rather missed that), he headed down the stairs and left his apartment, only to see Hermione’s door opening across from him. She was dressed in a trim tea-
length skirt and blouse in matching burgundy with gold buttons. The lapel of her black teaching robes sported a gold brooch in the shape of a roaring lion’s head and her chestnut hair was carefully plaited and twisted under itself in a subdued style that glinted in the torch light of the hall. Severus couldn’t help but twitch a bit at the thought that the Transfiguration Professor looked thoroughly delicious.

The professor in question smiled at Severus as she shut the room to her doors behind her. “Running late too, I see?”

“Yes. Shall we?” He gestured toward the stairs, indicating that she should descend first and caught a whiff of her perfume as she breezed past...something sweet and fresh, like apricots and currants and jasmine with something spicy underneath that tickled his senses...ah star anise. The complexity of the scent wove around him as he followed her down the curving spiral stair of the tower and toward the Great Hall.

They walked quickly to join the other professors in the foyer outside the Great Hall. The Headmistress stood at the top of the stairs with her back to the great oaken door, facing the gathered intellectual wizards and witches before her. In her hands rested the old and battered sorting house, at rest in these moments before its yearly song and dance. She flicked a quick glance toward Severus and Hermione and quirked an eyebrow. “Now that we’re all gathered, I want to dispense a few last-minute instructions. Hagrid is loading the students into carriages and boats as we speak and they should be here within a quarter hour. Neville and Aurora will greet our returning students at the gates. Filius, as Deputy Headmaster you will bring the first years into the Great Hall upon their arrival and administrate the sorting. Everyone else will take their places at the High Table with me to await the sorting. Mohinder and Severus, I will introduce you to the students after the sorting and before my welcoming address. Argus -- if you will please stop fidgeting -- I will make the standard proclamations about magic in the halls and the forbidden nature of the forest beyond the cleared boundaries. Are there any last minute questions? No? Then let us take our places for our little pageant!” She turned crisply on her heel and strode toward the Great Hall with a string of professors in her wake.

Hermione leaned toward Severus and spoke under her breath. “Is it me, or does Minerva seem unusually taciturn today?”

He smirked a bit as the Headmistress’ hat bobbed in time to her brisk march through the large hall and up the steps to the raised dais. She placed the hat on a table next to the low stool that would be used for the sorting. “She was always like this when I was here before. She becomes as precise as a Brigadier General when it comes to the opening ceremonies. She loves the tradition of the sorting, the boats, and the carriages. The school has been run this way for centuries and now that she is its custodian, I’m sure she means to make the founders proud.” Without thinking he pulled out a chair for Hermione before taking a place next to her. She blinked and dimpled at him, clearly pleased that they would be sitting next to each other for the meal. He warmed a little at that thought.

Severus and Hermione were seated near the end of the high table, leaving two seats open to the right of him -- on of which must be for Hagrid, considering its size and the magical reinforcement he could see shimmering around its legs. Mohinder sat on Hermione’s other side, trapped in conversation with the ever-vacuous Sybil, so Hermione leaned toward him again as students began to trickle into the great hall. “It’s strange. I spent so many years watching the High Table from down in the trenches, as it were, but I feel the same anticipation sitting up here and waiting for the new arrivals to come in as I did when I was in school.”

His shoulders moved in a silent laugh, though Severus maintained a straight face as he replied. “That’s because you’re an insufferable swot at heart, Hermione. You love learning and discovery,
and teaching is simply an extension of that process for you. You get to learn about your students and help them make their own discoveries, so your excitement is a reflection of what you hope theirs will be when you invite them into your classroom.”

She turned slightly to stare at his face in mild shock. “Goodness, Severus. I had no idea -- that’s exactly what it is.”

“I felt it as well, or at least I did during my first year of teaching. Though there was also a nervous nausea that went with it, in my case. I believe this is the first time in a long time that I’ve felt that same sense of anticipation in years.” As the words came out of his mouth, Severus realized that they were absolutely true. He was looking forward to welcoming students into his D.A.D.A. classroom, sharing his knowledge with them, and helping them make their own discoveries there.

He was rewarded for his fancies with a brilliant smile from his seatmate. “Who knew that you were so sentimental?”

“I’ll ask you to keep that to yourself, if you please. I have a new reputation to establish here and I will not have you mar it with such aspersions.” He allowed the corner of his mouth to lift in a smirk.

The hall continued to fill as more of the older students arrived. As Thurston and Hagrid took the empty seats to Severus’ right, the doors closed and the Headmistress stood to address the gathered students. “Welcome back to the new school year. I will save my opening remarks until after the sorting, so for now I would ask that you all welcome our first years when the arrive.” She favored the assembled student body with a smile and resumed her seat.

Moments later, Filius poked his head in through the doors to the hall. “The first year students are assembled, Headmistress,” the small man called from his end of the hall.

“Then by all means, Professor Flitwick, escort them in for their sorting.”

The professor slipped back through the doorway only to throw them open a moment later and lead a group of overawed children into the Great Hall. Some were nervously glancing around at their future schoolmates while still others gazed at the floating candles beneath the hall’s enchanted ceiling, which was cloudy with a nearly full moon.

The sorting began almost immediately with (yet another) pedantic song from the sorting hat. Severus found himself surprised that rather than singing about the differences between houses, the hat sang about the similarities between them, stressing that loyalty, cunning, bravery, hard work, wit, steadfastness, ambition, and intelligence were the markers of not the houses, but of the entire school. He quirked an eyebrow and turned his head toward Hermione. She leaned a bit closer and spoke sotto voce. “It’s quite similar to last year’s song. Minerva said that she and, by extension the sorting hat, has wanted to ease the tensions between houses since starting her work as Headmistress. The hat simply reflects her will.” Severus nodded in reply as he listened to the conclusion of the hat’s song and applauded politely at its conclusion with the rest of the gathered company.

As the hat finished singing, Filius summoned a cushion of air so that he could place the hat on each student’s head with ease and called forth the first years in alphabetical order. Severus realized with relief that he recognized few names from his most recent tenure at Hogwarts. Michel Aerts, Cleo Antony, and Merry Bateson were called before Kayla Bell mounted the dais and was sorted into Gryffindor. The next spurt of recognition came when Pavan Patil, clearly the much younger brother of the Patil twins, sorted into Ravenclaw. Severus watched each student sorted into houses with mild interest, but the Charms Professor’s squeaked call for Kiefer Skeeter to be sorted caught Severus’ attention. He could only hope that the newly appointed Syltherin first year had not inherited his mother’s atrocious nosiness. Finally, the sorting ended with Thomas Yeats sliding onto the cheering
Hufflepuff bench. The headmistress rose from her seat and waved her hand to replace the summoning area with the golden owl podium at the front of the dais and took her rightful place behind it for her opening address.

“Welcome to Hogwarts, each and every one of you. I’m looking forward to another rewarding year of watching each and every one you become the outstanding witches and wizards I know you can be. Here at Hogwarts we work together to build a brighter future for ourselves and for the world, so I am proud to announce that the school has expanded its curriculum to better suit the needs of the magically gifted in these changing times. I would like to welcome Professor Mohinder Bhatti, who will be teaching a new series of classes on International Magical Cultures. I would also like to welcome Professor Severus Snape, who will be returning to his previous post teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. We will also be offering several new optional and extra-curricular activities this year including a Hogwarts Orchestra led by Professor Bhatti, an advanced course on Animagus Transformation for select seventh years taught by Professors Granger and Snape, and a dueling club led by Professor Flitwick. More information on each of these activities will be available in the coming week. I will conclude my brief remarks by reiterating the rules for living together on the Hogwarts grounds. In short: No magic in the corridors. No running in the corridors. Do not cross the wards into the uncleared portion of the Forbidden Forest. Curfew begins at nine each night. Transgressors will be dealt with accordingly. With that I wish you all a happy start to your year. Let the feast begin!” The witch then raised and spread her arms in a gesture of bounty with a smile for the assembled students; plates and chargers filled with the aroma of the welcoming feast.

Severus breathed a sigh of relief that Minerva’s prediction from months ago had proven true: he had been accepted without complaint. No students had cried out or sneered at him as his name had been announced. No one had stood and shouted “traitor”. Feeling more at home than he had in the past two weeks, he inhaled the scents of the feast. Good roast chicken, herbed potatoes, caramelized asparagus, and curried brussels sprouts assailed his senses and he served himself a healthy portion of each whilst eying the trifle placed between his place and Neville’s. He applied himself to his meal with an internal alacrity that showed only through the gusto with which he sliced his chicken leg. The noise level in the hall rose as students and professors alike consumed their meals and met or greeted friends old and new and Severus found himself struggling to repress the mirth he felt at the familiar scene so that he could maintain some semblance of impassivity in front of the student population.

“Is the meal not to your liking, Professor Snape?” Hermione asked as she forked a dainty bite of sprouts into her mouth.

“On the contrary, Professor Granger. The meal is excellent.”

“Then why are you frowning at it and attacking it with your knife?”

He paused with an asparagus spear halfway to his mouth. “Was I frowning?”

She sniffed. “I’d hardly imply you were if you hadn’t been.”

“I’m trying not to smile too broadly.”

“Why on earth not? Are you enjoying the meal?”

He nodded. “I am.”

She rolled her eyes and the favored him with a small smile of her own. “Then by all means, show it. No one will think less of you for enjoying a meal, or the company, or the general pleasure of being
surrounded by happy students.”

He frowned at her in earnest now before forcing the muscles around his mouth to relax and slowly allowing a slight smile to color his features.

“Better,” she said. “You have lovely eyes Severus, and when you smile they are brighter and more inviting. Your students won’t think less of you for being human -- if anything, they’ll like you more.”

He pondered this as he turned back to his plate. “I know you’re right, but it’s difficult to break the habits of a lifetime.”

“Well, you can but try.” She returned to her plate with a tone of finality.

The rest of the feast passed rapidly as Severus ate his fill of the comforting foods around him (and seconds on trifle). He found himself conversing with Thurston for a large portion of the meal, enjoying a robust discussion of an evolving theory on how runes might be used to more narrowly predict harvesting times for specific magical ingredients grown outside their native lands (such as those in the Hogwarts greenhouse). Severus had (apparently) met the man only briefly during his recovery from Nagini’s bite and spent little time with him in the rush to prepare for the school year and regain his memory, but he enjoyed sharing some of his knowledge of plant harvesting for potion preparation with the man.

Eventually, the plates disappeared and Minerva rose once again to take her place behind the podium. “Prefects, please escort your houses to their respective rooms. I wish you all a good night and will see you bright and early for first lessons tomorrow.”

Excited and overfull, students left the room in a flurry of robes and excited shouts. Severus found himself jealous of the easy friendships of the children he would soon be tasked with teaching and somewhat saddened that it would be his job to warn them against the dangers of the magical world in which they lived. With a sigh, he rose and began to return to his apartments.

“Severus,” Hermione’s voice stopped him as she jogged a bit to catch him up. “Would you like company on your rounds this evening?”

He gave Hermione a playful sneer. “That would be...acceptable. I’m sure my foreboding presence will be tempered by your overly soft-heart when any sneaking miscreants try to spin a yarn about their comings and goings.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’re all heart, Severus. Come on. We’ll have coffee in the staff room ‘til it's time for rounds.”

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Hermione huffed a bit as they reached the top of the stairs of the West tower later that night, clutching at a slight stitch in her side. "Goodness, Severus, you do move quickly when you want to. I've never sent so many students back to their rooms in one night before."

He smirked at the breathless witch beside him. "Hermione, you'd make a horrible spy. You announce your presence when you're patrolling. The trick is to dim your lumos as much as you possibly can and to cast cushioning charms on your shoes so that they don't make sound. That way your quarry doesn't have the time to disillusion himself or flee."
"Maybe I like giving them a sporting chance to hide," she grumbled in response. "Heaven knows I spent enough of my own time at Hogwarts out after hours."

"So did I, but we were smart enough not to get caught."

She laughed at that. "Well, I had the help of Harry's invisibility cloak half the time." Her smile broadened at his derisive snort. "And the rest of the time I was careful to find out who was on rounds. I never left the rooms after curfew if I knew you were patrolling, Professor Snape."

"Like I said, smart enough not to get caught. We'll have to work on your technique, Professor Granger," he teased in return. "Only four couples snogging is an abysmal haul for one night. I'm sure you scared twice that many couples off with the clacking of those shoes you're wearing. And on the first night of the year too...so many reunions we could have broken up tonight!" He sighed with mock disappointment.

"If I didn't know better, I would think you still enjoy scaring the wits out of students, Severus."

"Absolutely! I should get some kind of entertainment out of losing a week of evenings with a book and a glass of firewhiskey every month. Speaking of, fancy a nightcap?"

She shook her head at the man and moved toward her door. "No, early morning tomorrow. I have my first year Transfiguration class at eight and need my rest if I'm going to be appropriately stern and forbidding."

He was pleased that she looked genuinely disappointed to turn down his offer. "Another time then. I'll bid you a good night." He turned toward his own door.

"Severus..." she paused as he looked back at her, but blushed as she seemed to suddenly redirect her thoughts. "...Um. Thanks for the escort. Sweet dreams!"

He stared after her for a moment before entering his own rooms and leaning against the closed door. He shook his head in confusion. Well what the fuck was that?

Choosing to skip his evening glass of Ogden's, Severus moved upstairs and began disrobing and preparing himself for sleep. He watched as the charmed windows darkened while he changed into his warm pajama pants and AC/DC tee, then regained their normal opacity as he moved toward the bath. Clever bit of charmwork, that. He found himself dwelling on the heightened color of Hermione's cheeks when she wished him sweet dreams. He couldn't remember anyone ever telling him to dream sweetly. As he washed his face and swished cleaning potion around his mouth, he realized that he had spent nearly the entire day in Hermione's company and that he had not found it trying or difficult in the least. He'd actually found it pleasant. Stimulating, even. He wished she'd taken him up on his offer of a nightcap, if only so he could tease her some more and make her blush again.

What the hell am I thinking? I'm acting like an idiot suitor on a first date. She's a friend and a colleague, and she's helping me with a difficult problem and giving up a huge amount of her own time to do so. This is probably just a reaction to spending so much time in her memories. And gratitude. She's...kind. I simply need to remember to keep more emotional distance from her when we're not working with the Pensieve so that I don't confuse the actions from my recovery with our relationship as coworkers. Though she did look lovely tonight before the feast...that shade of burgundy becomes her -- Dammit Severus, stop that!

Annoyed at himself, frustrated, Severus extinguished the torches with a wave of his hand and slipped under the duvet of his bed. With determined focus, he relaxed his muscles, envisioned a wall, and
forced himself to sleep.
First Lessons

Chapter Summary

Classes begin and the weekend approaches. Hermione and Severus make plans to escape the confines of the castle.

Chapter Notes

Laaaaaate chapter tonight. But here it is! Happy reading times.

September 2, 2005

*Severus Snape, you are the worst sort of coward. You can spy for a Dark Lord. You can spy for a Light Lord. You can face society’s censure and bear the burden of their gratitude. You can curse and hex and duel with the best of them, but here you are quaking in your dragon-hide boots at the prospect of greeting a class full of sixth-year D.A.D.A. students. Pull yourself together, man!*

Severus turned toward the small mirror in his office and adjusted the high collar of his shirt and vest, smoothing out the wrinkles in the dark grey material beneath his black teaching robes. He’d decided to adopt a slightly less formal air for this, his second go-round as a professor, and had eschewed the frock coat and cravat for a style that would allow more freedom of movement in his arms. He had, likewise, chosen trousers without the button cuff to allow for an unimpeded stride while moving around the classroom and demonstrating the broader movements of defensive spells. Oh, he still looked professorial...he just looked more approachable.

A quick *Tempus* showed that students should be gathered in the classroom just beyond his office doors. He took a deep breath, breathing “Showtime” under his breath and making for the office door. One affectation of his former persona that he simply could not give up was his tendency to make an entrance, and he did so with a flourish. With a wave of his wand, the heavy slab of oak flew open and Professor Severus Snape, Death Eater, Spy, Savior and Hero whisked into the room. He walked to the front of the space and paused, crossing his arms and leaning against the darkened surface of the desk. He cast a weather eye over the assembled students, who seemed to be in shock at his abrupt arrival, and regarded them with an impassive face. Then, slowly, he smirked.

“Good morning, and welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts. Can someone please tell me why there is not a single wand aimed at me at this moment?” He paused and looked at his silent students. “No? What about you, Miss…?”

“Frome, sir. And it’s ‘cause you’re a professor, sir. We can’t draw our wands on a professor.”

“Thank you, Miss Frome, for answering the question. I would like to disabuse you and all of your classmates of the notion that you will not aim a wand at me in this classroom.” He shifted to his feet and began to circulate the room, pausing between desks as his borrowed book had recommended. “Defense Against the Dark Arts is first and foremost a hands-on learning experience. You have a text which I have personally selected and its readings are useful for learning the theory and uses of
the spells that you will cast in this room, but it is a text that I will tell you to leave in your dormitories. During our sessions together, we will work on wandwork, spellwork, casting and discussion. I will announce reading and writing assignments for the next session at the end of each class; I fully expect you to complete this work in-between sessions so that we can spend the majority of our time in this room together in active practice.

For those of you who have not heard, I have a reputation as a somewhat stern instructor. This sternness comes not from my desire to overwork you or embarrass you, but out of a desire to guard your safety whilst under my care and to prepare you for your entry into the world as magical adults. So please heed my words when I say this: If you have not done the reading or completed the written assignment for my class, you will not be permitted to participate in our practice for that day. I do this to protect you from harm, and to protect your fellow students from your poor work ethic. Failure to adequately prepare for class will result in a lowered mark and the loss of house points. However, if you are genuinely struggling with the material and bring a completed -- if incorrect -- assignment to my classroom, I will happily guide you through the material and allow you to work with your peers. All I ask is that you put forth the effort to understand and place your trust in me to teach you to defend yourselves well.”

At this moment he completed his circuit and turned to look out over the gathered Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff sixth years. “Are there any questions thus far?”

A timid Hufflepuff boy raised his hand and was quickly acknowledged. “Sir, how will you know that we have retained enough information to practice in safety?”

“Your name?”

“Galen Barber, sir.”

“Mr. Barber, take a point for Hufflepuff for a wise question. None of you should feel comfortable practicing in the company of those who are ill-prepared. I will ask each student to demonstrate their mastery of part of their assignment at the beginning of each class -- a pop quiz if you will. Those who have not mastered the technique will work with a student who has mastered it to improve their skill. You, as peers, are now charged with the safety of your fellow students, so I will say this: Help one another inside class and out. This space is not one of competition -- we’ll save that for Professor Flitwick’s dueling club. This is a space of collaboration and of safety. Supporting your fellow students will earn you house points.

It may interest you to know that Headmistress McGonagall has seen fit to make four empty classrooms into large practice spaces for the skills I will teach you in this class. I encourage you to make use of them and to work with one another outside of class to improve your skills. Has anyone here heard of Dumbledore’s Army?” Most of the class nodded their heads vigorously. “Excellent. Can anyone tell me how the D.A. came into being? Yes, Mr…?”

“Pearsall, sir. Uriah Pearsall. And Dumbledore’s Army was founded by Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Professor Granger, sir. They created it to teach themselves practical defense during a time when the government sought to keep students from learning defensive magic.” The answer was almost textbook perfect...apparently Mr. Pearsall was aspiring to be the sixth form swot-in-residence.

“Very good, Mr. Pearsall. I see you know your Hogwarts history. Take a point for Ravenclaw. Potter, Weasley, and Professor Granger -- affectionately known as the Golden Trio, I believe?” He quirked an eyebrow and was greeted with nervous chuckles from several quarters, “were forced, along with a number of their classmates, to teach themselves defense for a year within the Room of Requirement. While the Ministry is no longer so foolish as to keep practical knowledge from your no-doubt thirsty minds, the concept of a small team of individuals helping each other learn is a solid...
one. That is what we will put into practice here, though I trust you will not need to secret away your practice sessions within the hidden rooms of Hogwarts. Now,” he clapped his hands and motioned for the students to rise from their seats, “please remove your school robes, roll up your sleeves, and grab your wands. Everyone move to the sides of the room. We will begin today by assessing your defensive skills.” He waved his hand and banished the desks from the room, leaving only simple wooden bleachers on the sides of the space.

“If you will please partner up, I would like you to practice Stinging Hexes and Shield Spells. The first partner in the pair will Shield and the second will Sting. After five minutes, we will switch. I will move around the room and observe. Begin!”

Severus began to move around the room, reminding himself to model the behavior he wanted to instill in his students. That meant slight correction, supportive statements, and keen observation. He found himself pleased that each of his students could conjure a solid shield or sting, though he would be surprised if sixth-years couldn’t master this third-year magic. “Excellent. Please find a new partner and we will begin again. This time I would like you to practice Flare Charms and Dampening Fields!” He circulated again as students began casting the distracting flare of light and the opposing field that would prevent it from blinding a target. He found it necessary to correct the incantations of two students whose simultaneously mispronounced third syllable in lux spendida had caused a small shower of origami frogs to appear, but the students largely cast and repelled these fourth-year charms with little trouble.

“Very good! I can see you’ve all mastered these spells. Let’s try something more difficult, shall we? I’d like each set of partners to team with another pair. You will practice the mobilicorpus charm collectively to levitate one member of your group. This is a difficult and draining spell, but in a group of three you should be able to levitate one person with control.” Severus waved his hand again, summoning padded mats around the perimeter of the room. “I strongly suggest that you attempt this spell over the mat.” He quirked an eyebrow at the room at large, then stood back to watch the students attempt the standard fifth-year spell.

As pleased as he had been with their grasp of simple stunning and defensive spells, Severus was equally disappointed with their grasp of fifth-year magics. Damn. They’re nearly a year behind where they should be! It’s going to take us weeks to get them working at level...and I’ll wager the seventh years will be even worse. I’m clearly going to need to revise my lesson plans for the next few weeks.

He grimaced as Mr. Pearsall’s group managed to levitate the smallest member of their group, but failed to maintain them in a stable attitude; the poor student began to flip end over end before falling to the mat and turning a sickly green color. He quickly dispelled the boy’s nausea with an anti-vertigo charm to prevent a sticky mess on his classroom floor. “Alright, stop there please. I can see that you’re having some trouble with this one. Let’s regroup at our desks and discuss your defense education to date.” Severus tried desperately not to scowl at his students. It’s not their fault they didn’t have better professors, but damn the Ministry for meddling in this curriculum for so long! He waved his wand to summon desks back to the center of the room and leaned a hip against his own to regard his students.

“I am unaware of who your last instructor was; can someone please tell me which text you used last year and how far you got in it?” He waited until a small hand in Ravenclaw robes rose at the back of the room. “Yes, Miss…?”

“Harriet Windle, sir. Our instructor for the past three years was Professor Blaxton. Except he was ill for a good portion of last year and we had a series of substitutes in the spring term. We were using Cabook and Cray’s Dark Arts: Avoidance and Protection for fourth and fifth-year, but we didn’t get
very far in the second half of the book before Professor Blaxton took ill.” The girl ended her monologue with a nervous stutter and sat back in her seat.

“Thank you, Miss Windle. That is most helpful. I can see that you have all mastered fourth-year spells, but the standard fifth-year spells are shaky at best. I have looked over your O.W.L.s and found that most of you managed Satisfactory grades -- a few of you achieved Exceeds Expectations. I suspect this is, however, the result of good book learning and not good practice; we will therefore work on getting your practical skills up to speed for the first few weeks of this term. This will take some significant dedication on your parts. I’m very sorry to burden you all with extra work, but I refuse to send you into your last year at Hogwarts unprepared to enter the wizarding world safely. Therefore, we will be working at a slightly faster pace than you are used to. I have faith that if each of you applies yourself and works with your peers, the entire class will be ready to learn the Patronus charm by Halloween. Are you all willing to put this effort into our class?” He was pleased when “Yes, sir!” chorused around the room.

Severus nodded his head at the class in approval. “Excellent. Let’s begin with the basics of the mobilicorpus charm that you all just struggled with and move on from there. Can I have two volunteers please?”

It was a very tired, very frustrated Professor Snape who returned to his apartments after his last class that Friday. Every single class, save the first years, had been behind by at least a term. He growled in frustration as he toed off his boots and stripped off his teaching robes; how was he supposed to make significant inroads with the D.A.D.A. education if he had to offer nearly seven weeks of remedial lessons first? Bloody Ministry. Couldn’t they find a competent substitute to lead the class? I can’t believe Minerva allowed this to happen on her watch! Damn them all! He kicked at the rug with his foot and narrowly avoided stamping like a five year old. Stomping his way upstairs, Severus raked his fingers through his already disordered hair and stormed out onto the balcony for a breath of fresh air, muttering under his breath all the way. His rant ended abruptly when he nearly paced his way into a low bench that had appeared at the center of shared balcony. He raised his eyes slightly to see a rather delicious set of toes painted a deep plum. Said toes were attached to some rather delicate ankles beneath a deep purple skirt spangled with tiny crescent moons. For reasons that were quite beyond Severus, he couldn’t quite tear his eyes away from those pink, wiggling toes to look at their owner.

“Rough day, Severus?” asked a vaguely amused voice.

Severus dragged his eyes away from those toes to see that Hermione was sitting sideways on the bench with a book (the book he’d given her propped against her knees and a glass of wine in her hand. She smirked when his eyes finally met his. “Care to join me?” She sat up a bit straighter to make room for him on the iron bench. He huffed a sigh and sat next to her, noting that she’d put a cushioning charm on the otherwise unforgiving metal.

“It was a rough day. All of the students are behind due to Professor Blaxton’s unexpected absence last term. I’m going to have to work them twice as hard for weeks to get them up to speed, and I don’t think they’ll thank me for it.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring over the railing at the black lake without quite seeing it.
Hermione made a sympathetic noise before closing her book and leaning forward to pat him on his back. “I’m terribly sorry, Severus. Did the substitute D.A.D.A. instructor not teach them anything?”

“It would appear that he had them doing book work and busy work the entire semester. They know the theories, but nothing practical. So I suppose it could be worse,” he groused.

“It could. You have your work cut out for you to be sure, but who better to do it?”

Severus turned his head and regarded the younger witch balefully.

“I mean that, Severus. You frog-marched my class through more potions in a month than Slughorn covered in a term.”

“That’s because I motivated you all with threats of detention and cauldron scrubbing. I don’t want to do that again. I don’t want to be the same cranky bastard I was eight years ago.”

She laughed a little and swung her legs to the ground to look at him more closely. “No one is saying you have to be. There are more ways to motivate than with threats and insults. And if the sixth-year Hufflepuffs who were in my last class today were any indication, you’re already on the right path with them. I heard several of them planning to meet in one of the empty practice rooms tonight to practice for next class.”

“Really?”

"Would I lie to you about something like that?” she chided.

He leaned back and rested his head against the cool stone wall of the tower. “Thank you, Hermione. It...it helps to know that I’m not going about this all wrong.”

“Well, you might be. How should I know? But if you do go wrong, it won’t be for lack of trying to set things right. Come on. It’s almost dinner time. I’ll walk with you down to the Great Hall and then we can try to round up reuniting couples during rounds, ‘kay?”

He smirked at her as he rose. “Did you put that cushioning charm on your shoes?”

“I did one better! I put the charm on my trainers. Come on -- last one there buys dinner.”

Feeling far better than he had just minutes before, Severus returned inside to gather his shoes and robe and head down to dinner with his friend.

“Twelve!” Hermione crowed as they reached the top of the West tower. “Twelve couples tonight! I’ve never had such a good haul.”

Severus chuckled as he reached the door to his rooms. “I told you, if you just stop telegraphing your imminent arrival, you get much better results! The look on Misters Rollins’ and Channer’s faces were priceless! I thought one of them had swallowed one of those Weasley concoctions meant to make you ill for class.”

“Well, considering Mister Channer is supposed to be dating Miss Elsmore, that’s hardly surprising.”
“Oh, the trials of youth. Coming in for a nightcap?” He unwarded the door and held it open in invitation.

“As it’s Friday, I think I will thanks.” She swept past him into his apartments and removed her trainers and teaching robe to take her usual seat by the fireplace. “Do you mind if I…” she gestured toward the fire.

“No, go ahead. Cognac?”

“Please.”

He busied himself pouring drinks for each of them, content with the comfortable routine they had established over the past week. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so at ease with someone before, but if Hermione’s memories were anything to go by he suspected that this was in fact the second time he’d experienced it, and with the same woman. I wonder if I enjoyed her company this much before? I must have if I escorted her to a ball, but that was after months of friendship. Perhaps this...rushed return of affection indicates a return of memory as well? He shifted a bit at that thought; it seemed impossible to separate his friendship now from the feelings that were surfacing in his memory sessions with Hermione...and he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to separate them. Not if it meant losing what was quickly becoming an inseparable friendship.

“Did you want to do any memory work tonight?”

Severus looked at her for a moment. Did her hair always have that deep brandied glint in the fire? “Hmm? We can if you really want to, but I’m just as happy to wait until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow then. I think I’d rather enjoy the fire and a drink before turning in. The first day of classes always leaves me knackered.”

He nodded and sipped his own drink, unsure of how to direct the conversation. He was spared the awkwardness of choosing the topic when Hermione spoke first.

“I love nights like these. The first nights back at school were always my favorite part of the year.”

He nodded; they were his too, though he suspected that he enjoyed returning to school for far different reasons than she.

“The first few days back was always about finding our friends and preparing for the new term. I still love the smell of new textbooks and parchment and autumn leaves.”

“And did you regret the end of the year so much?” He wondered if returning home for her was as tortuous as it has always been for him.

“No. The end of the year was always bittersweet, but I knew that I could look forward to time with my parents in France followed by time at The Burrow or Grimmauld Place with the boys. The hard parts were always the middle of the year, when Harry would somehow find himself in dire straights and I’d have to find some way to help him figure his way out of the mess.” She chuckled a bit mirthlessly. “We never really had a normal school year the entire time we were here. One of us was always getting petrified or poisoned or having his mind invaded by a dark wizard.”

“What about your last year? Wasn’t that more normal?”

“Not really. I spent nearly every weekend off with Ron and Harry and Ginny at Grimmauld or helping Molly at the Burrow. After you left -- sorry, Severus -- I was pretty depressed. You’d been the constant in my life that first year after the battle and then you just disappeared. I rather clung to
Molly and Ginny and the boys after that. Of course I haven’t been to see the Weasleys in ages now, and Harry and Ginny are so busy preparing for the second baby that I barely get the chance to floo them, much less see them. It’s all gotten rather complicated.”

“So you hole up here and immerse yourself in your work?”

“Except for the odd ministry function where I get ogled by every available and unavailable wizard in the country, yeah. They still like to trot us out a few times a year and remind everyone that there are living heroes who vanquished Voldemort. I’m sure you’ll be added to that round of balls and events as well, now you’re back.”

He sneered at that before replying. “You know, you should let yourself get too cloistered here. It’s easy to lose yourself in the rhythms of the school year and never leave Hogwarts or Hogsmeade, but before you know it it’ll be the hols, then Easter, then end of spring term and you will have spent another year trapped in this castle. You’re a young woman. You should make sure you get out.”

She looked at him. “Once could say the same for you, Severus. I don’t remember you frittering away your time on long weekends away. You were always here.”

“You’re right. I’m speaking from experience. Don’t let yourself grow old here without having a life of your own as well.” He sighed. “I was trapped here -- first by my guilt and my obsession over a dead woman, then by my work for two megalomaniacs who couldn’t destroy one another without my help. It was no way to live.”

“Then it sounds like you should make an effort to get away from Hogwarts as well. You’re not exactly ancient, Severus.”

He rolled his eyes. “Tell that to my back each morning.”

“I’m serious!” She leaned forward and looked him in the eyes. “Let’s make a promise right now. We neither of us will allow ourselves to be trapped here all year. We will both make efforts to get out and live our lives outside of the castle as best as we’re able, when we’re able. Deal?” She held out a hand.

He considered her for a moment; one could hardly mistake the sincerity in her chocolate brown eyes.

“Alright, deal. Tomorrow is Saturday. We don’t have duty until after the students’ curfew. What would you recommend we do?”

She looked startled. “Oh! Well, yes we could do something together I suppose.” He colored at that. Had he been too bold? “Well there’s no reason to stay here...would you like to do some Pensieve work in the morning, then head into Edinburgh for a late lunch? I know a few good Muggle restaurants, if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“That sounds excellent. What about a bookstore after? I confess, I didn’t expect to have so many shelves available when I first came to these apartments. There are empty shelves that are just begging to be filled.” He shot her a grin, knowing that she would never resist an invitation to acquire more books.

“Brilliant! It’s a date.” she polished off the cognac in her snifter and rose. “If we’re going to have such grand adventures tomorrow, I should get some sleep tonight. Shall I pop in ‘round ten again?”

Severus swallowed the sip of liquor in his mouth before he could choke on it. “Eherm. Yes. Ten will be fine. Good. Yes.” Shut up you idiot.

“Alright, see you then. I’m off to Bedfordshire. Thanks for the drink, Severus.” She gave him a
quick peck on the cheek and rushed out the door before he could gather his wits.

He stared at the door long after it had shut behind her, utterly confused. *How did that happen? One minute we were discussing work, the next we were making a date. Or she called it a date. Do we have a date?* Severus pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to reduce the pounding in his head. *She kissed your cheek. Maybe she thinks it’s a date? Is there a way to ask without coming off like a complete imbecile?*

He waved a hand at the hearth to bank the fire for the night and moved upstairs as though moving through water. In a daze, he drew started the shower and stepped under the streaming water. *We’re having lunch. And going to a bookstore. Not exactly the stuff of high romance. Maybe she just called it a date because it’s an event. That’s probably it. We’ve only just reconnected as friends and we’re still cautious around one another. It can’t be a date*. He scrubbed at his chest and arms with a flannel, removing the dirt of the day as he continued to ponder the situation. *All the same, she’s been much more open the past few days. We’ve spent nearly every day together, except while teaching or setting up our classrooms. How would I feel about this being a date? Not that it is.*

After washing his hair, simply leaned his hands against the wall and let the water beat on his back. *So what if this was a date? Would I mind? Not that I would know what to do on one, but it could be...rather nice, really. Assuming I don’t make a mess of it, which I probably would. You will not treat this as a date. You will treat this as an outing between friends. You will not take advantage of a woman who has befriended you and helped you. She just broke up with her fiancé; dating is probably the last thing on her mind.* He shut the shower off with a decisive snap and dried off before snagging his pyjama bottoms and a fresh tee.

As he crawled into bed, however, he couldn’t help but linger on the way the light played on Hermione’s hair, or how earnest her eyes had been when talking about the first days of school. He fell asleep thinking of how he’d like to run his fingers through those soft curls and sit on the couch with her snuggled into his side, and if he had a smile on his face as he finally drifted off there was no one there to see it but the silent walls of the castle.
September 3, 2005 - Hogwarts

Severus woke early on Saturday morning to run through the morning exercises he’d been neglecting for the past few days. After a quick shower and shave, he dressed in a muggle shirt and jeans and summoned an elf to bring him tea and something for breakfast. He couldn’t bring himself to go down to the Great Hall in anything less than his teaching regalia and he wasn’t entirely sure that he could contain his nervous excitement in front of the students as it was.

He rushed to the door in his stocking feet when a knock rang out at a quarter to ten, opening it to find a harried-looking Hermione clad in dark jeans and a muggle blouse. “Severus,” she began without preamble, “there’s been a bit of an accident with two of my students. There were mucking about with transfiguration in their dorm last night and -- well, suffice it to say that they’re both in my old house and there’s considerable damage to repair. Would you be horribly upset if I delayed our Pensieve session until after our outing while I took care of this?”

“Was anyone injured?” he asked with some concern.

She laughed mirthlessly. “Nothing serious -- Fanny Halifax had a broken ankle that Poppy has already repaired and Alan Tweerwottle’s eyebrows have been singed. It could have been worse. There’s a surprising amount of damage in the common room that needs repairing...and I need to give a lecture to the Gryffindors about experimenting with magic without supervision.”

He smirked and leaned against the open door. “I don’t remember you heeding such rules yourself when you were in school. I recall some interesting rumors about one Gryffindor who accidentally turned herself into a human-cat hybrid.”

She raised an eyebrow in return. “And that’s why I know that magical experimentation without supervision can have dire consequences. Or at least embarrassing ones. I need to run and take care of this, but I’ll meet you at the apparition point at noon, alright?”

“Of course.” He watched as she scurried down the stairs, trying not to feel too disappointed that their plans had been altered. *Maybe I can convince her to stretch our outing into a museum visit as well, make a full day of it.*
Since he was going to be at loose ends for a couple of hours, Severus gathered his lesson plans and wandered out onto the balcony. The iron bench from the night before was still in place, so he quickly transfigured it into a chair and table. He placed a no-fly charm on his papers and charmed his wand to vibrate at half-eleven, then settled in to work for a couple of hours. At least he had a view of the lake and surrounding hills to comfort him as he worked to rearrange his plans to compensate for the shoddy lessons his students had received in the previous year.

He worked without stopping until his wand signalled the time (Muggles had gotten something right with their vibrating mobile phones; it didn’t hurt to replicate their ingenuity when inspiration struck). Gathering his papers -- he’d made good progress on the next six weeks’ plans -- he returned the table to its former state and wandered inside to pull on black walking shoes and a leather jacket. He hadn’t been to Edinburgh for more than a casual drink in the past decade, but he could well remember the cobblestones on the Royal Mile and their effects on the poorly-shod.

He was nearly to the front door of the castle when he heard Minerva’s voice from the stairs behind him. “Severus! Are you leaving the castle today?”

He turned to face his colleague and nodded his head graciously. “I am. Professor Granger and I are going to apparate to Edinburgh for the afternoon.”

“Excellent. You’re both on rounds tonight, though. You’ll be back in time I assume?”

“We will. We plan to do some work with the Pensieve this evening as our morning plans were rather interrupted by some Gryffindor tower destruction.”

Minerva rolled her eyes. “I’m grateful that as Headmistress I’m no longer charged with overseeing my house directly. I don’t envy Longbottom the task of disciplining this lot. The third-years in particular are unruly in the extreme!”

“Yes, well you survived the antics of The Golden Trio. And Longbottom with his melting cauldrons. And Lavendar Brown and her bed-hopping. And the Weasley Twins and their exploding...everything. It’s about time someone else stuck their head in the lion’s mouth, so to speak.”

“Perhaps. I believe Professor Granger has been tasked with overseeing detention for Miss Halifax and Mr. Tweerwottle next week. She’s not quite up to your level when you were at your best -- or worst, as it were -- but her detentions are some of the most loathed in the school. I’m sure they’ll learn their lesson.” She smirked a bit as Severus shifted uncomfortably under her twinkling gaze.

“What grand plans do the two of you have in the city today?”

He shrugged a little. “Nothing grand by any standards. Just lunch and some book shopping, perhaps a little sight seeing. I haven’t spent any real time in Edinburgh since Voldemort returned just before the Triwizard Tournament, and neither Professor Granger nor I have left the grounds since arriving two weeks ago.”

She cleared her throat a little at his reference to the Tournament and Mr. Diggory’s untimely death (what a waste!). “Well, it sounds like a nice way to spend the day together. Since you’ll be in Edinburgh, would you mind stopping in at Majuscule and Miniscule’s to pick up an order they have waiting for me? I don’t want to risk it to owl delivery after they broke my last lot of ink.”

“I’d be happy to, of course. Er--If there’s nothing else, I’ll set off now.”

“Of course, of course. Thank you, Severus. Enjoy your outing!” She rushed off in a swirl of robes
and lavender water, leaving a bemused Potions Master in his wake. Why on earth is she so curious about a simple trip to Edinburgh? She never used to ask my plans when I left the castle. Shaking his head, he turned to the path that led to the apparition point just beyond the Hogwarts gates.

Hermione was waiting for him at the point just outside the gates and before Hogsmeade, still in her muggle jeans and blouse and a pair of sturdy looking flats. He couldn’t help but think that the years had been kind to her; she’d blossomed into a pretty young woman, all curling hair and red lips and brandy eyes. He shook himself mentally at the thought. You weren’t going there, remember? She lifted a hand at his approach, shoving a book into the small bag at her wrist and rising off the large rock she’d been sitting on. He checked himself as his hand rose to return her wave, feeling a bit the fool, and granted her a slight smile instead. Smiles still came easier than the easy gestures of friendship and affection that seemed to be second nature to the young witch.

“You’re early. Is everything tidied up with your students then?”

“Neville had it mostly in hand by the time I got there. I mostly ended up lecturing my students and doling out detentions.” She shot him a wry look under her lashes. “I have some lovely new toothbrushes for them to use to clean out the storage cabinets next week.”

“You just cleaned those cabinets last week before classes started.”

“Yes, well, I’m sure I can arrange for something sticky to break in there before Monday night. Especially if a certain potions expert might be willing to help me out…?” She smiled slightly as her expression shifted from wry to devious.

He laughed outright at her obvious enjoyment of the situation. “Minerva said you were trying to rival my detentions, but I think you’re taking notes straight out of my book. Try infusing a jar of molasses or honey with a mild sticking charm. It’ll take ages for them to clean it and they’ll have trouble removing the residue from their hands and robes. They’ll get sick of the smell of molasses for days.”

She grinned appreciatively. “Thank you! That’s quite helpful. And of course I’m taking notes out of your book; how do you think my detentions became the most loathed at the school? I learned from the master!” She slipped his hand through his arm and moved them toward the small paved circle that served as the school’s apparition point. “Shall we head to lunch?”

At his nod, she turned on the spot. Severus felt the familiar twisting and compression that came with side-along apparition, then his ears cleared and his feet hit the ground as they arrived at the far end of a small courtyard at the center of the Edinburgh Wizarding Music Hall. He made no attempt to drop Hermione’s arm as they stepped out of the circle and noted that she kept her hand firmly on his sleeve as they made their way onto the empty sidewalk in the wizarding section of the old Scottish city. She tugged a bit at his arm, leading him down the street and toward the wards that would lead them to the city proper, which was teeming with tourists.

“The place I had in mind is up the road a few blocks. I thought we’d have Thai food today; I need a little variety after two weeks of good British fare!”

“I’m fond of Thai food,” he replied, happy to be led along by her enthusiasm.

He’d always enjoyed visiting Edinburgh. The city was dark and moody, offering sights of buildings...
blackened with time and history in every cobblestone. While not as refined as Glasgow, it remained one of his favorite haunts throughout his tenure at Hogwarts. Severus was happy to return to one of the few places he’d genuinely enjoyed spending time before Voldemort’s return all those years ago. “I haven’t been here in ages. Would you mind if we played tourist a bit later? I understand the Ministry has opened a small wizarding exhibit within Holyrood that I’d love to see.”

She brightened at the prospect. “That sounds lovely! If we have time, we can hike up Arthur’s Seat while we’re at it. I’ve never managed to make it up there in my previous visits.”

He looked at her shoes dubiously. “Will those withstand the hike?”

“They’re charmed, so I’m sure I will be fine. It isn’t a steep climb as I understand it. Ah, here we are.” She paused in front of a small storefront a few blocks behind Edinburgh Castle and immediately climbed the stairs to the second floor, which hosted the small restaurant and a rooftop patio for al fresco dining. As they stepped into the small space, his nose was treated to the heady scents of fish sauce, lemongrass, and kaffir lime leaf. His mouth watered as she led him to the patio, which afforded a lovely view of the Northern face of the castle. Severus leaned back and enjoyed the sun on his face as they took in the scenery.

A waiter arrived quickly to take their drinks order -- jasmine tea for her and a Singha for him -- and they hungrily perused the menus, ordering fish cakes, cucumber relish, and a large bowl of tom kha gai with brown rice to share between them. Curls of steam drifted upward into the crisp air as they ate and slurped their way through the tangy, spicy meal. They didn’t speak of anything important, just observations about the view or about mutual students. As with their past shared meals, Severus found himself relaxing into the rhythm of a conversation that was punctuated with only the clink of utensils against plates or cups being placed on the wooden table between them.

They argued briefly over who would settle the cheque; Hermione won that particular battle (“After all, the restaurant was my idea!”) only when she agreed that Severus would pay for their admission to Holyrood Palace later that afternoon (“since touring the palace was my suggestion!”). Their friendly bickering put Severus at ease, as did the shared cost of their excursion. As I said, not a date.

Severus wanted to proceed to Holyrood immediately, to save them the trouble of carting their purchases around town, but Hermione insisted that she could fit their purchases in the little bag swinging from her wrist. As Majuscule and Miniscule’s and numerous bookshops were located directly off the Royal Mile, Hermione reasoned, it made more sense to shop their way down to the Palace, take the quick hike up to Arthur’s Seat, then apparate directly to Hogsmeade after. Severus conceded that this made some logical sense (how was he to know that that bloody bag had such a powerful extension charm on it?).

Majuscule and Miniscule’s, the ink and stationery shop that Minerva had preferred since her own school days, immediately retrieved the Headmistress’s order (maroon ink with gold flecks for official correspondence, deep burgundy for the every day, several pheasant feather quills, and a healthy stack of heavy-weight parchment guaranteed to soak up the ink) and handed it to Severus who, in turn, fed the package into Hermione’s handbag. They took a few moments to peruse the shop’s wares and he refrained from rolling his eyes when Hermione crowed with delight over her purchase of plum colored ink for herself and a tartan covered journal for a gift (“Minerva’s birthday is next month, and I want to get her something other than shortbread this year”). They left the shop and meandered their way down the cobblestone street toward a bookshop he’d frequented in the past -- a small wizarding store cleverly hidden between an antiquarian print dealer and a pizzeria crowded with Muggle tourists. The narrow shop offered a wide selection of out of print and rare texts, and her he and Hermione quickly lost one another amongst the shelves as they explored their own interests.
Severus had the exceptional good luck to find a copy of *Potions and the Dark Arts: A Historical Perspective* --- a book that had only been recently removed from the Ministry’s banned list. The price was exorbitant, but he could well afford the price now that he was back in Britain and had access to his Gringott’s account (where the profits from his patented potions had been filtering for several years). He thought it a fitting welcome-home present to himself. He moved through the shelves and pulled several other tomes for himself: a treatise on newer cauldron materials, a book on shielding techniques, a pamphlet on prank hexes, and several out-of-print wizard mystery books that he hid at the bottom of his pile (no need for Hermione to find out about his guilty pleasure reading).

As Severus moved closer to the back of the store, he spotted a collection of books that caught his eye. At first glance, they appeared to simply be leather-bound reproductions of muggle books. They were exquisitely bound, however, so he hovered his purchases next to him and reached out to pick one of the books up. It was surprisingly light, and as he opened it he discovered that it was a hollowed book with an undetectable extension charm placed on it. It would make a lovely novelty gift and he happened to know that Hermione’s birthday was approaching far faster than Minerva’s. Looking through the available selection, he quickly chose the most finely embossed of the grouping - - a copy of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. He grimaced slightly at the title (he might enjoy a good mystery in the privacy of his rooms, but gothic romances were decidedly *not* his thing) and added it to the bottom of his pile with the binding facing inward.

“Severus, are you back here?” He heard Hermione’s voice calling him from a few shelves over, nearer the back of the store, and quickly made his way to the front of the shop to make his purchases. The clerk had just finished placing his books in a sack when Hermione appeared at his shoulder with her own floating tower of books.

“All done already?” she asked.

“Yes. I see you’ve found a few things to take home with you as well.” His eyebrows raised at the small tower hovering behind her.

“Of course! Some people have a weakness for chocolate, some for books. I’m of the latter variety. And the former variety, actually.” She grinned at him as she motioned for her books to set themselves on the counter for the clerk to ring up. When her purchase was complete she opened the wide mouth of her little purse and invited Severus to place his bag within. He wandlessly warded the bag so that it wouldn’t open within the depths of her purse and gratefully placed his purchases inside. Hermione quickly did the same and they happily set off to continue exploring the Royal Mile.

Hands free, Severus slid his hands into the pocket of his jacket as they continued down the Mile toward the palace. He started slightly when Hermione slid her hand into the crook of his elbow and stepped a bit closer to him than was strictly necessary, but thought little of it as the streets were crowded with tourists intent on purchasing their overpriced wool tartans and “Edinburgh, Scotland” coffee mugs. They stopped at a small sweets shop to pick up a luxury tin of brandy wafers (Severus didn’t mind giving Minerva a traditional gift) and a small box of Island Creams to share as they walked on. They finally reached Holyrood just as the ticket seller announced final admission for the day, so Severus quickly purchased their admission tickets so they could explore the old palace.

He found that few of the displays had changed significantly from his visit years before, but took his time pacing through the exhibits as Hermione had clearly not been to the museum before. She paused at every placard, reading descriptions with as much focused attention as he’d seen her devote to her textbooks in years past. They were passing the spot where Queen Mary’s second husband, Lord Darnley, had supposedly been killed when he noticed a small sign directing magical tourists toward a hidden door. The sign was clearly tailored so that the non-magical tourists in the vicinity would fail to notice its presence, so he and Hermione waited for the group behind them to pass before stepping
through the door.

They found themselves in a small antechamber with a display on the magical past of Mary, Queen of Scots -- and particularly on her third husband the Earl of Bothwell. The display, which included an animated and silenced portrait of the Earl, his broken wand, and several of his journals, chronicled the rise and fall of the third and final husband of the ill-fated queen. James Hepburn had been a little known dark sorcerer during Mary’s reign and had used his skills to insinuate himself into Mary’s court and, eventually, into her bed. The non-magical queen was won over by his charm and charisma, and (if the history on the placards was to be believed) murdered her then-husband in order to attain her hand and power as her consort. His plan was thwarted only by Queen Elizabeth I’s wizarding advisor, John Dee, and the jealous English Queen carried out a years-long campaign to accuse, try, and eventually execute her royal cousin for supposedly soliciting the council and magics of a known dark wizard.

“It’s a bit depressing, isn’t it?” Hermione said in hushed tones.

Severus looked at her with brows knitted. “What is?”

“Queen Mary. And Bothwell, I suppose. Historians agree that Mary likely knew nothing of his plans; she was probably imperiused or under the influence of a love spell -- possibly both -- yet his mistakes became hers. She died for his ambition.”

He considered the woman on his arm for a moment, struck by the fact that she seemed genuinely saddened by the history as presented by the curators of this little antechamber. “Historians still don’t agree on exactly what happened between Bothwell and Mary. Or Bothwell and Darnley, for that matter. But the tale as presented is sad, yes. So often ambition ends up distancing us from those we love most…” his voice trailed off as he considered the results of his own quest for power more than twenty years past.

“I’m sorry Severus. I didn’t mean to spoil the afternoon. Come on, I’ve seen enough. Let’s go out to the gardens.” She pulled him out of the little room, leading the solemn wizard on her arm toward out of the palace and into the structured gardens still rich with the scents of rose and hyacinth. Hydrangea bushes outlined the interlocking walkways of the garden, and Severus and Hermione walked down the path slowly as he attempted to shake of the sudden mood that had struck him while in the wizarding exhibit.

After a few minutes, he spoke to Hermione in a low tone of voice. “I’m not often struck by bouts of guilt and self-pity since the end of the war. I to think I’ve largely made my peace with it, but sometimes, like in there, it’s easy to dwell on the price of my mistakes.”

Hermione turned and gave the man a swift hug before stepping back and looking him in the eye. “You atoned for your mistakes in a way Bothwell never did, Severus. Don’t dwell on it. Not today.”

He nodded and drew a breath before gesturing to the hillside backdrop of the garden. “That’s Arthur’s Seat. We should probably start the climb before the sun sets. I’d rather not have to navigate it at twilight.” He hesitated, the proffered his arm to her, obliged when she took it and fell into step beside him without comment.

The climb was an easy one as a path led directly up the side of the hill from the palace. They walked slowly for a little over an hour, in silence and without pause, until they reached the summit. Severus reached the top of the hill first and stood looking out over the city as the last tourists of the day began to make their way back down. Hermione joined him moments later and they watched the sun begin to dip behind the horizon as the breeze teased their hair.
Finally, Severus spoke. “It’s beautiful up here. I’d never thought to hike the hill before.”

Hermione replied somewhat breathlessly, “Muggle Legend says that Merlin is within the hollow hill, keeping watch over Arthur and his knights until he reigns again. I realize it’s just a craggy rock covered in grass, but I’ve always preferred the legend. It’s...comforting, somehow, to cling to the legend rather than the fact that Merlin died centuries ago. And that he was a bit of a arse who infuriated most of the wizarding world before he died.”

Severus chuckled slightly, but didn’t reply. He couldn’t help but notice that he laughed more with Hermione than he did with anyone. Of course, I spend more time with her than anyone...so that’s not terribly surprising I suppose. She seemed to bring out the lighter side of him and he was, in that moment, profoundly grateful for her continued friendship.

They stood together watching the sun set behind the aged city, hands in pockets and smiles on their faces, for long minutes without speaking. Finally, Severus broke the silence. “We should probably return to the school soon.”

She sighed. “Yes, duty calls. Minerva will be expecting us for dinner and there’s still Pensieve work to be done before rounds tonight. Shall I?” She reached down to take his hand to apparate and he nodded his consent. Hermione turned her body so that faced one another and gathered both hands in hers, noting his surprised look as she turned on the spot and brought them back to Hogsmeade.

Their feet hit the ground and the world righted itself quickly, but Hermione didn’t release Severus’ hands when their heads stopped spinning. Instead she looked him in the eye, stood on her toes, and leaned in to kiss him lightly on his lips. She broke the kiss after a lingering moment and looked at his startled face. “I had a lovely time today. Thank y--”

Her thanks were quickly cut off by his lips descending to hers with far more intensity than she had bestowed with her kiss. Severus wanted to devour her whole and wasn’t entirely sure where the feeling had risen from. His mouth pressed into hers with a ferocity that stole his breath. He found himself releasing her hands to grip her hips and draw her closer to his body, one hand moving up to her back as he tilted his head to align their mouths more fully. His thoughts scattered, his focus devoted only to the warm, curly-haired witch twining her arms around his neck. She tasted of vanilla and smelled of apricots; he was overwhelmed by the completeness with which she seemed to seep into his senses. To his surprise, she responded with equal alacrity, deepening the kiss and parting her lips slightly to taste his with the tip of her tongue, a small moan coming from somewhere deep in her throat as she pressed her body more tightly against his chest.

Just as suddenly as the kiss had begun, Severus dropped his hands and stepped back. He looked at Hermione with something akin to horror, his hands shaking as he scraped them over his face. He gasped a breath and croaked, “I have to go.” Before she could reply, the man whirled and fled, leaving Hermione alone, aroused, and confused at the center of the apparition point.
A Date and Dinner

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus sort themselves out over dinner.

Chapter Notes

Whoo! New chapter! Thanks for all your lovely comments on the last. I did so love torturing you all.

Merlin's jagged left toenail, what the FUCK was that? A very panicked and slight queasy Severus Snape marched toward the Hogwarts gates from the apparition point, hands dragging at the ends of his air and breath snorting out in frustration. She gave you a peck on the lips, Severus. A peck! As a thank you! And you tried to bloody leap down her throat like some spotty teenager! It wasn’t a date, and you went and arsed it up anyway! A simple lunch with a friend, and you act like a complete imbecile. She’s going to sodding kill you, drop you on your damned pointed head like the moron that you --

“SEVERUS SNAPE, YOU STOP WALKING THIS INSTANT!” An enraged shout from behind him made Severus stop in his tracks a short distance from the Hogwarts gates.

Not that he had much choice. Half body bind curses do have a tendency to halt one’s forward momentum. Severus hunched his shoulders -- since he couldn’t really move any of his other appendages -- and waited for the inevitable.

The very red, very enraged face that he had so recently been mashed against appeared in front of Severus’ lowered head. Hermione stood in front of him, wand drawn and hands on hips in a picture so reminiscent of Molly Weasley that Severus would have laughed but for the sneaking suspicion that she was about to hex his bollocks off.

The angry witch in front of him spoke in a dangerously low tone of voice. “You’re beginning to make a habit of rabbiting after first dates, Severus. Would you mind explaining what the hell all that was about before I turn you into a toad and fling you into the bloody Forbidden Forest for the centaurs to trample?”

Severus drew himself up as formally as the rigid body bind would allow before speaking. “I’m terribly sorry, Professor Granger. I did not intend to accost you. I don’t know what came over me and I can only express my abject --” He paused and winged an eyebrow at her. “First date?”

The color in Hermione’s cheeks heightened slightly, making her look like a blushing tomato with corkscrews coming out the top. “Yes,” she hissed, “first date. What did you think that was?”

“Ah...an outing? Between friends? I -- I wasn’t clear on the purpose of -- that is, we never specifically said that -- Pants. I’m shite at this.” He would have buried his face in his hands had he been able to move. Severus settled for rolling his eyes and focusing them over her shoulder.
A burble of laughter escaped from the (slightly less angry) woman holding a (very lethal) wand on him. “You really are, aren’t you?” She continued to look at him with an expression of exasperated amusement on her face. “If I unbind you, will you stop running and talk to me for a moment?”

He nodded and she wordlessly finited the spell, stowing her wand. His shoulders sagged as the binds released, but before he could as much as move she grabbed his elbow and half pulled, half flung him toward the low rock she’d perched on before they left for Edinburgh. He took the hint and sat, hands folded in his lap. She stood in front of him with her arms crossed, an expectant look on her face.

“So you didn’t think this was a date.”

“I didn’t want to presume. We’ve barely reestablished a friendship.”

She rolled her eyes. “Severus, you know we’ve been on a date before. Why wouldn’t you presume?”

“Uhm...because that date was six years ago? And I don’t remember it? And because, by your own statements, it was not an unqualified success?”

She considered him a moment. “You have a point,” she conceded. She sat next to him on the rock and huffed a sigh. “Well this is awkward.”

“Indeed.” The silence between them grew.

Hermione drew a breath as if to speak, then released it in a plosive gust. Severus shifted on the rock. She fidgeted with her nails a moment. Finally he spoke.

“I’m sorry I ran away,” he said in a low voice.

“Which time?” she replied.

“Either. Both. Take your pick.”

They both shifted uncomfortably on the cold rock, arms folded in mirrored positions of discomfort and embarrassment.

“You didn’t accost me.”

“Pardon?” he turned his head to glance at her, but she was still staring straight ahead.

“You didn’t accost me. I wanted you to kiss me. I had a lovely time today on what I thought was a date. And I had hoped it would end with a kiss.” She was blushing again. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. And cursed you.”

“I don’t think you should be the one apologizing here. I misread your intentions.”

“To be fair I wasn’t very clear about the purpose of our...outing.” She drew her legs up to rest her chin on her knees.

“Date.”

“What?” She looked at him in confusion.

“You said it was a date,” he replied with a smile. “You can’t take it back now.”

“I wasn’t taking it back.” She turned her head toward him with a little smirk.
“Well, good. Then. So we had a date.”

“We did. It even went pretty well, except for that last bit.”

He mulled over that before replying. “Would you want to go another one? A date?”

“Are you asking?”

He nodded decisively. “Yes. I am asking if you would like to go on another date.”

Her smirk broadened into a flirtatious smile. “Then yes, I would like to go out with you again. On a date. To be clear.”

“Good.” He congratulated himself on overcoming that small hurdle. *Now what do I do?*

“Good?” she replied.

“Yes?” he looked at her questioningly.

“You’re really bad at this.”

He grimaced. “I know.”

“To be fair, you were bad at this last time too.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, but didn’t deign to reply to her baiting.

She unfolded her legs and slid off the rock. “How about we try that last bit again?” She held out her hand to draw him to his feet.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Which part exactly?”

“The part where I say, *I had a lovely time today. Thank you for such an enjoyable day*. And then I give you a kiss.” She rose on her toes to match action to words, pressing her mouth against his softly for a long moment, then withdrawing. “And you say…?”

He drew her a bit closer and looked her in the eye with a smile of his own. “Thank you for accompanying me on our date. I enjoyed spending the day with you and would like to do so again, if you’re amenable.”

She grinned at him, then spoke teasingly. “A very acceptable response, if a bit stilted.”

“Hermione?” He lowered his head until his lips hovered just above hers.

“Hmm?”

“Stop talking.”

“’kay.”

He closed the slight distance between them and watched as her eyelids fluttered closed. He touched his lips to hers gently, tilting his head to rest the hook of his nose against her petal-soft cheek as he savored the feel of her warm body close to his. He held her there in the dying sunlight, restraining the urge to deepen the kiss. Instead, Severus concentrated on running his hands down her arms to her waist and holding Hermione in a light embrace. When their lips parted he simply rested his forehead against hers and stood with her in the rapidly cooling air.
“We should probably head in to dinner.” he murmured.

She sighed against his lips. “Probably. But I don’t want to.”

He drew back a bit, but kept his arms around her for a moment longer. “Would you like to dine in my rooms this evening? We should probably talk.” He winced inwardly at his less than enthusiastic phrasing, hoping she hadn’t noticed.

She had, but the corner of her mouth quirked. “Sure. Come on. It’s getting cold.” She stepped out of the circle of his arms and slipped her hand into his. He lifted her fingers to his lips and pressed a light kiss into her knuckles as they began their walk back to the castle.

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Once back in his apartments, Severus busied himself hanging their jackets in the cloak closet and summoning Winky to bring them dinner. Hermione immediately stepped out of her shoes, opened her purse and removed Severus’ purchases and Minerva’s order to set them on the hall table. Severus watched as Hermione moved into the sitting room and waved her hand toward the fire to light it. He noted that she bypassed her usual armchair by the fire and settled into a corner of the couch, clearly waiting for him to join her. Obligingly, he sat at the opposite end of the couch and tilted his body toward hers in a position mimicking what he’d viewed in their last Pensieve session. “The food should be here momentarily. I asked Winky to bring us the same meal that everyone else had tonight. I hope that’s alright...I didn’t know what you might want to eat.”

She waved a hand absentmindedly. “That’s fine. I’m not feeling very particular tonight.” She snuggled further into the couch as the fire began to warm the room and looked at him expectantly. “You said you thought we should talk?”

“Yes, I --” he was interrupted by Winky’s sudden reappearance with a tray laden with roast chicken, vegetables, crusty bread, the ubiquitous pot of tea, and an absurdly large portion of treacle tart.

“Winky has brought foods, Professor Sir,” the little elf squeaked.

“Thank you, Winky. Please place it on the coffee table and we’ll serve ourselves. We won’t need you any more tonight.”

Winky disapparated with a soft pop almost as quickly as she had come.

Severus turned back to Hermione and gestured toward the tray. “Why don’t we talk while we eat?” She tilted her head in agreement and watched as he took out his wand as he levitated plates and cutlery toward them, then stilled the air to hold them at a comfortable dining level. They quickly applied themselves to the meal, eating slowly and eyeing each other cautiously over their food.

He was the first to break the silence. “Hermione, I don’t know if we’ve had this conversation in the past so I hope you’ll forgive me if we’ve been over this before. I haven’t spent a great deal of time with women in my life -- I think you know that?”

She nodded and swallowed the bite of zucchini in her mouth. “You told me a few years ago that you’d dated...infrequently since turning spy against Voldemort.”

He sighed. “Yes. You know, it’s a little disconcerting to not know how much I’ve shared with you in the past. Regardless, I haven’t courted anyone ever. I’ve been on dates, but those relationships
have generally been short lived. You said yourself, I’m exceptionally bad at...this.” He waved his hand at the air between them, nearly upsetting his plate in the process. He took a deep breath before he plowed on. “I realize we’ve only renewed our acquaintance recently, but thanks to your willingness to share your memories I feel that we had and will again have a strong friendship. I’m...hesitant to risk that friendship by subjecting you to my romantic blundering.”

Hermione blinked at him as she processed what he’d just said. “Hesitant, but not unwilling?”

“No, not unwilling. But I think -- no, I know that I would need you to be patient with me. I’m...unsure of what I’m feeling right now. I don’t know if I’m experiencing reconnection or a resurfacing a memory where you’re concerned or if I’m simply grateful for your help with recovering that lost year in my life. I don’t want to take advantage of your natural sympathies or your own memories of our past connection. That seems manipulative. But I can’t deny that I find you attractive and have since I first saw you at Minerva’s welcoming party two weeks ago.” He felt a blush rise to his cheeks, admitting his feelings in such a forthright manner was not in his nature.

He cut another piece of chicken and speared it with his fork, staring at his plate as he spoke. “I know that I found you attractive before we discovered I had been obliviated, so I’m going to hope that my continued efforts to recover my memories won’t interfere with what I feel now. I just...I don’t want to hurt you and this entire situation feels as though it’s asking for complication.”

Hermione set aside her utensils as she regarded the frustrated man across from her. “Severus, our relationship after the battle built slowly -- partly because you were still recovering from Nagini’s bite and struggling with the press and trying to find yourself after years serving two mostly-insane chess masters. It took you weeks just to trust me enough to call me a friend. But our friendship now has reasserted itself with a rapidity that makes me believe not all your memories are as buried as you think they are.

You’re trying to separate your feelings now from what you’ve seen of your feelings then, and I don’t know if you can or should try to do that. If what you felt then is trying to reassert itself, then let it. I can’t avoid how I felt then; I don’t have any choice but to let it color my choices now. Why should you try to be any different?”

Severus stared at her in frustration. “I’m not expressing myself very well. Hermione, I’ve spent the better part of my life being manipulated by my own feelings. First by my feelings of inadequacy, which led me straight to the Dark Arts and eventually Voldemort. Then by my feelings of guilt, which led me to Dumbledore. Then by feelings of duty, which led me to engage in unspeakable acts in an attempt to pay a debt to Lily and Dumbledore and myself. I’ve been controlled by my past my entire life, and I worry that this time you’ll be hurt with me. What if my memory comes back and it changes who I am now, how I feel about you? What then?”

“Then you’re taking no less of a risk I am. This is how every relationship works, Severus. Everyone who allows their life to entwine with another’s takes the chance that feelings might change. Some relationships work, some fail. Yes, you could hurt me. You probably will. And I’ll probably hurt you in turn. But I’m still interested in you, even after six years of not knowing where you were, why you left me on our first first-date all those years ago, or what I’d done to send you away. If I can take a chance on you, shouldn’t you be willing to take a chance on me?”

He found her candor disarming, and couldn’t help but latch on to the first part of her statement. “So you’d want a relationship with me?”

She smiled at him. “Trust you to only hear the first part of that. Yes, you silly man I want a relationship with you. I wanted one with you six years ago, which is one of the reasons I nearly ended up with Ron.”
“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow.”

She sighed again. “My friendship with you during your recovery was one of the defining moments of my adult life. It shaped who I am today, but so did the fact that you left without a word. I told you that I had to make peace with the choices I made after you left -- Ron was one of those choices. I didn’t date anyone for over a year, then I sort of fell into a relationship with him because he was always there. I think I chose him because he was your anthesis. And we see how well that worked out.” She chuckled mirthlessly. “I’m not suggesting that we pick up where we left off -- you wouldn’t know where that was without me showing you anyhow. I’m just suggesting that we not ignore the fact that we have a shared history.”

He rose and gathered their plates, moving toward the dinner tray to pour tea and serve slices of tart to each of them. The movement bought him a little time to think before replying. “If we did form a relationship, I would want to proceed cautiously. It would give us both time to adjust to any emotional upheaval caused by learning about our past history.”

“That seems sensible. Define slowly.”

“I’m not going to set goals or dates, but I don’t think we should be intimate for quite some time.”

She snorted. “Intimate? That’s presuming a lot, don’t you think?”

Severus met her eyes and she stilled, caught by the flare of passion in their depths. “No, I don’t.”

He was pleased to see a hot flush rise from the neck of her blouse to color her cheeks before she broke eye contact and sipped her tea.

Hermione cleared her throat. “So we would...what. Go on dates?”

He considered. “Well, yes. Outings would be a part of it. But I think the larger point is that I want to get to know you better -- both through your memories of our friendship and through the relationship we’re establishing now. So we would spend some evenings together, dine together when we could, talk to each other...much as we’ve already been doing.”

“Except with snogging.” She raised an eyebrow teasingly.

He surprised himself by laughing. “Yes. Except with snogging. But I don’t think we should go beyond that. Not for awhile. I want to be sure I’m not going to hare off to the continent again if a memory jars loose, and I think I’d like to make sure you’re interested in the Severus who returned to Hogwarts after several years of travel rather than the injured man you helped nurse back to health. Make sense?”

“You’ve always made sense, Severus. It’s what makes debating with you so incredibly frustrating. We never used to argue, you know. You’d just logic me ‘round to your way of thinking. A girl can’t even have an irrational tantrum around you.”

He smirked as he ate his tart. “I’d apologize, but I fail to see how sound reasoning could be frustrating.”

She rolled her eyes as she dug into her own dessert. “Clearly the continent didn’t change you that much. You used to say that then, too.”

“That’s nice to know.”

She paused as she chewed and swallowed her treat. “Would you expect exclusivity while we date?”
“I’d prefer it, yes. I’ve never been terribly good at sharing, and as we’re both working toward an actual relationship I’d rather not have to fend off the hordes of men who no doubt pursue the Gryffindor Princess whenever she leaves the castle.”

“I’m fine with exclusivity, as long as it’s mutual.”

Severus shot her an offended look. “I wouldn’t dream of offering you anything less.”

She blushed. “Sorry. I just...after Ron I need to be clear about that.”

He looked at her questioningly. “Were you not clear about that with Ronald?” Hermione certainly hadn’t seemed like the type to allow her partner to wander.

“Not clear enough. Clearly.” She stabbed her fork into the tart aggressively. “I forgave Ron once. I don’t think I have it in me to accept infidelity again.”

“Nor should you have to. If you and I are dating -- even if we are not yet intimate -- I will not be dating anyone else. I promise you that, Hermione.”

She nodded her head and looked at her plate to poke at her tart again.

Severus rose and gathered their plates, since she was clearly not going to be eating the remainder of her tart, then returned to the sofa. “Would you like to stay for a bit this evening? We could read for a bit or take in the air on the balcony.” He was disappointed when she shook her head.

“No, I think we should work with the pensieve.”

“Are you sure? It has been rather a full day -- and an emotional one at that. I don’t wish to overtax you.”

Hermione smiled and scooted out of her corner of the sofa to sit knee-to-knee with him, leaning in to give him a quick peck on the cheek before drawing back to look at him. “I’m not fragile, Severus. And you’re at a bit of a disadvantage. We have a history as friends, for all that our relationship seems new to you now. I want you to know that history so that I’m not carrying it alone.”

He flushed a bit at the kiss and her frankness. “Of course.” He withdrew his wand to banish the dinner tray to the kitchen, then floated the pensieve into position on the coffee table. “After you.”

Hermione leaned in to press another lingering kiss to the corner of his mouth, then rose to take her usual seat near the fire. She withdrew her wand and began extracting the memory of the evening, placing the silver wisp into the bowl. Severus sat in the chair opposite and braced his hands on his knees before plunging his face into the silky liquid in the bowl.

Severus found himself back at Spinner’s End, which appeared to be much cleaner than the last time he had seen it in either memory or reality. He was on his back atop a cushioned table in the center of his sitting room, covered in sweat and far from happy. He had his arms crossed and was holding his them close to his body as if to keep them from moving away.

“Kindly remove yourself from your presence you overbearing harpy!” he growled at the thera-witch in pale pink robes. “Don’t you dare poke me with your bloody wand, you stupid creature! Dammit! Hermione, get this woman out of here!”

The thera-witch clucked her tongue and pointed her wand and his shoulders again. “Calm yourself Mr. Snape. That was only set nine. Once more and you’ll be done for the day.” Without waiting for reply, she moved her wand with a swish and a poke, commanding his muscles to clench and release in rapid succession. Severus watched his past-body’s shoulders and pectoral muscles ripple as they
moved through a set of magically syncopated movements. Without speaking, the thera-witch proceeded to swish and poke her way down his body, swishing and flicking and muscle groups in his arms, abdomen, legs, hands, and feet.

Severus grunted and swore his way through the final round of therapy. He watched his past self mutter under his breath, catching only snippets that sounded like “lobster claws for hands...won’t trust yourself to shower without a spoon...scorpions and nettles in the mattress...you’ll never eat marmalade again, you sadistic bint!” He chuckled, imagining what retribution he’d planned. However, as the session progressed he could see that his past-self was clearly struggling with the exercises; his insults began to taper of and his breath began to rattle out in puffs and wheezes. By the end his normal pallor was sheet white and his eyes were glazed with pain.

“You’re done for today, Mr. Snape,” snapped the thera-witch, who turned away to gather her things.

With the exercises finished, Hermione -- who must have been near the wall watching the torture session -- moved forward to help him sit up and handed him two vials in periwinkle and goldenrod. She guided his shaking hands to his mouth to assist him in drinking the muscle relaxant and pain relief potions before gingerly helping him move to the couch. He groaned as he sank into the cushions, his breath still wheezing out in an alarming fashion. The thera-witch ignored her patient and busied herself with sheathing her wand and straightening her robes.

Hermione handed Severus a glass of water and spoke in a low voice. “I’ll be back in a moment. I’m just going to see Madam Lawdee out.” He simply gulped at the water and glared at his therapist.

Hermione took the middle-aged witch by the arm and led her toward the door “Winifred, you know that I’m grateful that you come to assist Severus each week, but might I make a suggestion to help your sessions progress more smoothly?”

The thera-witch drew herself up haughtily. “You can suggest, but I doubt anything would make that man more cooperative!”

“He does not like to feel out of control, Winifred. Therapy is necessary for him to strengthen his muscles -- he knows that as well as I -- but if you could perhaps wait for him to signal his readiness before beginning each muscle group exercise. And perhaps give him time to recover between each muscle group. I don’t think it’s good for him to struggle so much with his breathing. I -- I realize that you have other places to be, but I do think you have rushed it the past few sessions. He was unable to walk for two days after your last visit. He was unable to do the home exercises, which does not seem like a good way for him to make progress between sessions.”

“Are you a therapist, Miss Granger? There is no recovery without pain! I will not alter my techniques simply because he is lazy. I will return at the same time next week. And tell Mr. Snape that if he cannot keep his uncouth mouth shut, I will charm it shut for him during our sessions. I do not take abuse from my clients.”

Hermione lifted her head and stared at the woman in front of her for a moment before opening the front door. “I see, Madam Lawdee. You do not take abuse, but you are willing to dole it out? That hardly seems professional. We thank you for your time, but I believe Mr. Snape will be seeking the services of another in the future. Have a good day.”

The thera-witch sputtered. “I am Ministry approved! You have no right to --” Her words cut off as Hermione closed the door in her face and returned to the sitting room.

“Is the bitch gone?” he asked.
“I dismissed her. We’ll find someone else. And if we can’t find a thera-witch, we’ll bring in a Muggle physical therapist. The techniques are similar.” She picked up a towel and handed it to him, taking his empty water glass.

Severus glanced up as she walked past him into the kitchen, surprise and gratitude clear on his face.

He emerged from the pensieve and glanced at the woman seated across from him. “When was that? Dates are getting a bit muddled from my end.”

She thought for a moment. “You were released in early September and began physical therapy right away. I think that was your third or fourth session, so late September? Early October? Somewhere in there.”

“And you were still with me?”

She blushed. “Most of the time, yes. I stayed in your spare room most nights. I was afraid to leave you on your own.”

“I’m surprised Potter and Weasley didn’t come to rescue you at some point.”

She laughed. “Harry came to see you twice a week, Severus. You were getting close to friendly by the time you left the country. Ron...well, Ron was wrapped up in other things that first year. He had a fan club and uh...took advantage of it. Shamelessly.” She shrugged and changed the subject. “Are you ready for another?”

“If you’re up to it.” He watched as she drew another silvery memory from her mind and placed it in the floating bowl, then glanced at her briefly before immersing himself in the memory.

It was clearly a few weeks later. His past self looked a bit healthier and steadier on his feet. Past-Severus was drenched in sweat again, but he was neither trembling nor pale. He shook hands with an older gentleman dressed in black pants and a simple shirt and watched as he escorted him to the door. Hermione was tidying up the sitting room, shrinking a mat and large inflated ball down to stow them in the cupboard under the stairs.

Her muffled voice came from inside the small space. “I think Robert is working out well, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “He’s a sight better than the thera-witch. I like that he lets me work at my own pace.”

She nodded. “What was that he was saying to you as he was leaving?”

“Just a suggestion for care after my therapy is complete. He was talking about some sort of Muggle exercise programme. Pilates?”

She chuckled. “Pilates. My mum used to do that. It’s like...calisthenics with stretching and strengthening bits. Very controlled. We can look into it if you want. I’ll even learn it with you.”

“Hm. That sounds tolerable, especially if I’m not suffering through it alone. Robert recommended I look into it. He said it would help with the shoulder and back pains.” He gestured toward his own rail-thin frame and rolled his eyes. “He also told me that I need to fill out some.”

“Well you’ve always been thin, but you became...rather painfully so when you were in St. Mungo’s. I think he wants to help you build up muscle. I mean, could you even move a cauldron without magic right now?”
He narrowed his eyes and didn’t reply. “I need to shower,” he muttered, moving toward the stairs. “I’ll get us some lunch. How do you feel about chinese takeaway?”

“Get what you like. It matters not to me.”

“Don’t forget we’re expected at Harry’s for the party tonight. He said no costumes -- just dinner and drinks with the Order.”

His resigned voice was muted as it came down the stairs. “Dammit woman, you’ve reminded me twice already today. My body is weakened, not my mind. I said I would attend, and so I shall.”

She snickered to herself as she gathered her purse to head outside. “Touchy today aren’t we? I’ll be back in a half hour.” She slipped into a Muggle jacket and went off to fetch lunch.

When Severus emerged from the bowl again, he spoke slowly. “That’s odd. I’ve been practicing Pilates for nearly five years now. I learned on the continent...but I’ve never known why I felt drawn to trying it.”

“Perhaps there are gaps in the memory charm?”

“It seems plausible. It would explain why I felt the need to establish a friendship with you so quickly. I wonder if there are other things that are slipping through that we haven’t noticed.”

She shrugged and rubbed at her head. “We’ll have to wait and see. I suspect that the memory sessions are helping to widen those gaps.”

He watched her hand as it rubbed slow circles on her temple. “Headache already?”

“Apparently. It’s been a long day...we should probably stop there for the night.” She began the process of gathering and replacing the silver wisps, wincing as she touched her wand to her head.

He rose and walked to the bath, returning with a small vial. “Here. This will help.”

“Thanks.” She downed the headache potion quickly, grimacing a little at the taste. “I appreciate it.”

“It would seem that it’s only fair. You took care of me for weeks, after all.” He gestured toward the pensieve.

She eyed him a moment before replying. “It’s what friends do, Severus. You were -- and are -- my friend. I wanted to help you. Still do, apparently.”

“That was far more than friendship, Hermione. You entertained me. You made sure I was fed. You helped me find therapists who would help rather than hinder my progress. You cleaned my bloody house and were all but living there during my convalescence. Why would you do so much for me, especially after how I treated you during your school years?”

She sighed a bit and ran her fingers through her hair to tidy it. “I’ll admit it started as gratitude. You saved us so many times during school and you were the deciding factor in the final battle. We knew what your sacrifices were and I knew I wanted to help you regain some of what you’d lost in the attempt to help us defeat Voldemort. And...I’d developed a bit of a crush by the time you were released. So I kept helping you because it let me be near you.” She flushed a little at the admission.

He took her hand and helped her rise to her feet, gathering her into a hug. “I probably didn’t deserve such devotion, but thank you for it all the same.” Looking down, Severus touched his lips to her
forehead. “You should rest before your headache returns.”

She nodded and moved to the foyer to gather her bag and jacket. “Will you be at breakfast in the morning?”

He gave her a crooked smile and opened the door. “It looks like I have a bit of a crush on you, so if you’ll be there, so will I.”

She stood on her toes to place a soft kiss on his lips. “Then I’ll see you in the morning.”
Let the Games Begin

Chapter Summary

The first week of classes is complete. Severus experiences some teaching success, Hermione plans a little revenge, and the staff celebrates survival of the first full week with some fun and games.

Chapter Notes

*evil laugh* I had too much fun putting this chapter together.

Also, I love your comments. They make me write faster...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 9, 2005 - Hogwarts

Severus faced the combined Gryffindor/Slytherin seventh years and tried not to let his exasperation show on his face. “I see that you’ve improved your patronus charms over this last week, but that most of you are unable to sustain the mist form for more than a few seconds.” He flicked his wand and had baskets of chocolate pieces floating down the sides of the room toward his students. “I’ll remind you, should you ever encounter a dementor you will need to maintain the mist form for at least one full minute in order to mask your presence long enough to move clear of the creature’s area of effect and apparate elsewhere. Your textbook states that this is the prescribed course of action for an encounter with a single dementor. Can anyone tell me the flaw in this logic? Mr. Bertle?” He motioned his hand toward the breathless Gryffindor who was currently vying for this year’s title of top-swot.

“Dementors rarely travel alone, sir. They generally travel in packs, and as the ministry no longer retains control over dementors since their release from their Azkaban duties, they have been allowed to breed without restriction or oversight.” The boy swiped at his brow discreetly, trying to clear the sweat that had accumulated as he battled to sustain his mist patronus before snagging a brick of chocolate from the basket.

“Excellent Mr. Bertle. Five points to Gryffindor. While it’s rare to see dementors roaming the British countryside, the Ministry’s failure to wrangle the creatures at the end of the Second Wizarding War resulted in small clutches of them falling into the hands of dark wizards. If you should run afoul of a grouping of two more more dementors -- and let me remind you, they generally travel in groups of five to seven -- what form of patronus will you need?”

“A corporeal patronus” chorused the class.

Severus nodded at the group approvingly. “Yes. You will need to create a corporeal patronus to shield you from a group attack.” He paused as one of the Slytherin seventh years raised a hand. “Yes, Miss Dioli?”
The young woman sneered at him. “Why are we learning this particular piece of magic? It’s not on the N.E.W.T. You’re just wasting the time that we should be spending revising for our exams.”

The entire class gasped as one and turned their heads toward their Professor, anticipating the set-down that their legendary Defense professor was about to hurl at Dinah Dioli. Severus simply raised an eyebrow and replied in a dry tone of voice.

“Miss Dioli, I am not accustomed to having my curriculum questioned in an open classroom. In the future, if you have concerns about our lessons I encourage you to come speak to me during my office hours. But I’ll answer you this once as you have -- however rudely -- managed to ask an intelligent question. Can anyone tell me why I have asked you to learn the Patronus Charm, even if it’s not on your final exam?” One shy Slytherin raised her hand. “Yes, Miss Gorman?”

“Because the release of the Dementors from their duties at Azkaban eight years ago has meant that there are more attacks on the wizarding population, sir.”

“Yes, Miss Gorman. Five points for Slytherin. You have managed to negate the five points I’m taking from Miss Dioli for failing to address an instructor with proper decorum. I will tolerate legitimate questions, Miss Dioli, but not disrespect. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” the sarcastic teen muttered, glaring at Severus. He simply turned back to the class at large and noted that the Headmistress had slipped into the back of the classroom.

“The Patronus Charm is not the only spell that I will teach you that will not be found on your N.E.W.T. exams. As important as those exams are to your future careers, they do little to prepare you for the very real dangers we face in our world. My job is to prepare you to both pass your exams and become witches and wizards capable of defending yourselves safely and without notice. Harry Potter -- who had some talent, yes, but was by no means a magical genius -- managed to produce a corporeal patronus at the age of fourteen. He taught others -- many of whom survived the Battle of Hogwarts and whose names you now learn in your History of Magic classes -- to do so when they were sixteen. This is not magic that is beyond you, and I expect you to apply yourselves to its mastery.

Now then. The practice spaces are open all weekend long and the supply cabinets therein have an ample supply of chocolate for replenishing your reserves. I expect you to make use of the space between now and our next meeting. I want to see each and every one of you maintain the mist form of the patronus for one minute during our class. As an added incentive, anyone who manages to produces a corporeal patronus by next Friday will be awarded twenty house points and an automatic O on this assignment. We will be moving on to compulsion spells next week with only limited attention to the patronus, so I suggest you use your time wisely before we meet again on Tuesday afternoon. Please don’t forget to read your texts on the compulsion spell before our next class. You are dismissed.”

Robes rustled as they were drawn on as the students collected their belongings and moved toward the door. Severus was pleased to hear some of his students making plans to meet in the practices rooms over the weekend; he only hoped that more than a handful made use of the time. He raised his eyebrows in greeting as Minerva moved toward him as the students filed out.

“Well, Severus. I am impressed. Word has it your practice rooms are in use every night.”

“Yes. They seem to be getting some good use. I’ve been pleased -- most of my students have been making rapid improvement in their spell casting.”

The elder witch nodded. “I would hope so. I wanted to come and let you know that I’ve decided to
open an additional two practice rooms to accommodate the overflow. I’ve been receiving complaints of students practicing in the halls outside the rooms from Mr. Filch.”

“Oh. I’d not heard that. Thank you, Minerva. If the rooms are that full, it would seem that the extra space is needed.”

She smiled at his gracious reply. “I’m glad that your lessons are inspiring students to work on their own during their free hours. That’s quite an accomplishment, as you know. You seem to be inspiring just enough fear to get students to practice and offering just enough incentive to guarantee their improvement.”

He smirked. “House points always inspire the masses, though I’ll be surprised if anyone produces a corporeal patronus within a week.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate this lot, Severus. They may not have received the defense education they deserve, but they’re endeavoring to meet your high standards.” She patted his arm. “Now then, will you be joining the rest of the staff in Rolanda and Aurora’s quarters tonight?”

He glanced at the Headmistress as he bent to gather his work satchel. “They invited me, so yes I’ll go and drink myself into oblivion.”

“Excellent. I look forward to seeing you there after dinner. Have a good afternoon, Severus.” The woman turned and walked out of the classroom with a swish of her robes and a twitch of her tartan shawl.

Dinner that night was a lively affair. Severus slipped in through the teacher’s entrance and snagged the chair next to Hermione before Flitwick could do so. The charms professor had managed to edge him out of the way the previous evening and had kept her attention for the entirety of the meal and Severus was forced to listen Hagrid and Luna discuss the potential of a new Nargle breeding ground in the far reaches of the library.

He turned to Hermione with a murmured hello and was greeted with a soft smile from the woman, though he noted that she looked tired and that her hair was approximately two times its normal size this evening. “Rough day?” he ventured.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes. My fifth years were attempting liquid transfigurations today. Six of them lost control over their water-to-milk transfigurations and managed to catch me in the crossfire. Luckily none of them had actually managed the transformation, else I’d smell like a sour dairymaid.”

It took a fair bit of control for Severus to control the smile that wanted pop onto his face. “Professor Granger, might I venture that all six of these students were male?”

She looked surprised. “Good guess. How did you know?”

Severus dropped his voice so that only she could hear. “Forgive me, but your robes today reveal rather more of your ensemble than normal.” He gestured toward her modern-cut robes, which settled further back on her shoulders to reveal a white Oxford shirt that might have once been crisp and a calf-length pleated skirt the color of gooseberries. “I suspect that your clumsy students were trying to replicate the effects of a Muggle wet t-shirt contest.”
Hermione’s eyes flicked down at her shirt and back to Severus as she absorbed his words. He watched, entranced, as her face shifted from horror to anger, then from anger to steely resolve.

“How interesting,” she said tightly. “Well, I’ll have to come up with a rather creative punishment, don’t you think?” Her eyes glinted with delight, and Severus fancied that he could see the gears in her brain engage.

“Something more creative than taking house points or assigning detention, I assume?”

“I learned my disciplinary methods from the best, Professor Snape. I’m sure I can come of with something suitable for six hormonal pranksters.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest as students continued to trickle into the Great Hall for the evening meal. “As I recall, Professor McGonagall rarely went in for public humiliation.”

“I wasn’t talking about the Headmistress. I was talking about you.” She smirked at him as she lifted her goblet of water to her mouth for a sip. “You haven’t been here long enough yet, but I believe my disciplinary methods may eventually challenge your legendary detentions for the most loathed punishment amongst the students. I’ve managed to combine the best of your techniques with the humbling tactics of the Weasley twins’ pranking.” She smiled thinly.

He chuckled darkly as he regarded the petite witch next to him. Looking at her, butter wouldn’t melt...but he knew far better than that. “If I recall, your revenge tactics were impressive even when you were a student yourself. I seem to remember Poppy requesting a rather specific set of potions to heal one Marietta Edgecombe during your tenure at the school…”

“And I seem to recall that those potions had little effect on her disfigurement,” she replied smugly.

The smirk that Severus shot her could only be described as indulgent. “I hate to deface a work of art, Professor Granger. And that particular piece of spellwork was a piece of art, make no mistake. Though I understand that Miss Edgecombe’s condition eventually cleared on its own.”

Hermione suddenly turned serious. “I would never permanently scar someone for being a tattle, Severus. It isn’t fair for someone to live with a permanent mark of a mistake they made when they were a mere teenager.” She glanced down at the left sleeve of Severus’ frock coat. “The curse was designed to fade after two weeks, and so it did.”

Severus shifted slightly in his chair before replying. “And this is why I’m sure you’re in the right profession. You know how to teach a hard lesson without destroying the recipient.”

Hermione favored him with a smile and was about to reply when dinner appeared on the tables spaced around the Great Hall. Both of the instructors leaned forward to serve themselves portions of roast lamb and roasted root vegetables, effectively ending the serious conversation they’d inadvertently begun. Severus concentrated on steering the conversation to lighter topics throughout the rest of the meal, but couldn’t prevent shooting his dining companion a speculative look as he ate. He knew that she had been referring to the Dark Mark on his arm with her talk of teenage mistakes, and he found himself pleased that she seemed so willing to view it as the lasting reminder of a mistake rather than a blight on his character. _Hermione Granger is clearly more generous than I likely deserve._

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The end of the evening meal saw prefects and the Head Boy and Girl ushering the students back to their respective common rooms for the evening. Severus was grateful that he’d discharged his monthly patrol duties over the previous week, which left him free to attend Professors Hooch and Sinistra’s semi-annual “We Survived the First Week: Everyone Drink Up” gathering. He remembered the event as one of the highlights of each term. Rolanda and Aurora traditionally provided some rather potent, homebrewed rotgut and there was a strict agreement that words spoken under its influence would remain safely within the couple’s shared quarters never to be held against their bearer. Albus Dumbledore had often taken shameless advantage of this rule and used the event to flirt shamelessly with every member of staff, male or female. Severus couldn’t help but wonder who had the unfortunate task of remaining the ‘designated responsible adult’, thus remaining available for emergencies while the rest of the staff got completely bladdered.

At half past nine, Severus walked up to the third floor where the flying instructor and astronomy professor dwelled. He stopped at a sculpture of rather effeminate looking medieval wizard and tweaked its nose, then slapped it on the left cheek. A doorway appeared in the wall opposite the statue and he raised his hand to knock, only to have it flung open and a drink thrust in his hand. “Come on in, Severus, that water’s fine!” giggled Aurora Sinistra, pulling him through the foyer and into the a sitting room that over looked Rolanda’s beloved quidditch pitch. Music pumped through the room -- a vaguely objectionable thumping and crashing song -- and the sconces were charmed to move through the visible color spectrum...though whomever charmed them had neglected to make them shift synchronously. The settee and chairs had been pushed toward the sides of the room and large cushions were piled around in what Severus could only imagine were meant to be seating areas. The entire space looked like it was in a Muggle nightclub. Under the moon. This was definitely a change from his previous visits to WStFW:EDU!, most of which had devolved into drunken games of whist or terrifying stories of past students. Looking toward the center of the room, Severus noted that Mohinder and Thurston had clearly been here since dinner and were dancing awkwardly through the room with their drinks held aloft, free hands moving gracelessly through the air. Hmm. How did they get the music to play out loud? I should ask Hermione how she gets that awful stuff she listens to streaming through her apartments.

After making note of the location of the sober-up potions for the end of the festivities, Severus nosed the clear beverage in his hand and decided that it was definitely attempting to imitate gin. He took a cautious sip and fought to keep a straight face as it burned its way down to his stomach. It might smell like gin, but it tastes like the cleanser I use in my lab after a cauldron boils over. Did they take the term bathtub gin literally and attempt to distill this in the loo? Out of loo water? Noting the look of anticipatory glee on Aurora’s face, he raised his glass and muttered “to your health” before downing the lot and schooling his face to absolute neutrality. Or as neutral as you can get with watering eyes.

“Hah! You pass, Severus!” Aurora crowed. “Nice to see you haven’t lost your touch!” She laughed as his glass automatically refilled itself with the clear liquid and boogied off toward her partner, giving her a resounding smack on the lips. Severus shrugged his shoulder and tossed back his second dose of rubbing alcohol (Gods, this has to be the worst batch since the year Flitwick got his kit off and climbed on the mantle to recite Shakespearean sonnets. And that was the year they’d attempted to make absinthe with actual wormwood.) Ah well, he was here to drink himself into a stupor with the rest of the staff, and far be it for him to deny tradition.

Looking around the room he spotted Neville and Luna cozied on a settee quaffing from their own glasses of noxious liquid. Hermione was seated on the a floor cushion next to them giggling at Mohinder’s decidedly disturbing hip gyrations. She spotted Severus and waved him over to their corner of the room, where he carefully lowered himself to a cushion next to her. He sipped at his
drink again and worried slightly that it had stopped tasting quite so repugnant.

“Sheverush, what kept you so long?” Neville asked. The boy clearly did not hold his drink well, but that didn’t seem to stop him from taking another sizeable gulp from his glass. “We’ve all been here for ages.” Severus smirked a bit as ‘ages’ was clearly about a half hour. He glanced at Luna, who seemed perfectly composed as she drained her own glass.

“I had to stop and frighten some fifth years, Longbottom. There were students necking in the corridors. They were from your house...I’m afraid you’re going to be a bit low on house points come Monday.” He smirked as he drained his glass again.

“Aww, let ‘em have their fun Sheverush. Let yer hair down and have shome fun yershelf. Come on Loonah. Dansh with me.” At that he set his drink down and grabbed his wife’s hand, pulling her toward the improvised dance floor. With a surprising amount of grace, Neville spun Luna and began to dance with her pressed to his hip.

Severus turned toward Hermione with surprise. “He’s actually pretty good. Where’d he learn to dance like that?”

Hermione giggled again. “He took lessons. After the Yule Ball -- Gods, a decade ago -- he decided he’d be more attractive to women if he had moves on the dance floor. He and Luna took some classes together before they got married...they did a little dance at the wedding and everything”

He continued to watch Neville as he maneuvered his wife into a quick cha-cha. “I don’t know whether to be concerned or impressed. I think I’ll go with impressed.”

“Do you dance? I mean, I know you can waltz -- we waltzed at the ball six years ago -- but can you do anything else?”

Severus turned his head, only mildly concerned when the room swirled a bit before he managed to meet Hermione’s eyes. “Not like that, I can’t. I think I’d need to be seriously inebriated to dance like that.”

Hermione grinned at him and tapped his glass. “Then drink up! I have a mind to see you dance.”

Severus rolled his eyes and took another sip of his liquor before he realized that she might read his action as a desire to make a fool of himself on the dance floor. He might be able to manage a wizarding waltz, but if there wasn’t enough alcohol in the room to get him to do...whatever that Shimmying thing Neville was currently doing.

Severus and Hermione remained on the floor in companionable silence for awhile, watching their fellow staff members drink, dance, or attempt to shout at one another over the music. Every few minutes, her hand would brush his leg or her hair would tickle his arm. Eventually, he found himself leaning against the wall and placing his arm behind Hermione and allowing her to rest against his shoulder as they people watched in their own little corner. It was a fairly entertaining activity -- Severus nearly choked on his drink when Slughorn dragged a vocally abusive Minerva on to the floor and attempted a quick rhumba, but for the most part everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Around eleven, the music dropped in volume and the dancers plopped down on the settees or cushions with their drinks as Rolanda teetered her way to the center of the room and set down a tower of rectangular blocks. Severus groaned as he recognized the game from years past.

“Come on Rolanda, you’re not still trotting that thing out every year are you?” he said to the hostess.

“I sure am, and you’re going to play it you grumpy arse!” she said with a grin.
Mohinder, who was seated next to Thurston on the settee near their corner, looked at Severus in confusion. “What is it?” he asked.

Severus scraped his hand down his face and finished his drink (his fifth? sixth? he was losing count...). “A game that we are entirely too old to be playing,” he groaned. “It’s Charm-Blocks*. Minerva confiscated it from some of her Gryffindors years ago and Rolanda, of course, decided we had to play with the damned thing. Every bloody year. I can’t believe the charms still work.”

The newest staff member looked intrigued and drank from his own glass. “How is it played?”

Rolanda answered the question for him. “The rules are simple, Moh. Each wizard has to levitate a block out of the tower without deshtibla-- deshtabbi-- knocking it over. Then you put the block you take out on top and the next person goes. But each block has a charm on it. When you read it aloud, it’ll make you do or say something.”

Mohinder narrowed his eyes at the tower. “I don’t understand.”

“What Rolanda isn’t explaining,” Severus interjected, “is that each charm makes you do or say something incredibly stupid. So you’ll tell your most embarrassing secret. Or lose a piece of clothing. Or reveal the best shag you’ve ever had in gruesome detail. It’s like...compulsory truth or dare.”

“Oh!” Exclaimed the younger wizard as he understood. Then he thought about it. “Oh. Um. Are we sure that’s a good idea?”

Neville muttered something like “it shertainly wasn’t a bad idea during my apprenticeship” and leaned over to kiss his wife on the lips. Except he missed and caught her chin, nearly knocking her over in the process.

Hermione laughed. “It’s a very, very bad idea Mohinder. But we do it anyway. Anything that happens here doesn’t leave the room -- we take an oath. Minerva won’t fire you for anything you say and no one will ever mention anything that occurred when it’s over. And to be fair, everyone in this room ends up with as much blackmail material on everyone else by the end that spilling anyone’s secrets would be suicidal.”

“And,” interrupted Minerva, “everyone gets two passes. If the charm will make you break an oath or it’s just too embarrassing, you simply have to speak the charm urbanum refuseal and the proceedings will halt.”

“Right!” exclaimed Rolanda. “And if you knock the tower over, you have to do something embarrassing, to be deshided upon by the lasht person to place a block down shucesshfully. Rulesh clear?”

Mohinder nodded his head, looking simultaneously intrigued and scared out of his mind.

Rolanda clapped her hands. “Okay everyone. Wand on your left palm, right hand touching your wandsh please! Not that wand, Thurston you perv. Repeat after me: I hereby shwear that what is said and done at this gathering will remain at thish gathering. I will not reveal to any person not currently present the events that take place thish night.” As Rolanda finished leading the oath, she raised her glass and drained its contents and each staff member did the same.

“Right then,” the flying instructor said in her best referee voice. “I want a good, raucous game. From all of you.” She pointed her wand at Mohinder. “Newest instructor firsht.”

Chapter End Notes
*Charm-Blocks is modeled on a game I played in college that involved a Jenga tower with truths and dares written on it. It works exactly like the game described here, but without the advantage of wands, charms, or levitation skills. The copious amounts of alcohol were, of course, a given.
Party On, Profs

Chapter Summary

The party continues and some mild shenanigans ensue. Also there's dancing. And snogging. And possibly a little second base action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a drunken cheer from the assembled party as Rolanda set the Charm Blocks on the floor, then pointed her wand and very deliberately enunciated novum ludum. The small wooden rectangles glowed a virulent purple for a moment before hovering in the air and rapidly restacking themselves into a perfectly balanced tower. Mohinder looked at Rolanda, then Severus with trepidation before lifting his wand and pointing it at a chosen block. It delicately slid out from the stack and flew to his hand, where he frowned at the blank piece of wood.

At Rolanda’s slurred instruction, Mohinder held the block a both of its ends, his brows knitted as he read the words that appeared there aloud.

Welcome Mohinder, if we’re not imposing, / Finish your drink and strip one piece of clothing.

Severus barked out a laugh at the confused look on Mohinder’s face. “Bloody hell, Rolana. It rhymes now?”

“How’s it always done?” asked Luna.

“Not the last time she trotted the damned thing out,” he replied.

“I may have made shome improvementsh since the lasht time you played.” The flying instructor gave a small hiccup before turning her gaze back on Mohinder. “Right then, off with it Moh! And shoes count as one piece together.”

Mohinder gave a brisk nod and bent to remove the lace-up Oxfords from his feet, then levitated his block into place at the top of the tower. “Who is next?” he asked.

“We go clockwise. Thurston, yer up!”

The ancient runes professor gave a quick grin, then swished and flicked his wand at the pile of blocks, and quickly grasped it to allow the writing to appear.

Thurston, you’re an incorrigible lump / Turn ‘round and flash your covered rump

“Really? Rather tame, Rolanda…” but Thurston turned and dropped his trousers, showing off the green and pink polka-dotted pants beneath, much to the hooting delight of the gathered professors. He colored slightly and slid his block back into place.

Aurora giggled and slid her arm around her partner’s waist. “I helped Rolanda with the charm work on the blocks this year, Thurston. They’ll…shall we say, increase in intensity as we progress through the game.”
“I can hardly wait, dear lady!” he murmured as he refastened the buttons of his slacks. “Hermione, I believe you’re next.”

“So I am!” She raised her wand and carefully slid one of the lower edge pieces out of the tower, pausing briefly as she waited for her assignment to appear.

_You dear lady have been assigned this test: / For one half minute, kiss the one on your left._

Hermione laughed at her block’s orders. “I guess my name is too hard to work into rhymed couplets. Well, Severus?” She dimpled at the dark-haired man sitting to her left.

He heaved an overly-dramatic sigh. “Hardly fair, it’s not even my turn and I’m already being challenged!”

“The professor doth protest too much, methinks!” shouted a twinkling Minerva from across the room. “Go on, Severus. I’ll keep time.”

Severus shot the woman a grin before turning back to Hermione as she raised her lips to his in a light kiss. He allowed his eyes to close and his hand to rest on her shoulder, then did his best to ignore the catcalls and cheers from the gathered sots as he refrained from deepening the kiss. He inhaled, breathing in the subtle apricot and spice scent of her and allowed her actions to guide his. Her lips were soft, but remained steadfastly shut against his. They separated as Minerva called the time, each avoiding the other’s eyes as they leaned back and regarded the room at large. Hermione quickly levitated her block and placed it in the center of the last two at the top of the tower.

“Oh for Circe’s sake, Hermione! That was positively virginal!” goaded Rolanda, rolling her eyes.

“The block didn’t ask for tongues, dear,” Minerva admonished. “Severus your turn.”

Sitting up a bit straighter, Severus turned his attention toward the blocks and confidently summoned one from the exact middle of the tower. He grasped it and looked down, waiting for the words to appear.

_You, Severus, refuse to rush / But kindly state, who is your crush?_

The room laughed. Severus raised his eyebrows at the block and looked up at the smiling faces before sipping at his drink (it actually wasn’t half bad, now that he was a number of glasses in). “I hardly think that’s much of a secret, but if the room wants to know I have no objection to confessing my attraction to Professor Granger. Or hers to me.” He smirked at the widened eyes of Neville and Horace and tried to avoid the knowing smile on Minerva’s face. He sent his block back to the top of the tower, again aligning it precisely, and was relieved to feel Hermione’s head return to rest on his shoulder. Severus thought he caught the glint of something bordering on jealousy in Mohinder’s eyes, but on later reflection decided it must have been the shifting lights.

Aurora went next, which resulted in the first Waterfall challenge of the evening. Aurora lifted her glass and proceeded to drink from it as each person around the circle lifted theirs, knowing that they could only lower their glass when the person to their right lowered theirs. Aurora -- whose tolerance had been legend at Hogwarts for some time -- drained the liquid in her glass and continued to drink as it magically refilled itself. When she had been drinking for a good fifteen seconds, she lowered her glass and grinned at the somewhat glazed faces in front of her as the glasses lowered, one by one. _Good Ceridwen, if we continue to drink like this we’ll never make it til midnight!_ Severus looked into his glass and realized that at this point he had no idea just how much of the rotgut “gin” he’d consumed thus far. _Better take more than one Sober-Up before bed tonight, else I’ll be worthless the rest of the weekend._
The game continued as Rolanda, Sybil, and Horace each took their turns. Rolanda had gotten a group assignment (everyone loses one piece of clothing), Sybil had to sit in Thurston’s lap for five minutes (which made the Divination professor giggle like a fourteen year-old whilst Thurston looked desperately for a safe place to put his hands), and Slughorn had to make his belly talk (which mostly served to make the entire gathering want to self-obliviate).

As the game continued, several humiliating secrets emerged (apparently Minerva had managed to lose her virginity in the gamekeeper’s hut -- thankfully long before Hagrid took residence) and more alcohol than was wise was consumed. The tower built ever higher, becoming significantly less stable. The first time it fell, Hagrid assigned Filius the task of singing a horribly uncomfortable sea-shanty to the group (Who knew that Flitwick had such a lovely singing voice? Or that he was capable of putting it to use singing downright pornographic ditties?).

By the time the fourth round began, the tower was destabilizing again, but everyone was laughing so hard that it didn’t really matter. The gathered crowd was crocked to the point of giddiness and several members of the crowd were missing articles of clothing. Neville was inexplicably sitting in his undershirt and pants, despite the fact that he had not received a dare to strip anything. Severus blearily thought that the boy looked about two sips away from passing out; oddly, Luna was the only lucid one in the group, despite the fact that she’d been drinking steadily the entire evening. Not for the first time, Severus marvelled at the alcohol tolerance of magical folk; a Muggle would be on the way to hospital to have his stomach pumped by now.

When Hermione’s turn came ’round again, she was instructed to take two shots out of Mohinder’s lap without using her hands. Watching Hermione stretch her mouth around the conjured shot glass and stick her head anywhere near Mohinder’s crotch made Severus actively want to strangle the man. For his part, Mohinder sat still, blushing as Hermione completed her task. She returned to her seat and carefully set her block on top of the teetering tower, sagging against Severus when her task was complete. Unfortunately, she slid down against his shoulder a bit just as he was levitating his block and caused his hand to jerk; Severus watched in horror as the tower toppled to the floor and the rest of the group crowed in delight.

He sighed in defeat and turned toward the cause of his current predicament. “Well, Hermione. I believe you get to challenge me to the task of your choice...despite the fact that you caused me to tip the blocks over.”

Hermione colored and giggled (giggled!), turning toward Severus with a manic glint in her eye. “You said earlier that you hadn’t had enough to drink to dance. Well we’ve all had enough to drink now. I think you should dance for us, Severus!”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Alone?” She nodded, with a little smirk on her face.

“Unfair, Hermione!” shouted McGonagall, who had Slughorn’s tie wrapped around her head. “You did make Severus topple the tower. I believe they should share the challenge.” The other professors quickly shouted their agreement with various degrees of slurred speech.

Severus rolled his eyes but nodded his head to accept his punishment. “That seems fair to me.” I can always just lead her through a simplified waltz. There’s no reason to put on a show.

Suddenly Flitwick piped up from his side of the room. “And make it shut the mushic. No wizarding waltzes to shexy shongs, Sheverush.” The little man’s eyes glinted mischievously in the low and shifting lights.

With that, Aurora wormed her arm out from beneath a semi-conscious Rolanda and flicked her wand to raise the volume of the music, starting a song that seemed to be all percussion and bass. Severus
thought it sounded like something that would play in a Muggle strip-club, but rose unsteadily to his feet and held out a hand to bring Hermione to hers.

They took their places at the center of the room. Severus allowed himself to sway a bit to the music, realizing that he was feeling somewhat less self-conscious than he likely should. He looked down at his dance partner and placed his hands on her waist, gently gathering her into a loose embrace as they began to sway in the center of the room. He felt Hermione’s arms go around his neck and was grateful for the fact that they were both amongst those who had managed to keep most of their clothing (they’d both lost their shoes).

“Come on you two! This isn’t the bloody Yule Ball!” called Aurora from her spot on the far wall. Severus rolled his eyes before sending a questioning glance at Hermione. She smiled up at him and removed the distance between their bodies, pressing up against him as the intensity of the music built. Their hips pressed together as his leg insinuated itself between hers; he felt her body begin move against his in a slow undulating motion and suddenly realized that he was completely out of his depth.

He leaned in toward Hermione and whispered in her ear under the pulse of the music. “When I implied that I could dance at all, I meant the wizarding waltz or formal dance. I don’t know how to do this.” He realized that he sounded slightly panicked and hoped that his dance floor ineptitude wouldn’t put Hermione off of him.

She smiled into his shoulder and turned her head to whisper back. “Don’t think about it so much. This kind of dancing is more about feeling. Listen to the music and the lyrics and let your body do the rest.”

Severus tried to do as she said and tuned into the voice of the sultry lyrics that were now floating through the air. Her eyes / She’s on the dark side / Neutralize / Every man in sight. He allowed his own eyes to drift half shut and allowed himself to drift with the music, but still felt stilted and awkward despite the curvy woman wrapped around his leg. Why on earth did she make this her dare? This is insane. I’ve never danced like this. She had to know that! What if --“

“Stop thinking, Severus,” she whispered. He felt her hand move from his neck to the back of his head, drawing it down to meet hers in a slow kiss. Embarrassed -- this wasn’t a part of the task! -- Severus tried to pull back only find that Hermione held his head in place. She deepened the kiss as they continued to sway; the rest of the room seemed to melt away as he concentrated on the feel of her lips against his, feeling the pulse of the music and the press of her body. It’s like syncopated sex, he thought before he felt her tongue trace the outline of his lips, seeking entrance. He groaned as her tongue slipped forward to tangle with his and felt himself slowly grinding his hips forward against hers in time with the music. He desperately tried to ignore his increasing arousal as the moved against each other until the song came to an end.

When the music slowed to nothing more than a clicking percussive beat, he broke the kiss and drew back to stare at her. She seemed to suddenly recall their surroundings and glanced around at the silent room. Every person in the room, save a lightly snoring flying instructor, was staring at the couple as though they’d grown extra heads. Minerva’s cheeks were flushed from watching something so intimate and Neville was staring with unabashed fascination.

“I think that ends this evening’s entertainment.” Aurora whispered.

Severus nodded tersely pulled away from woman in his arm. She looked a bit poleaxed, which pleased him immensely, so he drew his wand and wordlessly replaced their shoes on their feet. He took her hand into his gently drew her toward the door, not bothering to say his farewells to the rest of the gathering. No one in the room spoke a word as they left.
Severus was grateful that they didn’t encounter any clandestine couples in the hall as they made their way back to his tower rooms; he wasn’t entirely sure he would have had the heart to speak to them and he was damned sure that he couldn’t have done so without revealing his own less-than-sober state. He felt his wards shift as he opened the door to his quarters, pulling Hermione into the room behind him. Before he could so much as gesture to light the sconces in his darkened sitting room, he found himself pushed against the door as the witch attacked his mouth. He responded by gathering her close and lifting her off the floor, keeping his lips pressed to hers as they moved toward the sofa.

He lay her against the soft leather cushions as he stretched out above her, and her lips parted to allow him entrance. She was like a live flame in his arms, devouring his mouth as her hands pulled his shirt from his the waistband of his trousers. He heard her moan when her busy hands encountered the flesh under his shirt. The breathy pants and murmurs she made only served to inflame his ardor, and he found his hips grinding into hers in an unconscious mimicry of the dance they’d shared just minutes before in a more public space. Severus could feel the heat pulsing from her core and groaned, moving his hand to palm her breast through the thin fabric of her blouse.

“Please,” she whispered when their lips broke contact, arching her hips upward to press against his arousal. “Severus, please.”

He returned his lips to hers, moving his hands to make quick work of the buttons of her blouse and spreading it open to reveal the soft skin beneath. Her nails dug into the flesh of his arms as he skimmed his hands down the sides of her torso and up again, returning one hand to her lace-covered breast as the other moved to her back and pressed her more tightly against him.

Her hands flew to his waist, working their way between their bodies to begin unfastening his belt. She fumbled with the clasp, giggling against his lips as his tongue swept back into her mouth. She tasted like the gin they’d been drinking all night and he groaned against her, fighting the urge to thrust his hips against her and crush her hands between them. Suddenly he paused.

Her lips taste like gin because she isn’t sober. With a shuddering breath, he broke the kiss and sat up, ignoring her mewl of disappointment as his weight left hers.

Severus motioned with his hands to light the sconces and the fire in the room, and immediately wished he hadn’t. He looked at the rumpled woman laying on his couch, propped up on her elbows and staring at him with passion in her eyes. Her shirt gaped open, providing a view of the champagne lace he’d had beneath his fingertips just moments before. Her skirt was hitched up to the top of her thighs and all he could think was that she looked so ridiculously fuckable that it hurt. He fought to catch his breath, trying to keep his gaze from drifting to her swollen lips and half-naked torso. He watched her, cursing himself silently, as her gaze focused on his and as the passion shifted to concern.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He replied cautiously. “Neither of us is sober, Hermione. We shouldn’t do this tonight.”

“I don’t mind,” she said, smiling coyly.

“I do.” He scraped a hand over his face and sat back on his heels, her legs still trapped between his. “I don’t want my first time with you to be the result of too much drink. I’m not after a drunken quickie, Hermione.” He shot her a dark look, then glanced away again.
She let out a sigh and flopped back against the cushions of the couch, squeezing her eyes shut. “You’re right. I really hate it, but you’re right.” She sat up and began buttoning her blouse. Her wild curls drifted forward to obscure her face.

“I told you that I wanted to take it slow. I meant that.”

She shot him a dark look as she rose from her seat. “I know. But that doesn’t mean I’m not disappointed.”

He smiled a bit. “Well, that’s something then.”

“I should probably go back to my rooms...but I’d really like to stay. Just to sleep?”

Severus looked at her for a long moment and nodded. With a quick gesture the sofa extended to become deep enough for two. He wedged his lean form between the back of the sofa and hers, then drew her back against his body to spoon her, facing them toward the snapping fire. Another wave of his hand had an afghan settling over them as she pillowed her head on her arm. He pressed a kiss atop her curls, inhaling that wonderful scent that was so purely her, before simply resting his head against her mad hair. They lay there in silence, allowing their breathing to slow and their passion to cool as his hand caressing her arm. Allowing their eyes to close, they drifted off to sleep together in the dim light of his rooms.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter today, followed by a lengthier one on Sunday. I haven’t ever written a lot of intimate behavior, so I hope you’ll all forgive any stilted awkwardness that may appear in this update. (For those disappointed for the lack of smutty sex in this chapter, a caveat: I'm trying to write about a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. In my book, that means that drunken sex can't be a thing because Drunken!Hermione != Consenting!Hermione.)

The song to which I refer is Massive Attack's "Angel", released in 1998, which is still one of my favorite down tempo sexy songs. (Also their Paradise Circus which was, alas, released entirely too late for me to use it in this chapter.)
Severus was flying. He was high, high above the towers of Hogwarts, watching the sun glint off the wet tile roof of the castle and soaring through clouds. The air was cool up this high, and he found himself extending his arms...wings?...and craning his neck around to look around him. He wasn’t alone. He could hear the beat of wings and rustle of feathers nearby, though he could not see who flew near him...He felt comforted by the knowledge that there was someone else with him, and contented himself with listening to the rustle of feathers as he -- they -- floated on the breeze.

Severus awoke to the sound of feathers on the breeze and a piece of hair up his nose. Perturbed, he slotted one eye open only find a mass of chestnut curls obscuring his vision. The rustle came again and he sat up cautiously to glance over his sleeping companion’s shoulder.

“Good morning, sleepy.”

Severus hissed as he sat up, wincing at the light that filtered in through the high windows of the sitting room and at the dull ache pressing at the bottom of his skull. He felt a bottle being pressed into his hand and peered down at the pale green liquid Hermione had given him. Recognizing it as his own hangover relief potion, he removed the cork and drained the bottle before flopping onto his back and flinging an arm over his eyes.

“I hope you don’t mind. I woke up feeling like death, so I raided your stash.”

Severus simply waved a hand in dismissal and rasped out, “S’fine. Less talking, more shushing.” He felt Hermione’s shoulders shake, but she otherwise lapsed into silence as Severus lay still, waiting for the potion to take effect. As the pounding in his head began to subside, he heard the familiar rustling noise again. “What’s that sound?”

“Shh. I’m shushing now. There’s a hungover man in the room.”

“Very funny.” He rolled to his side and looked over her shoulder and saw that she was holding a sheaf of papers. “Aren’t those mine?”

“Mmm hmm.” She seemed rather engrossed.

He rolled his eyes and gingerly climbed over her body. The step-dancers in his head seemed to be tiring as the potion took effect, but other needs had begun to make themselves known. He shuffled
off to the loo to relieve his over-full bladder. When he opened the door to return to the sitting room and thought better of it, returning to the little half bath to pour a measure of mouth cleansing solution into his mouth and rid himself of his hungover something-crawled-in-my-mouth-and-died-there breath. Feeling marginally more human, he made his way back toward the curvy witch cuddled under the afghan on his sofa and re-inserted himself between her back and the cushions.

Hermione made a contented little sound in her throat and scooted more firmly against him. “Have you been through these?” she asked with interest.

“You mean the list of names from the 1st anniversary ball, I assume?” He draped an arm around her torso and stroked his hand over the wrinkled fabric of her blouse.

She twisted her head to look back at him. “Yes. I was wondering if you had any idea who might have cursed you.”

He sighed and let his hand rest. Apparently somebody wasn’t in the mood for a cuddle. “I looked through them. There’s no one obvious...almost everyone there fought in the battle or works for the new ministry.”

“What about the Malfoys?”

He looked down at her and pressed a kiss to her pert little nose. “It’s not Lucius. He was one of the people encouraging me to come back from my travels and take care of my affairs here in Britain myself. He said he was sick of playing steward.” Lucius and Narcissa were the only friends he had left outside of Hogwarts; he would bet the contents of his Gringotts account that Lucius would hex the bollocks off whomever did obliviate him, if only to have Severus owe him another favor.

She nodded slowly and turned back to the papers. “He didn’t really seem the type anyway. He’d be one to ruin your reputation or bankrupt you if you angered him, not steal your memories and send you off to the continent for a few years. There’s no one else on this list that seems obvious. Maybe some of the witches and wizards on the Wizengamot? Several of them were not in support of your Order of Merlin.”

He made a humming noise in throat. “That’s what I thought too. I’ve made a list of names and sent it to Lucius. He’s more likely to get information out of Wizengamot members than I am. Now why don’t you put those down for a bit?” He waited until she complied and shifted until she was partially under him on the couch. “I can think of much better things to do on a lazy Saturday morning.”

Hermione giggled as he nuzzled at her neck. “What about going slow?”

He grinned wolfishly before pressing his lips against the strong line of her jaw. “Who said anything about going fast?” Very little else was said for the next hour.

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Severus emerged from the bath in a cloud of steam and with a towel draped around his hips. Scrubbing at his hair with a second towel, he moved to his wardrobe and grabbed a pair of jeans and a grey jumper. As much as he’d prefer to move around campus in a t-shirt and jacket this afternoon, the eventuality of running into another student made him opt for a slightly more formal version of casual wear. He’d vowed when he returned to Hogwarts to take up the D.A.D.A. professorship that he would not spend every weekend trapped in his teaching robes, and thus far he’d managed to keep
his promise.

He was running slightly behind his mental schedule for the day. He’d hoped to go into Knockturn Alley this morning and purchase some of the rarer ingredients for his personal lab, visit the more traditional apothecary for some new brewing supplies (his favorite cauldron had, sadly, rusted whilst he was on the continent), and to make a trip to Madam Malkin’s for new dress robes -- Minerva had informed him the previous week that he was expected at the now-annual Yule Ball, and his old ones were shabby and moth-eaten. Malkin’s might have to wait for another day, but he still had time to get supplies for his research if he hurried. He needed to be back in time for dinner so that he and Hermione would have time to do memory work this evening.

Grabbing his jacket on the way out the door, he hurried down the stairs (not quite a run, lest the students feel that he held himself above the rules) and made his way toward the apparition point. He passed a knot of fourth year Ravenclaws sitting on the grass by the path, enjoying the last of the cool autumn weather before the Scottish snows set in, but missed the surprised looks on their faces as he rushed passed. He found himself smiling a bit as he jogged along the gravel path to the school gates. He might be pressed for time now, but he found he couldn’t quite regret losing more than an hour of his morning to the rather agreeable experience of snogging one Hermione Granger.

He knew that Hermione had been frustrated with him the night before -- hell, he’d been more than frustrated the night before -- but he’d meant what he said about taking things slowly. What Hermione didn’t seem to realize is that taking things slowly also meant taking the time to, well, woo her. Severus knew that he’d already had more second chances at life than most people are given; he wasn’t going to screw this one up by rushing headlong into what could be an unbelievably fulfilling relationship with a willing, mature, and (Merlin) beautiful young woman by ballsing it up from the start like some oversexed Weasley. She’d been hurt not too long ago. It was time to show her how an honorable man courted a woman, and that did not include acting like a randy teenager. Even if he felt like one.

Call him old-fashioned, but he was rather looking forward to romancing her.

With a quick wave to Hagrid, who appeared to be tending to a rather large slug-creature in his pumpkin patch, Severus was through the gates and at the apparition point quickly enough. He turned on the spot and landed at the corresponding point outside Gringotts, rushing in to make a quick withdrawal before wending his way down to Knockturn Alley. He ducked into Mulpepper’s first to acquire a small shipment of herbs he’d ordered sent in from the Falkland Islands when he’d accepted his post at Hogwarts. While Mulpepper’s assistant fetched the crate from the back storeroom, Severus made sure to stock up on both Moondew and Moly for his continued experiments in perfecting a vaccine to the Imperius curse (a lofty venture that had thus far led to nothing but a series of very dead ends). He paid for his purchases, shrinking them down and pocketing them in his jacket before rushing back out to Diagon Alley proper. A quick stop into Slug and Jiggers, one size 2 copper cauldron, a pyrite stirring rod, and a pound of beetle eyes later (there was a sale!), and he was off again, amazed at the time he was making. He stopped into Madam Malkin’s somewhat breathless and managed to snag the proprietess’ attention. Tatty Malkin herself strode forward when she recognized her customer.

“Professor Snape! I’m shocked. You’ve set foot in my shop twice in one season! If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to cut a swath through Hogwarts!” The round little woman stood on her toes to buss Severus’ cheeks, then took him by the elbow to steer him toward the men’s side of the shop.

“Nonsense, Madam. I’m here for some new dress robes, which I neglected to purchase when I was last here. I was not aware that Minerva had instituted a yearly Yule Ball and I find I’m without
appropriate garments for such an occasion.”

“Of course, dear boy! Do you want ready-made or custom? Custom will take longer, of course, but there’s still plenty of time until the holidays.”

Severus scanned his eyes over the ready-made robes on the rack next to the seamstress and found none were quite to his taste. “I think I would like you to make a custom set of robes for me. In green, perhaps? Something opulent without being ostentatious. I don’t wish to look like Lucius.” He smirked a bit as the witch fluffed up a bit at that last remark.

“Lord Malfoy, as you well know, has not frequented my shop for many years. I believe his Lady wife prefers a French modiste to my wares.” She sniffed at the insult.

“Well, it’d hardly do for me to look as though I were putting on foreign airs, now would it?” He fingered the a bolt of dark green -- nearly black -- velvet. “I think I’d like my robes made from this bolt. With a silk lining? In...this?” He reached out to skim his hand over a black silk shot through with dark green threads. “I’m not sure of the piping.”

Malkin’s eyes narrowed as she studied Severus’ choices. “Yes, I think that would look very well. You’ll want to do a more modern, cut-away design I think, otherwise the lining would never show. I believe you’ll want some proper dress attire beneath the robes, unless you aim to shock the general population at Hogwarts.” She twinkled at him a bit at the implied lewdness of her remark.

Severus chuckled good naturedly and ignored the shocked look on the woman’s face. Merlin. Does everyone have to look at me like I’ve grown a second head if I laugh?

“Yes, I should think so. The robes will be quite warm, so let’s keep it simple shall we? Waistcoat, button-leg trousers, and a mandarin collared shirt with button closure rather than cravat. I don’t want green -- I’d prefer to avoid looking like a walking stalk of asparagus. And black would be too sombre. What would you suggest, Madam?”

The shopkeeper narrowed her eyes and studied Severus over her little square spectacles. “A grey, I think, shot through with a black stripe. I have just the thing.” She flicked her wand and two bolts of cloth came sailing out of the back store room toward the pair. “I have these two,” she said, gesturing toward a charcoal grey with a thin black stripe and a medium grey with a thicker black stripe with metallic edging. Both were a soft wool and both looked obscenely expensive.

“The first, I think. I like the subtlety of the thinner stripe, and I’ve never been one for flash. White for the shirt, I think. Classic.”

“Excellent!” Severus could practically see the woman rubbing her hands together at the promise of such a sale. “I’ll have my girls start on this right away. Do I need new measurements?”

“I believe my measurements from a month ago should still be appropriate.”

“Then I’ll have your robes sent directly to you at Hogwarts when they are complete. Is three weeks from now sufficient?”

Severus bowed toward the woman with respect. “That is more than sufficient. Thank you, Madam Malkin.” He quickly paid the bill and saw his way out the door, casting a quick Tempus to check the time. He had two hours before dinner in the Great Hall. Apparently he shouldn’t have been panicked about finishing his errands on time.

He paused as he left Madam Malkin’s at the flower stall directly in front of her shop and considered. If I’m going to romance Hermione, I should do it properly. Fishing into his robes again, he paid the
florist two galleons for a bouquet of Mezereum, Russian sage, and Valerian. He didn’t know if Hermione spoke the language of flowers, but even if she didn’t the bouquet made for a lovely offering without being overwrought. At least the flowers would be useful once the blooms had faded. I’m probably overthinking this. I’m sure she’ll appreciate the sentiment if nothing else. Doesn’t every woman like flowers? Not that Hermione is like every woman. Not that I even have experience with that many women. Shut up Severus.

He turned to walk back toward the apparition point outside Gringotts when a sudden realization pulled him up short. September 10. Hermione’s birthday is in September, isn’t it? She was always the oldest student in her class. With a sigh, he turned back toward Diagon Alley; clearly, a romantic partner should get his paramour a gift for her birthday. What does one give a new girlfriend (he winced at the term) for her 26th birthday? A book seemed like an obvious choice for the dedicated academic, but that seemed utterly unromantic. It was likely too early for jewelry. He wouldn’t know where to start there anyway, though he made a mental note to consult with Lucius or, rather, Draco about such purchases in the future.

Severus was walking down down the cobblestone alley casting desperate looks at various shop windows when he found himself outside Slug and Jiggers once more. A small display caught his eye and just as rapidly inspiration struck. Without pausing to second-guess his decision, he went back into the apothecary and purchased what he would need to create a gift that was both personal and appropriate for this early stage of his relationship with Hermione. He felt quite pleased with himself as he left wizarding London to make his way back to Hogwarts.

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When he arrived back at the castle with disillusioned flowers in hand, students were just beginning to trickle into the Great Hall for dinner. With a silent curse, he moved briskly toward the stairs so he could shed his jacket for some more concealing robes. As much as he preferred the comfort of his muggle clothing, he still felt rather insecure without that armor of those thick robes obscuring him from view.

He hurried past a small knot of girls headed into the hall when he heard a small gasp. “Professor?”

Severus groaned internally before turning to face the girl who’d addressed him. “Yes, Miss Windle?”

She gave him a small smile. “You look...different. Sir.”

“It is the weekend, Miss Windle. Did you have a question for me?”

“Oh, um...n-no oh YES sir. Um. A few of us were wondering if you meant what you said in class on Friday. About awarding points for anyone who managed a corporeal patronus this week?”

“I generally do not say things I do not mean, Miss Windle. Is that all?”

“Oh. Um, yes...thank you, sir.” The girl scurried off toward the hall to meet up with her giggling friends. Severus rolled his eyes as he turned back toward the stairs. Merlin save me from the gossiping hordes.

“That was a bit brusque, don’t you think Severus?” asked Minerva from the landing.

Severus paused to address the Headmistress. “I don’t know why she stopped me to ask such an inane
question. I checked the practice room wards before I left and no one has managed the corporeal patronus yet.”

Minerva clucked her tongue and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, dropping her voice so that only he could hear. “Surely after all these years you recognize the signs of teenage infatuation when you see it?” Severus shot her an alarmed look. “Miss Windle and, I believe, her friend Miss Clocher have developed a bit of a crush on you Severus. You hadn’t noticed?”

“I had not,” he bit off.

“Well, you do cut quite a figure in your Muggle clothes. And of course they all know you’re a war hero. It’s likely harmless, but I suspect several students have developed an obsession for the dark and mysterious Professor Snape.” The woman had the temerity to twinkle at him. “And a certain Transfiguration Professor as well, I see.” She slid a look toward Hermione as she walked into foyer from the direction of the library and shot Severus a bright smile. The younger woman looked fit to burst at the sight of him.

He sent a tight smile to Hermione before returning his attention to his employer. “Minerva, have I ever told you to mind your own business?”

“Many times, Severus. I stopped listening ages ago. Now go put your things away and come down to dinner with the rest of us.” The older woman trotted down the stairs and into the Great Hall, taking Hermione’s arm and heading into dinner.

Severus glanced around him furtively and caught at least one set of female eyes on him. *Dammit.* That’s the last thing I needed.

He rushed off to his rooms and thankfully encountered no more adoring female students. *Since when am I fodder for adolescent fantasies? This was never an issue before.* He quickly summoned a tall vase of water and *finited* the charm on on the flowers, replacing it with a stasis charm. He would give the flowers to Hermione after dinner this evening. After placing the rest of his purchases in his laboratory, he turned to his rooms and pulled on one of his older robes -- the ones that concealed his clothing best. He was feeling decidedly uncomfortable with the attention Miss Windle and her friends had shown him.

Rushing back down stairs, he used the teachers entrance to slip behind the head table between Filius and Hermione. Steaming lamb stew, crusty bread, and a delicate chocolate torte were already laid out on the table, and he lost no time in serving himself.

Hermione turned her head toward them and scooped up some stew, blowing on it to cool it as she asked, “Where were you off to today?”

Severus stirred his own stew to help it cool. “Diagon Alley. I needed some supplies that could not be found at the apothecary in Hogsmeade. And you? How did you spend your afternoon?”

She politely chewed and swallowed before replying. “I spent most of my day in the library, researching some of the intricacies of memory charms. I think I may have figured out which spell was used on you. We should talk after dinner.”

*That explains her smile in the hall. I’m surprised her hand didn’t shoot into the air in an attempt to gain my attention.* “I look forward to it. Pensieve work after?”

“How fares your head today, Severus?” Filius asked.
Severus turned his attention to the Charms Professor and grimaced. “I woke feeling like death...forgot to take one of the potions with me when I left last night.”

“I noticed. You did seem in a rush to leave, though I’ll venture you had much better stock in your own rooms than what Horace brought. I do hope the remainder of your evening was...memorable.” The man waggled his eyebrows at Severus suggestively.

“I’m afraid I fell asleep almost immediately after escorting Progress Granger home, Filius,” Severus lied smoothly. The gossipy little man had the temerity to look disappointed, but did not press the point further. “I’ve been hearing good things about those practice rooms you’ve reserved, Severus. I’m wondering if I shouldn’t encourage my students to use them to practice their charm work between classes as well.”

“I don’t see why that would be a problem, Filius. Though I suspect you’ll need to incentivize the work a bit; I’ve offered to award house points to those who master spells beyond the level needed for exams. The chocolate supply in the room doesn’t hurt either.”

“Yes. Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask you, are you busy next Saturday afternoon?” The little man looked at Severus expectantly.

“Not that I know of, no. Why?”

“It’s the first meeting of the Hogwarts Dueling Club for the year. I’d like to put on a bit of an exhibition for the students, and you’re one the best duelers here.”

Severus nodded his head respectfully. “You’re too kind, Filius. I’m rather out of practice, but I would be happy to attend the meeting as I did in years past. Who would you match me against?”

“I had thought to duel you myself.”

Severus cleared his throat. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I seem to recall that you managed to make a good showing at the International Dueling Championships two years ago.”

Flitwick nearly squeaked with pride. “Third place! Not bad for an old codger like me. Of course, I’m nowhere near what I was in my prime. Loganov was a devil in our duel. Absolutely eviscerated me.”

Severus allowed himself a low laugh. “I know. I managed to attend the semi-finals and finals during my stay in Russia. You did well, Filius, but Loganov and Koscielski were both superior. I believe it has something to do with the training methods in the old Eastern Bloc. They aren’t afraid of to let their students off the leash...there seems to be a belief that the next war is always just around the corner.”

“You may be right, Severus. I think I prefer your method of teaching, though. Help the students prevent the next war from happening while arming them with the knowledge to survive.” Filius nodded approvingly.

He cleared his throat. “Yes, well. I’m happy to demonstrate that you are still the superior dueler and that my skills are not infallible. Perhaps it will drive home how important these skills can be, even if it will be a structured fight. Just try not to crush me too badly, eh?”

The Charms Professor chuckled as they finished their meal. “Just a friendly duel, Severus. Miss Granger has agreed to face off against Minerva as well. It should make for an interesting club opener.”
Severus turned his head to Hermione, knowing full well that the witch had a mean streak for hexes. “I have no doubt.”

He’d only been back in his rooms long enough to shed his robes when a knock sounded at his door. Severus opened it to find Hermione clad in jeans and a jumper that left very little of her figure to the imagination. She was clutching a notebook to her chest in a move so reminiscent of the swotty teenager he’d once taught that he couldn’t help but smile at her.

“Hi, Severus,” she said, rising on her toes to place a gentle kiss on his lips before moving into his sitting room.

“Drink?” he gestured toward the small bar cart near the fire.

“Mmm, not tonight thanks. I think my head is still in recovery from our time in the land of gin.”

He chuckled and moved to pour himself a short measure of cognac, setting the snifter on the side table. “Wait here a moment. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared into the dining room for a moment and returned with the vase of flowers he’d procured that afternoon. “These are for you.”

“Oh, how lovely! Thank you Severus, but what’s the occasion?” she looked at him questioningly.

He felt color rising to his cheeks at the question. “No occasion. I just thought they’d suit you.”

She made a pleased humming noise in her throat as she ran her hands over the blossoms. “Then I like theme even more. Just-because flowers are the best kind.” She set the vase down on the side table and slipped her arms around his waist, nuzzling her head against his chest. “You’re the sweetest man.”

“Just don’t go spreading that around. I’m having enough trouble with my students as it is.”

Her muffled laugh was throaty and made his chest tingle. “Minerva mentioned that. Are you honestly surprised?”

“Frankly, yes.” He pressed his lips to her hair, inhaling the scent of her shampoo. “I never had to deal with this before. Students didn’t develop crushes on the Great Bat.”

“That’s what you think!” she scoffed. “Girls have always been fascinated with you, Severus. You’re like something out of a Gothic novel. Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Rochester, brought to life.” She leaned back to look at his face, smirking at his dropped jaw.

“What?”

“You really didn’t know? Oh, Severus,” she laughed. “Several of us had crushes on you at one point or another. Parvati. Helen. Millicent. Me.”

He looked at her and shot her a predatory grin. “You? Really, Miss Granger. How terribly inappropriate. Teachers are not for ogling.”

“Oh yes, you were. I spent hours staring at you during potions fourth and fifth year.” She shivered a little and pressed a kiss to his jaw, then slid her lips up to her ear. “It was right after I read Wuthering
Heights. I fancied you as my own personal Heathcliff.”

He couldn’t help it -- he laughed outright. “There’s an image.”

“Well, you have to admit that you were a fabulous brooder.”

“I’ll admit no such thing.” He drew her down to the sofa so he could more easily return her teasing kisses, touching his lips to her temple, then the corner of her lips.

“Hmm. You know, I think memory work and charm theory can wait for until tomorrow, don’t you?” she said, shifting so that she was stretched across his lap with her arms around his neck.

“Professor Granger, you have the best ideas.” And without another word, Severus bent his head toward Hermione’s, happy to end his day much as it had began.
Seeds

Chapter Summary

Hermione explains what her time in the library revealed, and Severus discovers that a lazy Sunday at Hogwarts is just the cure for a bad mood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning…

Severus woke slowly -- a luxury he’d not had for most of his life and had learned to revel in over the past few years. He was almost obnoxiously warm due to a certain curvy little witch and her the weight of her limbs on his chest and hips. *Sweet Circe, the woman is a furnace when she sleeps.* He peered down at the mop of wild curls currently trying to make their way into his nose and mouth and couldn’t quite suppress a wry grin. This was the second night she’d spent with him and despite the fact that they’d been fully clothed both nights he couldn’t help but think this was marked progress in their relationship. Apparently he wasn’t the only one who’d noted his closeness to a woman. Severus winced a bit as his morning erection pressed against the zip of his pants; apparently it had noticed that there was a soft female in the bed and oh, by the way, he could probably have her now if he just reached out and...

He cut those thoughts off with a snap, choosing instead to slide his (completely numb) arm out from beneath his companion and extricate his body from beneath her (Gods, superheated!) appendages so he could relieve himself. Once a certain pesky pant-intruder was again quiescent, he returned to the bedroom and leaned against the doorframe, looking at the sleeping witch in his rooms. Severus reflected that he liked the look of Hermione in his bed, even if her hair was doing its impression of the giant squid attacking his headboard and pillows. She looked peaceful in her sleep and it occurred to him that this must be the only time when he couldn’t see the thoughts racing across her face.

He checked the time and noted that it was still early -- just past eight. Deciding to let her sleep awhile longer, he quickly changed into workout clothes and padded downstairs to roll out his exercise mat. He cast a quick notice-me-not and silencing charm before beginning the set of exercises that were his near-daily routine. Just because she *knew* he practiced didn’t mean he wanted her to be able to watch him contort and rhythmically breathe his way through the set.

An hour later he was drenched in sweat but feeling much more limber than he had upon waking. He called for a house-elf and asked that tea and breakfast pastries be placed in the dining room before climbing the circular stair to the bath. He peeked into his bedroom and noted that Hermione was now taking up the entire bed by laying diagonally with her feet dangling off one end and her hair hanging off the other. And that she was snoring. Loudly. With a little smirk, he gathered pants, slacks, and a soft jumper went to wash.

He found her sitting cross-legged in the midst of the bed when he emerged from the bath. “Good morning,” he said, tilting the corners of his mouth into a small smile.

She smiled in return, lifting a hand in an attempt to reign in the beast that was her hair. “‘Morning. How long have you been up?”
“Awhile. Breakfast should be down in the dining room if you want to eat.”

“Mmm. Tea would be wonderful.” She slid off the side of the bed and walked up to give him a peck on the cheek before moving toward the loo.

Severus reached out and grasped her wrist as she passed. “That’s it? Just a peck on the cheek and off for food?”

Hermione blushed before replying. “I have morning breath. Let me freshen up and I’ll say good morning properly, ‘kay?”

He snorted, but released her wrist so she could scamper across the hall. “There’s a mouth cleansing potion under the sink,” he called as the door clicked shut. She’s clearly the daughter of dentists, he mused while pulling on his socks. Grinning at the sound of running water and flushing toilet, he headed back downstairs to pour the tea. There was certainly something comforting about morning routines.

Not much later, Hermione brushed croissant crumbs from her jumper and reached to top off her mug of tea. “So I was in the library yesterday reading up on memory charms.”

Severus grunted a bit as he sipped at his own cuppa. “Something I’ve been remiss to do myself. It hardly seems fair that you’re doing my homework for me.”

She flashed him a cheeky smile. “Yes, well I’m rather used to it. You can pay me back by grading a stack of transfiguration essays when I’m pressed for time later in the semester, which is certainly more than the boys ever did. Anyway, I think obliviate granum was cast on you.”

“Seed obliviation? I’ve never heard of it.”

She smirked. “I’m not terribly surprised. It wasn’t very well known until histories of the Second Wizarding War began to emerge about three years ago, and you were somewhere on the continent at the time. You missed the scandal that came after all the trials were done and the lead-up to Voldemort’s coup was exposed. You know Fudge is in the Ministry prison now, right?”

“I didn’t, no. What’s Fudge got to do with this?”

“Everything! He created seed obliviation.”

Severus blinked at the witch in confusion. “Alright. Let me see if I understand you. You believe I have been obliviated with a modified version of the spell created by none other than our former dunderhead of a Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge?”

“Yes? On which point was I unclear?”

“Only all of them?” he exclaimed, standing up to pace around the dining room. “First, I find it hard to believe that Fudge could create any kind of modified spell. But second, he wasn’t even at the ball! He’d fallen into disgrace at that point and was living off in Cornwall somewhere! Hermione, this doesn’t make sense.”

“It would perfect sense if you’d sit down and let me finish explaining.” He opened his mouth to snort
a reply -- “without interruption, please.” Severus’ closed his mouth with a snap of his teeth and returned to his chair.

“Do go on, Professor Granger,” he snarled sarcastically.

Hermione simply rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t go and be a git now, you great berk. You’ve been doing so well these past weeks.” She took a breath before slipping into what Severus thought of as her insufferable know-it-all voice, which he knew would mean a nearly word-perfect, if somewhat condescending, repetition of whatever was in the book she’d found.

“Obliviate granum, or seed obliviation, is -- as you have already surmised -- a variation of the memory charm. Fudge created it during his time in the Charms Registration Office in his 20s. Contemporary historians believe that it contributed greatly to his meteoric rise within the Ministry, though it’s likely such suppositions will never be confirmed. The charm works by erasing a memory of events and interactions, but leaving behind the recipient’s desires. When the spell is performed properly, these desires are allowed to bloom into fruition, but the motivations behind them aren’t there. So, when combined with even a weak compulsion charm, granum allows the wielder to literally plant the seeds for future action into another.” Hermione finally stopped in oration and looked at him across the table.

He narrowed his eyes a bit as he thought through the information he’d just heard. “Alright. I can see how you might think that might fit my situation...but I didn’t experience any compulsion!”

“That you remember, Severus. And I think we can agree your memory can’t quite be trusted on this matter. And I said that’s how it would work if the charm was applied properly -- as Fudge originally designed it. By the time he’d been elected Minister for Magic, Fudge had taught the charm to a few of his most trusted advisors, a few members of the Wizengamot, several ‘trusted’ friends -- including your good friend Lucius -- and Merlin knows who else. The spell has been bastardized as it was passed to others and since Fudge never actually bothered to register the damn thing there’s no standard set of practices for it. Why do you think the Ministry was such a mess for years? You had wizards obliviating and half-obliviating them in the court. It’s why so little of our legislation made sense under Fudge!

That’s not even to mention that seed obliviation was never intended for long-term memory erasure. It was meant for specific instances; erasing, say, the exact wording of a meeting but leaving the results of coercion or blackmail in place without the memory of threat itself remaining within the victim’s head to be extracted via pensieve. Whomever cast granum on you managed to compulse you to leave the country, but they didn’t cast the spell well enough to erase the desires or motivations behind the rest of your personality. You were in a state of transition during your recovery, Severus. You had a lot of desires and motivations coursing through you just then.”

“So what you’re saying is someone -- not Fudge, but maybe one of his flunkies or maybe a Death Eater or maybe some random imbecile -- cast a half-arsed version of an unregistered, modified memory spell at me and managed to erase an entire year of my life, but leaving enough fucking seeds that I continued to pursue some of my goals.”

“Right. I suspect that the seeds weren’t the point of the spell...so what um, germinated, so to speak was the goals you’d established for yourself during your recovery. I recognize some of them -- you traveled, which was something you said you’d wanted to do. I’ll bet you visited all the places you’d told me you wanted to go: Japan, Russia, Serbia, most of continental Europe, maybe even the Americas?” She continued, seeing his nod. “You learned Pilates -- something that you’d decided to do during physical therapy. You sought out fugitive Death Eaters and returned them to Britain for trial when I know those runners sat heavy on your mind for months. I’ll bet you anything we’ll find
more things that took root and bloomed while you were gone.”

Severus resisted the urge to simply lay his head on the table in frustration. “It’s good information and I’m glad you found it...but I suspect that as an unregistered and inexpertly performed charm, there is no reversal.”

Hermione reached a hand across the table toward him. “I don’t know. Perhaps you’ll be able to regain some of your memories if you can find the original caster?”

“That doesn’t seem likely if they were misusing the charm to that extent to begin with, but I suppose you could be right. It does at least help narrow the list some, I suppose. Gods, tell me the spell has been banned now?”

“It’s not an unforgivable or even dark, but Fudge was forced to register it and it was subsequently placed on the banned magics list. That’s not to say that it isn’t used anymore, but doing so will send you an appointment with the Wizengamot and likely a short prison sentence.”

“That’s little enough. I suppose this will help us narrow the list some. Clearly we can rule out anyone who would know how to perform the charm properly -- Fudge and his closest sycophants. Lucius, because I refuse to believe he wouldn’t just Imperius me if he needed me to do something badly enough and couldn’t convince me to do so...and he’d probably be able to convince me of anything he truly needed anyway. So we’re focusing more closely on the Wizengamot, I suppose...which is where we were mostly looking before.” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“At least we have a place to start looking, Severus. Come on. I have a few more memories for your pensieve.”

He let out a mirthless laugh as he rose from the table, but found himself slightly heartened by her use of the word we.

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Hermione had shared three memories with him before leaving his rooms for her own. The memories hadn’t been much of great importance -- she showed him another reading session where they’d worked through the last third of *The Copper Crown*, another PT session where he’d begun to show real progress, and a tea-time discussion of some of the places he’d like to travel when he was recovered enough to do so. He and Hermione had set a new goal: he would work on strength and stamina so that he could walk at leisure, and she’d immediately hauled him off to the local Argos to order a muggle contraption called a treadmill (he still thought it looked like a medieval torture device).

After he’d thanked Hermione and she’d returned to her rooms to see to her own needs and chores, Severus found himself pacing his sitting room in an attempt to work off his excess energy. Finally he grabbed his Muggle jacket out of the closet and stalked toward the rear of the castle. He found himself wandering Greenhouse 4, the indoor herb garden, as he often had when he’d needed to find some calm during his previous tenure at Hogwarts. As always, the scents of enchanted lemon balm and spearmint calmed him. He found himself fingering an overgrown sage plant, stroking the velvety leaves before bringing them to his nose to inhale their bouquet.

He was startled out of his reverie by a voice behind him. “Pilfering from my herb stores, Professor
Snape?”

Severus smirked as he turned to face the intruder. “It would seem only fair, Neville, after you liberated my store of Gillyweed for the Triwizard Tournament all those years ago.”

“Ah. So Hermione finally ratted me out on that one, did she? So much for Gryffindor solidarity.” The boy had the audacity to grin. Cheeky bugger.

“No, Harry did a couple years later. He’s a right horrible occlumens.”

The younger professor snorted at that. “I like to walk through the greenhouses before dinner when I can. Take a turn with me?”

Severus’ smirk broadened. “Why Neville, if I wasn’t acquainted with your lovely wife, I’d think you were flirting with me.”

“Ah, sorry Severus, but I’m more into blondes. Come on, I’ll show you some of the changes we’ve made since Pomona retired.”

And that was how Severus found himself spending a pleasant hour touring the greenhouses with Neville Longbottom. Despite being one of the most abysmal brewers he’d had the misfortune to teach in his long career, the boy -- man -- did know his plants. The greenhouses were flourishing under his attentions, and he’d even managed to cultivate a few rare specimens. There was an enormous mimulus mimbletonia residing in the corner of Greenhouse 2, rising nearly fourteen feet in the air and undulating in a vaguely (no, make that very) disturbing fashion.

“Don’t get too close to that one, Severus. I’ve had her since I was sixteen and she doesn’t like to be touched by anyone but me and Luna. Not sure why, actually. But she’ll squirt you if you get within a couple feet of her bulbs.”

“I’m fascinated. I thought these weren’t supposed to grow larger than two feet!”

“Yeah, she was my first experiment at Hogwarts. After losing Trevor for the final time in my fifth year, Gran thought I could use a less ambulatory pet. I couldn’t get my hands on the right fertilizer, so I made my own compost out of leavings from the Great Hall. Still do, actually. She particularly likes bacon.”

Severus turned incredulous eyes on the herbology professor. “She?”

“Yeah. I’ve decided she’s a girl because she dances, like. Luna calls her Sherazade.”

“That’s...truly disturbing.”

Neville grinned broadly. “I know. It’s wonderful, innit? I’ve got a something I’m calling a TentaTonia over in Greenhouse 6 if you want to see it.”

Severus’ voice rose quickly in alarm. “You hybridized a mimbus mimbletonia with venomous tentacula? What on earth were you thinking?!?”

The younger professor just laughed again. “It’s not so bad, Severus. I tried it on some seedlings and grew it away from the student greenhouses for the first year. It’s an odd looking thing, but completely harmless I promise you. Come on, I’ll show you.” He quickly dragged Severus out a side door and toward Greenhouse 6. “This really is my pride and joy -- none of my other hybrids have come out half as well.”
Sure enough there was a small plant that looked vaguely like the tentacula, but with roundish mimbletonia pods on the delicate vines. The plant undulated much like its parent so that it looked as though it were waving a green ping-pong balls on a string.

“The hybridization made the venom completely inert. It still shoots venom from the mimbletonia pods, but it smells like toffee and cleans graffiti like turpentine. I haven’t found any other practical applications for it yet.” Neville sounded downright proud of his discovery.

Despite his best efforts, Severus found his curiosity piqued. “Might you have a sample that I could examine?”

“Sure!” The boy moved over to a small cluster of shelves and removed a flask of brownish, viscous liquid. “I meant to tell you earlier, I know you’re still researching potions even if you’re not teaching it anymore. You’re welcome to gather from the herb gardens and to ask me for any other supplies you might need like you did when Pomona was in charge.”

Severus blinked in surprise. “That’s incredibly generous of you, Neville. Thank you.”

“Of course! You said it yourself, we’re colleagues now. Colleagues help each other out in their research. Though I hope you’ll keep me apprised of any discoveries you make with the TentaTonia false-venom, right?”

“I’ll do better than that, Neville. If there are any other practical applications, I’ll list you as co-discoverer on the write up.”

“That sounds more than fair, Severus. Tell you what, come on into the castle and have a drink with me before dinner. I’ll fill you in on the hybridization process for Tonia there and it’ll give Luna a chance to catch up with you. She’s a bit put out that you’ve barely had time for her since coming back to Hogwarts.”

“I’m not sure what she’d want to talk to me about, but I could certainly use a drink, thanks. Lead on, Neville.”

Drinks with Neville and Luna had been surprisingly pleasant. The pair of former students were clearly well-matched; Neville’s gentle nature and patient demeanor provided a subtle foil for Luna’s dreaminess and occasionally manic expositions on magical creatures, publishing, or the state of the wizarding world at large. Their rooms, located on the ground floor with a view of the back gardens and greenhouses, were spacious and comfortable -- if decorated with a rather eclectic assortment of unrecognizable horns, claws, plants, and teeth (and in one corner a plant with teeth).

They passed an amicable hour in each other’s company during which Severus learned more about Luna’s writing curriculum (“I’ve decided that students should be able to write persuasively, informatively, informally, and editorially. That way they’re prepared for any possible career.”) and the imminent release of the first issue of Hogwarts’ newly official weekly newspaper: The Hogwarts Spectator, whose first edition would be released on Friday. Luna’s effusive praise for her students’ enthusiasm reminded Severus that he would need to talk to Hermione about starting their Animagus course soon.
Severus was pleased to see that Neville and Luna embraced their lives and careers at Hogwarts so wholeheartedly and couldn’t help but be swept up in the positive atmosphere they generated. He reflected that he had been just as passionate about teaching Potions in the beginning, but that his youthful ideology had soon buckled under the pressures of two wars and a lifetime of double agency. He’d only just begun to rediscover his own enjoyment of educating young and (sometimes) thirsty minds. Yes, returning to Hogwarts had been a good decision, especially when he was surrounded by talented and invested colleagues. It didn’t hurt that he was no longer forced to fulfill the role of school villain either.

The trio headed in to dinner together, and Severus found himself sitting to the right of the couple as they continued their conversation about the changes Neville was making to the herbology curriculum. He paused in his conversation as Hermione took the open seat next to him looking tired, but pleased that he was conversing so openly with her friends. He nodded to her in greeting as she joined in the discussion. It would seem that meals at the high table weren’t nearly as tedious when there was good company to share them with. He even managed a small smile when Minerva caught his eye after a particularly loud burst of laughter burst from Neville. Even the Headmistress looked pleased that he was joining into faculty life more fully than he had in the past.

As he and Hermione made their way back to their respective rooms for the evening, Severus noted that he hadn’t felt this content and settled in ages. He felt positively sanguine despite the fact that his day had started with news that held just as much negative information as positive. In years past, the news that he was unlikely to be “cured” of his condition would have sent him into a fury that would’ve sent students scurrying through the halls for a week. Now it was just a bump -- albeit a fairly sizable bump -- in an otherwise good day. The thought brought an unbidden smile to his face.

Hermione turned toward him as they reached the top of the tower’s spiral stair. “What’s that smile for?”

“I’m just...pleased with how my day has gone. I can’t remember feeling this contented with my life before. It’s incredibly rewarding. I have some new research to pursue, some developing friendships with smart colleagues, a home that relaxes me, and a brilliant and beautiful witch who enjoys my company. It seems like losing a year of my life led someplace that I never would have expected to end up seven years ago.”

Hermione blinked at him for nearly half a minute before reaching up to pull his head down to hers. “You, Severus Snape, are quickly turning into an optimist,” she breathed as she pressed her lips to his. “Who would’ve thought?”

Severus pulled his head back slightly to regard her. “I wouldn’t go that far Miss Granger. I’m still grumpy Professor Snape. I just...like being him more than I used to.”

“You keep saying that, Professor Grumptomist,” she said, gathering him close again and nuzzling into his chest.

Severus chuckled as he held her in the darkened hallway. *Maybe a little optimism isn’t such a dangerous thing*.

Chapter End Notes

Bad Persnickety. Bad, bad.
It's nearing the end of the semester where I work, so my workload has basically trebled and my writing time has been halved. Chapters are taking longer than I like. Whinge whinge whinge.

But alas, here is a (rather explainy) chapter. I've finished outlining a major plot point this week, so hopefully the writing will go more smoothly for a bit.
L'escarmouche

Chapter Summary

A little citrus, a little romance, and a little battle. Sometimes I like to mix it up.

September 16, 2005

There were times when Severus forgot just how quickly Minerva McGonagall could move when properly motivated. He had paused at the Headmistress’ call of “Severus! A moment if you please.” and attempted to suppress his smirk as the tartan-clad woman made her way to him in a swirl of robes and the scent of the lavender and chamomile sachets he knew she kept in her wardrobe as he’d given her the first set more than twenty years ago as a Christmas gift.

“Minerva,” he intoned respectfully as they were standing in the foyer outside the Great Hall. Dinner had been excellent, as usual. “How may I be of assistance?”

“I’d need to speak with you, if you don’t mind. Privately. My office?” She gestured with a jerk of her head toward the stairs.

Severus shrugged his acquiescence. “After you, Minerva.”

They walked in silence, passing the few students working their way toward the library or (more likely) attempting to find a secluded alcove in which to secret themselves away for an hour or two before curfew. Once safely ensconced within her offices, the witch whirled on Severus with a look of astonishment on her face. “Severus, the other professors want to know what the devil you’ve done to the house points!”

Ah. So that’s it.

“I’m afraid I underestimated my students, just as you warned me, Minerva. I’ll have to be more cautious about that in the future.”

“Corporeal patronuses.”

“Indeed.” He nodded. “I offered the challenge in class last Friday. During demonstrations yesterday afternoon, nine students managed corporeal patronuses in one class alone. Another twelve managed to do so between my sixth and seventh year classes today. I’m afraid I was forced to award the promised points, but that has naturally caused rather rapid inflation within the point system. My apologies for that. It should equalize quickly enough.”

The Headmistress sat behind her desk with an inelegant thwump. “Bugger the point system, Severus! You’re telling me that over twenty students managed to produce corporeal patronuses in your class, and that they learned to do so over the weekend. That’s astounding!”

Severus blinked at Minerva. “I -- well, yes it is. So you’re not upset about the house points.”

“Upset? Bite your tongue! We haven’t seen progress like that since the last time you taught D.A.D.A.”

“Then I’m confused. What exactly is the problem?”
“Dear boy, there is no problem. I’m overjoyed at the progress you’ve made with your students. I wanted to congratulate you on their successes!”

Severus could count on one hand the number of times he’d been called into this particular office with good tidings rather than bad. Oh the times, how they change! He couldn’t help but slant his eyes toward the portrait of a sleeping Dumbledore and think that not once had the meddling old man ever called him to his office with good news or praise. Only sessions of duty and fear and strategy. “Well, I’m glad that you’re so pleased. I do hope that none of the other instructors are angry with me so upsetting the balance of things.”

“On the contrary. I suspect that after hearing why you have awarded so many house points they will feel free to match you in your generosity. I expect ‘extra-credit’ assignments will become de rigeur. Oh sit down, Severus. You’re giving me a crick in my neck looming over me like that.” Severus’ arse plopped into the chair opposite his colleague and friend. “Have a cuppa with an old lady, will you? I’ve missed our banter.” She waved her hand and had a small enchanted tea service next to her desk piping with steaming Ceylon.

He couldn’t help but smile at that. “We didn’t banter, Minerva. We scrapped. And if I recall, I usually won.”

She wrinkled her nose as she poured out two cups and doctored them to taste. “Hmph. Having the last word isn’t winning, Severus. Even if that last word is invariably clever. So, I hear you and Filius will be dueling at the club opening this Saturday?”

“Indeed. I expect to be thoroughly trounced. You and Hermione are facing off as well, yes?”

Minerva snorted. “We are, and I expect her to thoroughly trounce me. That woman throws a wicked hex.”

Severus smiled at that. “She learned from the best.”

“Very subtle. Humility never was your strong point, was it?”

He laughed outright at that. “For once, Minerva, I wasn’t referring to myself. Or, at least, not solely to myself. She had some of the best instruction available -- Lupin, me, Potter, Ginevra Weasley, and actual battlefield experience. It’s hardly surprising that she’s adept. That woman absorbs instruction like a sponge; she simply took the best of what each person taught her and committed it all to that formidable memory of hers.”

“Well, here we are again.”

“Beg pardon?”

“You’re smitten with Hermione Granger. Again.”

“Well, yes. Is that so surprising?”

Minerva chuckled and sipped from her cup. “The only surprising thing is the speed at which you moved this time. Weeks instead of months.”

“To be fair, Minerva, I was recovering for some of those months. I think. How quickly did I move last time, exactly?”

“Well, it’s hard for me to know dear. Hermione confides many things in me, but her romantic life has always been a subject touched on only lightly. I know you were great friends for a long while. It’s a
question likely best put to her, really.”

Severus sighed and sipped from his own cup. “We...haven’t gotten that far in the memories yet.”

“Perhaps you should just ask. How are you doing otherwise, Severus? You’re doing well in the classroom, I know, but you had such a revelation before classes even began. Are you...coping?”

He thought a moment before replying. “I am. It hasn’t been painless, but my work with Hermione is progressing -- not just in memory recovery, but in planning for the advanced class in animagus transformation -- and my classes are going well. I’m...happy here. Which isn’t something I thought I would ever feel again.” He stopped speaking when he noticed that Minerva’s eyes appeared suspiciously watery. “For Merlin’s sake, woman, don’t start weeping on me.”

The Scottish haridan drew herself up with a sniff before replying in a rather rough voice. “Nonsense, Severus. I’m simply pleased you’re doing so well. Have you made any progress with that list that Kingsley gave you?”

“As a matter of fact, we have. Sort of. Let me tell you what Hermione discovered.”

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It had been a good week, he realized as he returned to his rooms. Amazing how the lack of an extracurricular life consisting mainly of spying on an evil overlord allows you to be more productive. His students were improving by leaps and bounds -- even the first years were sustaining shield charms admirably -- he had colleagues who seemed to enjoy his presence, a home that was more comfortable than the house he actually owned, enough money in the bank thanks to his patents and substantial war reward, and a brilliant witch for a girlfriend (Is girlfriend the right term? She’s not my lover yet...). If you completely ignored the fact that he was mysteriously missing the better part of a year from his memories, Severus rather thought he had it all.

It was with this thought in mind that he gave a Hermione’s door a rather exuberant (for Snape) knock. When the door opened, Severus was greeted with a wickedly smiling face surrounded by a halo of curls. He’d barely opened his mouth to say “good evening” when he found himself unceremoniously grabbed by the collar of his shirt, dragged across the threshold, and pressed none-too-gently against a wall with a set of very soft and unbelievably enthusiastic lips fastened to his neck. Severus heard a buzzing noise in his head as his senses went into overdrive.

So this is what sounds like when your brain liquefies between your ears.

“—Hermioneee!” His voice squeeked out in a frenzied expulsion of air and he had to try again, deliberately lowing the timbre of his voice. “Ah -- Hermione! I thought we were working tonight.”

The woman in question drew back and looked him in the eye before quirking her lips in a very familiar smirk. Without a word she placed his hands on her arse and hopped up to wrap her legs around his waist, throwing him back against the wall as she attacked his mouth. What little blood was left in Severus’ head promptly fled to his crotch leaving sense and most of his polysyllabism in its wake. Fuck work. Witch now. Lesson plans later. Much, much later. With a growl in his throat, he found himself clasping her pelvis against his as he met her demands with his own, parting her lips with his tongue and drunkenly steering them toward the open sitting room before tipping (tripping, really) over the back of the sofa and missing its soft cushions almost entirely.
They fell over the side in what had to have been the most graceless display of ardor in his adult life, knocking them both off balance and rolling to the floor...but not before cracking his elbow on the coffee table. Hermione’s legs were, unfortunately, still wrapped around his pelvis as they crashed over the side of the sofa. She landed with a none-too-gentle thump on his cock and balls and the rather dramatic kissing session came to an abrupt halt as Severus wheezed out a high pitched whine and allowed his head to drop as he stared at his would-be lover, cross-eyed in pain.

Hermione simply slid to the side and dropped her head to his shoulder as Severus lay like a dead man, taking stock of his multiple injuries. Long moments passed as he waited for the throbbing in his balls and his elbow to ease. When he finally felt he could draw a full breath again, he noted that Hermione was shaking against his arm.

“You’re laughing at me, you little minx,” he gasped. The shaking against his shoulder trebled and he swore he could hear her snort into his shirt. “I’ve never understood why your kind finds such damage humorous.”

Hermione burbled out a laugh before attempting to regain control over herself. “I’m sorry!” she gasped. “I’m sure it’s not funny at all. Here, let me kiss it and make it better.”

Severus caught her as she moved to press her lips against his (still injured) crotch. “Don’t you dare. Just stay here if you don’t mind. What on earth possessed you when I came in?”

She blinked at him owlishly and tilted her head before pecking a tiny kiss on his beak of a nose. “I missed you this week.” She snuggled further into his side, avoiding any contact with body parts below the belt.

He sighed and tightened his uninjured arm around his witch. “I missed you too.” He turned his head to return the peck to her pert little nose, tilting his head to avoid poking her in the eye with his own. “Come on. We have work to do.” Sitting up with a little groan, he rose and extended a hand to help Hermione to her feet. “I see you have decided to speed things up a little.”

She slid him a shy smile. “Just a little. Sometimes a girl just needs a little throw-down in her life, even if she’s the one doing the throwing.”

“Noted.”

Severus took a seat on the sofa as Hermione busied herself pouring each of them their now habitual cognac and they quickly settled into their work on the advanced animagus transformation course that they’d promised to develop. Tonight had been scheduled as an attempt to give her over-taxed brain a break from the stress of retrieving and re-assimilating memories on a near-daily basis; she’d complained of morning tension headaches for the last three days running.

They worked diligently for more than two hours, laying out a twenty week course of study that would take the students from theory, through meditation and self-awareness exercises, and to the magic of transformation itself in a closely monitored environment.

“They hardest part will be the month of the leaf, of course,” Severus muttered as they mapped the course of their instruction into Hermione’s cleverly designed study scheduler. “It drove me up the wall to have that thing in my mouth for a month.”

“Hmm.” Hermione agreed. “But it is a necessary part of the process. We’ll need to let the other instructors know that those students may be less vocal during the month.”

Severus nodded and leaned back to polish off his cognac. “We’ll need to provide a setting in which
they can safely transform, no matter what shape they take. One of the empty classrooms on the third floor in the South wing of the school should do. Near one of the old baths, in case we have an aquatic transformation.”

“That seems prudent.” Hermione rose and stretched her back to remove some of the kinks, then moved to refill their snifters. “I’ve been hearing good things from your upper level classes. Corporeal patronuses, hmm?”

He smiled. “Yes. I’m both astounded and ridiculously proud. I’m happy to see that the students are willing and able to rise to a legitimate challenge. A few more weeks and they’ll be back on track where they should have been before this year, so the survival course won’t be a complete loss this spring.”

“Any interesting patronuses?”

“A few. Mr. Bertle conjured a platypus, of all things. And Miss Frome managed a giraffe. I’m not going to pretend to understand that one.”

“Well I don’t know about Bernard Bertle -- whose parents I’m convinced must hate him to give him that name -- but Iona Frome comes from a Muggle family. She spent her formative years in Tanzania, living on a game preserve in the Ruaha National Park. She grew up around giraffes. Just be grateful she didn’t summon a rhinoceros or one of the more...stampede ungulates.”

Severus chuckled at the image. “It will be interesting if her animagus form matches her patronus. If our course is a success, I can almost guarantee she’ll be enrolled in it next year.”

“Yes. Iona is one of my best sixth years. Her grasp of transfiguration is instinctive -- I’d definitely recommend her for the advanced course next year.”

“So I’m curious...does your patronus match your animagus form?”

Hermione looked a bit smug. “It does.”

“And your patronus is a little aquatic weasel, is it not? A river otter?”

“It was, initially. It shifted after the battle.”

“Really? To what?” He was becoming more curious by the moment, trying to imagine what Hermione would become in her transformed state. He could only imagine that she might be some sort of kitten...soft, but with sharp claws.

“Tell you what, I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” She grinned at him and waggled her eyebrows in mock flirtation.

Severus merely rolled his eyes in return. “We said we’d take things slow, Hermione.”

“Oh, pish. Don’t be a grump. I’ll transform if you do.”

“Fine,” he agreed, “but I would prefer to do so outside.”

“That’s fine, so would I.” She walked briskly toward the spiral stair, gesturing for him to follow him through her bedroom (Don’t think about her bed, Severus. Just keep walking.) and out onto her balcony.

Once he’d joined her she shot him a shy smile and took a deep breath, closing her eyes in
concentration. He watched as her body shimmered for a moment before rapidly drawing in on itself. After a moment, a Little owl hopped onto the balcony railing. Severus stared at the miniaturized Hermione for a moment before reaching a hand toward her with a smile. “May I?” he intoned, and the small creature tilted her head toward him so that he could stroke the downy feathers atop her flat head. Even in the dim light from her rooms, he could see that her coloring mirrored that of her hair, and that her wide eyes were the same honeyed amber as her human form. After a moment he felt a little peck at his wrist and Hermione made a soft hooting noise that seemed to imply *Well, get on with it!*

With a shrug, Severus took a step back and closed his own eyes. His transformation was more rapid than Hermione’s had been as he’d been using the form for close to two decades. In an instant a raven landed next to the owl and regarded it over its curved beak with solemn black eyes. Hermione ruffled her feathers in pleasure at the sight of another bird and hopped toward Severus to peck at his wing. With a jerky motion of his head, Severus motioned toward the open sky, and the two friends quickly took wing, skimming over the waters of the black lake and chasing one another through the graceful Victorian arches of the restored covered bridge. After circling the clock tower, the raven let out a crow of delight and began to fly back toward the shared balcony of their apartments. Severus landed first, quickly returning to his normal form where Hermione joined him a moment later. They looked at each other a moment before they both began to laugh.

Hermione quickly grasped Severus in a tight hug. “That was brilliant!”

“And here I thought you didn’t like to fly!” he chuckled in return.

“I didn’t. I don’t, really. At least, not on a broom. I never feel like I’m in control of it, but I don’t know...as a bird, it’s just instinct. I know what I’m doing and I know I won’t fall. Of course, you can bloody fly without transforming, so I guess you don’t have to worry about falling off a broomstick or having the damned thing disobey you.”

Severus shrugged. “I actually prefer flying as a raven. I like the feel of the wind in my feathers and the heightened senses. And it’s not nearly as off-putting as the cloaked bat impression that Riddle taught me all those years ago.”

Hermione made a noncommittal noise in her throat. “Well, we’ll have to make time to go flying again soon. That was fun.” She breathed deeply in the chilly night air and snuggled more deeply into Severus’ arms. “It’s really beautiful out here, even at night. I selected this room for the view. It’s nice to be able to share it with you now.”

“And I’m glad you want to share it with me.” Severus placed a kiss on top of her curly head. “Come on, we should turn in. We have a big day of dueling tomorrow.”

Hermione looked up at the hawk-like features of her companion. “Would you like to stay here with me tonight? Just to sleep?”

“I’d like nothing more.”

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**Saturday morning**

“Welcome to the inaugural session of the Hogwarts Dueling Club!” squeaked Filius Flitwick from atop the transfigured dueling platform. He regarded the assembled students with great pleasure. From
his place between Minerva and Hermione, Severus could see that nearly a hundred students from across the houses had gathered to watch the demonstration and learn to duel. Several were clearly hoping for a show from the “guest” duellers.

“Today’s gathering will begin with the promised exhibition matches between Professor Snape and myself, then Professors Granger and McGonagall.” We will be abiding by the International Duelling Standards laid forth and ratified in 1862 by the European Duelling Commission. Can any of our older club members remind us of what that means? Ah, yes Mr. Catteramp?”

An older Slytherin student stood and recited the rules. “Hexes and Charms only, no curses of any sort. Dark magic is forbidden and its use will result in a permanent ban from approved dueling matches. Hexes and Charms may injure, but may not disfigure, maim, or kill. All injuries must be reversible. Verbal and non-verbal spells are permitted and no wandless magic may be employed.”

“Very good, Mr. Catteramp. Thank you for such a succinct summation of the rules. Duelling, unlike a true battle, was traditionally a noble wizard’s sport. It is now, of course, practiced by witches and wizards of all classes. We do not seek to harm one another because dueling is like a game of chess; it is about strategy and timing. I will leave it to Professor Snape to teach you how to do battle. Here we fight only to improve our skills, not to save our skins.

“Very well! Without further ado, I would like to invite Professor Granger and Headmistress McGonagall to the platform for their match. Ladies?”

Minerva and Hermione rose quickly. Severus noted that Minerva was dressed in traditional women’s dueling attire -- a wide split skirt with tewes beneath and a short tunic with loose shoulder seams for easy movement. Soft kid-skin slippers were on her feet. Hermione, on the other hand, wore a pair of worn and comfortable jeans and a long-sleeved jersey shirt with her hair plaited to keep it out of her face. Battered sneakers were on her feet. The difference between the two women was like night and day.

The two women met at the center of the platform with friendly smiles and saluted one another with the signals of their willingness to enter l’escarmouche. They then turned and walked ten paces in either direction to assume their dueling stances, Hermione with feet apart and wand at the ready, Minerva in a more elegant pose with knees bent and body twisted artfully to the side. Minerva is a trained duelist -- she even competed nationally. But Hermione is barely observing the forms here. Severus couldn’t help but worry that Hermione was sorely out of her league.

Filius cast a protective shell over the dueling platform that would absorb any stray hexes or curses. He then hovered a timer in the air that began to count down from ten. When it reached zero, both women began to attack.

Beams of light shot through the air as Hermione and Minerva blasted silent hexes at one another, each blocking and evading the spells of the other. They moved quickly -- Minerva swooped and crouched in an almost balletic dance, reminding Severus of a popular film he’d seen not too long ago where Muggles used technology to perform athletic feats (like dodging bullets and running down buildings) in slow motion. Hermione on the other hand exhibited none of the grace that Minerva employed. Her style was, for lack of a better term, positively brutal. She charged and retreated from Minerva, flicking and circling her wand, dodging spells by dropping to the floor, crouching, or leaping out of the way.

Minerva landed the first blow, tangling Hermione’s feet in a band of...was that licorice?...and causing her to crash face first into the floor. Ignoring the gasps of the younger students, Hermione instinctively cast a shield spell to deflect Minerva’s next attack, managing to send a petrificus into the
protective shell. With a murmured spell, Hermione dissolved the candy strings around her ankles and shoulder rolled forward to send a flock of attack-canaries (Really, Hermione? Canaries?) at her former mentor, who coated the platform beneath Hermione’s feet with birdseed to send them winging back toward their master. Minerva followed this with a blast of light that looked like a reduced stunner, but it missed as Hermione slid on the birdseed and landed on her back, clearly winded.

With an athletic skill that surprised Severus (and apparently startled Minerva), Hermione kipped up into a crouch and flicked her wand in a series of quick strokes, causing the air around Minerva to still to the consistency of pea soup. The older witch’s attempts to counter the spell were hampered by her slowed movements and Hermione followed with a judiciously applied *incarcerous, silencio*, and finally, *expelliarmus*. She deftly caught the Headmistress’ wand as it launched into the air, then turned to bow toward Filius as master of ceremonies. The entire match had taken less than two minutes.

Filius quickly lowered the protective shell, which released the enchantments upon a panting Minerva. “Well done Professor Granger, well done!” He turned toward the gathering crowd of students. “Please join me in thanking our professors for that demonstration!” Minerva and Hermione smiled at each other again and shook hands to signal a fair match.

As the ladies took their seats and drank deeply from the provided glasses of water, Filius gestured Severus toward the dueling platform. “For our second demonstration today, Professor Snape and I will face off.”

“Hardly fair, Filius, considering you’re an internationally ranked duelist and I’m a rank amateur!” Severus muttered to the Charms professor as the protective shield went up.

“Now now, Severus. You could have been a duelist too had you decided to pursue the matter -- you have faster reflexes than any wizard I know. It’ll be a fair match. Shall we go through the formalities?”

With a nod, Severus and Filius saluted one another and paced off ten steps before turning, each assuming the dueling pose. Severus crouched in his favored position, body twisted to the side with one arm above his head. Filius, the smaller target, simply stood with his wand at the ready as he cast the ten second timer that would signal the start of the match.

When the timer’s countdown completed, Severus remained still to watch for the first flick of the smaller man’s wand. Filius’ goblin ancestry provided Severus with a much smaller target to hit, so every spell he cast would have to count.

Finally, Severus saw the lighting fast twitch of a spell just moments before a blast of light flew directly at his head. He deflected the spell with a modified protego, allowing him to absorb and redirect the spell though he didn’t recognize it. Flitwick was nearly knocked off his feet by the stinging wind hex, but managed to force the majority of its energy into the protective shell. In return he cast a ball of lightning that expanded as it approached its target, which Severus transformed into a ball of marshmallows which he flung back toward the other professor (Marshmallows? What was I thinking there?). The marshmallows quickly became beetles, which turned and charged Severus, who employed a self-created charm to pluck their legs from their bodies (an excellent spell for any potions master). He charmed the bodies into ball bearings that he sent racing toward Flitwick, before turning the legs into stinging needles, which he flung toward Filius’ legs. The smaller man’s muscles cramped under the assault and he fell to the ground. Severus wasted no time in disarming the man to claim victory.

As soon as he had Flitwick’s wand in hand, he dispelled the protective shell himself and moved to
the man’s side to ensure he’d endured no lasting injury from the duel. Flitwick rose to his feet with a grin on his face. “That business with the beetles, Seveus. Genius! Oh, I enjoyed that.”

Severus huffed out a laugh. “You’re a sick man, Flitwick. I’ll show you the charm if you like, though.”

“Yes, yes. Excellent! Everyone, please join me in congratulating Professor Snape for winning our duel!” Severus nodded his head in thanks for the applause before shaking hands with Flitwick to signal that it had been a fair bout. He moved away from the dueling stage to resume his seat and take a long sip from his glass of water.

Filius took a deep breath and turned toward the gathered students. “Well! Now you’ve seen what a duel can look like and the kind of creativity that can and should be employed in a match. You won’t be dueling at the same speed, of course, but we’ll begin with some basic disarming and blocking spells today.”

“Professor Flitwick?” a first year student, Xandria Henley, raised her hand and was acknowledged. “Could we see the winners face off?”

Severus’ brows rose at the request; there’d been no mention of a winner-takes-all bout. He opened his mouth to politely decline, but was interrupted by Hermione’s voice, colored with the wicked grin on her face.

“I’m willing if Professor Snape is. What do you say, Severus? Are you courageous enough to fight a Gryffindor know-it-all?”
Chapter Summary

The duel exhibition continues and the loser buys dinner.

What do you say, Severus? Are you courageous enough to fight a Gryffindor know-it-all?

It was at this moment that Severus noted several things: Firstly, the challenging smirk on Hermione’s face was a serious turn-on. Secondly, Luna Longbottom was amongst the crowd, supervising several students who were -- damn -- furiously scribbling on Muggle notepads. Thirdly, Minerva and Filius were grinning at him like mad loons.

It was only after noting these facts that Severus rose from his chair, sketched a small bow toward his colleague, and replied, “If the lady so desires.”

Excited squeals and sighs sounded around the room from a half the girls and at least two boys. Severus heard a horribly loud stage whisper coming Shannon Walmouth, a Muggle born fourth year: “I ship them!” He regarded her with a stern, but puzzled gaze and watched the girl’s cheeks turn pink. What on earth did that mean?

Filius interrupted his thoughts. “Very well! When Professors Granger and Snape are recovered from their bouts, will they please mount the dueling platform?”

Severus took a final sip of water and dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief before remounting the dais. He and Hermione quickly went through the formalities of the salute, the bow, and the pace-off as Filius cast the protective shell around the platform again. Severus resumed his favored dueling crouch as he thought about strategy for this particular bout; he had absolutely every intention of winning against his former pupil.

Severus quickly thought through what he’d observed with Hermione’s match against Minerva. She was clearly skilled and more athletic than he’d given her credit for. Her greatest strength, however, seemed to be her situational awareness. If she couldn’t turn what he threw at her against him, she would find a way to use it to defend herself. With that in mind, he raised his wand and prepared for the countdown to begin.

When the timer reached zero, Severus chose to spring into action rather than wait for Hermione to attack first. With an upward slash of his wand, he launched a cloud of paper party snakes at her, obscuring her vision. Ignoring her shriek of surprise, he jogged to the side and renewed his attack with a downward flick that caused his snakes to erupt into a shower of molasses that would, hopefully, slow her movements. Unfortunately, Hermione employed a silent gathering spell and shot the sticky substance back at him in a high-pressure stream. He was forced to drop to the ground to dodge the flying goo, casting a protego to deflect any following spells. He deflected a modified bat-bogey hex, which was absorbed into the protective shell above him but caused a shower of rubber bats to thump down on top of his backside.

Quickly rising to his knees, Severus grasped switched his wand to his off-hand and circled it thrice
counterclockwise before jabbing it toward his opponent. Hermione ducked and rolled away from a highly amusing hex of his own creation, *tripudium discotechus*, which hit the shell and dissipated in a blast of replicated Swedish synthesizer music. Hermione narrowed her eyes at Severus (they’d had a mock-argument about the musical merits of ABBA just two days before) and jabbed her wand at his chest. He failed to dodge or shield as he was still recovering from casting his last spell (fine, he knew he’d been showing off with that one...it took too much energy to cast in a situation like this). Hermione’s hot-air charm hit his chest full on and Severus felt the immediate effects as his shirt began to inflate like a hot air balloon, making it difficult to move his arms.

He quickly threw up a shield before he lost all ability to move his arm, then flicked his wand toward his sleeve to cut a vent into it (*Damn. That was a new shirt too.*) As the air escaped, he switched his wand back to his favored hand, gripping it upside down and punching it toward Hermione in an underhand, upward motion. The dueling platform beneath Hermione’s feet turned to water, and Hermione fell through the floor with an awkward splash. Twirling his wand into its normal position, Severus approached the watery pit cautiously, prepared to cast the incarcerous that would win the battle. The only sound in the hall was that of gently lapping water.

Severus reached the magically created mini-pond, surprised that Hermione had yet to emerge, and he was seized by a sudden panic that she’d caught a lungful of water and passed out. He leaned over the pond to peer beneath its depths, and just as his shadow crept across the surface Hermione burst from the water in a shower of droplets, hair flying in mad ropes as she ascended like a rocket into the air. Caught by surprise, Severus jumped backward and tripped over his own feet, falling on his arse and knocking his head against the protective shell of their dueling area. The ensuing shock to his scalp for nearly falling out of bounds caused his eyes to slam shut for the merest moment, and so he never saw the carbonite hex coming. Before he could utter a protego, Severus found himself encased in freezing metal, unable to see, hear, or move.

An indeterminate amount of time later, the enclosure melted around him and he was able to take a deep breath. Shaking his head to dispel some of the disorientation from being suddenly flash-frozen, Severus stood and looked at his competitor. Though she shook hands with due humility and congratulated him on a match well fought, he could tell that she was vibrating with self-congratulatory glee.

Severus smiled inwardly at his (drip-drying) witch’s success. “Well done, Professor Granger. Was that last spell of your own creation?”

She grinned. “It was. Harry loves the Star Wars movies. He made me watch them with him a couple of summers ago.”

He guffawed before he caught himself. “Stealing from Muggle movies? Really, Hermione?”

“No complaints from you, Severus. You threw disco at my head!”

“I was just trying to satisfy your strange ABBA obsession, Hermione.”

“They were really more Europop, actually. Next time aim some Donna Summers my way.”

He smirked. “Next time?”

Their interlude was interrupted by the clearing of a throat next to them. “If you two don’t mind...” muttered Filius. “Congratulations, Professor Granger. You’re our champion for today’s duels! That was truly some creative wandwork from both of you.” He turned back toward the students at that
point and said, “We’ll have another exhibition at next month’s meeting -- I’ll announce the competitors when I’ve secured their agreement. In the meantime, if you would like to rise to the level of today’s duellists, I suggest we proceed with learning those disarming and blocking spells for the first through third years. Fourth and fifth years will work on jelly legs and binding hexes. Sixth and Seventh years are to help the younger students before adjourning to open practice.”

With that the hall erupted into a flurry of activity. Students excitedly paired off to begin practicing their wandwork with the help of their older peer. Severus, Hermione, and Minerva made the rounds to help the younger students for a half hour or so and Severus was pleased to see successful shielding spells amongst the first-year D.A.D.A. students in attendance. He made a mental note to reward them for their hard practice the following week.

Eventually, Severus, Minerva, and Hermione left the club to Filius’ direction and made their way to the Headmistress’ office for tea.

“Well! That made for an exciting afternoon. Hermione, you’ve improved considerably. You absolutely trounced me, my dear! And Severus! That was some wonderfully creative spellcasting this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Minerva.” Severus replied as Hermione blushed her own thanks. “That made for an enjoyable afternoon. And Hermione, I should add my own congratulations. You’re formidable with a wand in your hand.”

Hermione’s pink cheeks brightened under the praise from her friends and colleagues. “I’ll admit, I’ve had a lot of practice. I usually stay with Harry and Ginny for a few weeks in the summer months, and we spend quite a bit of time dueling. It helps keep Harry’s skills sharp and Ginny just bloody enjoys it. I think I’ll recommend that Filius bring them in as guests next month.”

“If I remember correctly, Mrs. Potter cast some brutal hexes during her time at Hogwarts.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him. “You weren’t supposed to know about those.”

Minerva chuckled into her teacup at that. “My dear, by now I’m sure you know that the professors of Hogwarts turn a blind eye to many more infractions than we actually punish, if only so we might have our evenings free from detention on occasion.”

“That reminds me, did you ever find a way to reprimand your students for your unceremonious soaking last week?” Severus turned his smirk toward Hermione expectantly.

She slanted a sly smile toward him in return. “I did just this afternoon, thanks to you Severus. I think they might have a slight transfiguration accident that turns the area beneath their desk into a pool of ink.”

Minerva looked confused as Severus threw his head back to roar with laughter. “Brilliant! Minerva, you should never cross this woman! She gives back what she gets ten fold!” He wiped a tear from his eye and raised his teacup in salute to Hermione’s ingenuity.

The Headmistress took a calm sip of her tea. “How you handle discipline in your own classroom is, of course, your own business Hermione. So long as the students in question aren’t harmed.”

“Harmed, no. Embarrassed, absolutely.” Hermione leaned forward and chose a shortbread biscuit with some satisfaction.
Minerva merely sighed. “I swear, you two are too alike for your own good.”

Severus turned his head toward Hermione as they made their way back toward their apartments after tea. “I’ve had a sudden brainstorm. How would you feel about getting out of the castle this evening? Having ourselves a bit of a date.”

“I thought we were going to do pensieve work this evening.”

Once they were safely out of sight of any potentially passing students, he reached out and caressed her arm until she turned toward him. “We can wait until tomorrow for that, can’t we? I rather spend time with you instead, and I certainly owe you a nice meal to celebrate your victory this afternoon. We haven’t left the castle in two weeks.”

“It would be nice to get out for a bit. Where would you like to go?”

“Trust me to surprise you?”

She gave him a considering look and nodded. “Alright. You choose. Casual or not? Muggle or Wizard?”

Severus gave her a look that he hoped communicated romance rather than the restrained lust he knew he was feeling. “Definitely Muggle. Wear a dress. We’ll make a night of it. Can you be ready to leave at six?”

“Sure. You’ll need to notify Minerva that we’ll be off campus.”

“Not a problem. I’ll see you in an hour, then.” He leaned in and gave her a peck on the cheek before they climbed the stairs to their respective rooms.

Once in his rooms, Severus thought of how it felt waking next to Hermione again that morning and conjured his patronus. He was surprised to see not his doe, but his raven staring back at him. Shaking himself, he gave it a message to take to Minerva and sat down heavily in his chair. When it returned, he sent it off again to Lucius, asking the man to secure a table at his chosen restaurant for the evening.

He sighed once he’d received his reply from Lucius, only half-heartedly pleased at the man’s success at reserving a table for two in his name (and a warning to expect an owl the next morning). Severus’ mind was whirling. His doe was gone. His lovely doe, the last remaining reminder of his first friend, taken too soon. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that.

*I thought patronuses were only supposed to change when their caster went through a significant emotional upheaval -- usually falling in love or some sort of trauma. But my life is more stable now than it has ever been...and as much as I like being with Hermione, I’m not in love. At least, I don’t think I am. So what prompted this change? And how long has it been like that?*
He tried to remember the last time he’d had cause to cast his patronus. Not for some months, really. When he was traveling, he would sometimes conjure his doe to keep him company when feeling particularly lonely. The misty figure had always been a reminder of some of the best times of his life, before Riddle killed his friend. But since coming to Hogwarts, he hadn’t had much cause to cast summon her…

He thought he’d mention it to Hermione this evening over dinner and see what she thought.

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At six o’clock on the nose, Severus rapped on Hermione’s door. When it opened, he found himself momentarily breathless at the sight in front of him. Hermione was clad in a long-sleeved wrap dress in a beautiful shade of viridian. The color did wonderful things to her eyes and her brandy-colored hair. She smiled as she reached into the cloak closet and he couldn’t help but appreciate the way the dress hugged her curves, appearing modest while leaving little to the imagination. She emerged holding a copper toned Mackintosh that almost exactly matched the dainty heels on her feet. He noted the copper twists at her ears.

“You look truly beautiful,” he breathed.

“Thank you. You look dashing yourself.” And it was true. Severus had chosen a charcoal grey Muggle suit and paired it with a black shirt and dark grey tie. The darker tones still suited his pale features, but he worried that he might appear rather somber next to her colorful elegance. He could feel his cheeks heating at her compliment, though he was pleased she like the way he looked.

Severus cleared his throat and proffered an arm to Hermione. “Shall we?”

She dropped his arm when they left the tower, but took it up again as they made their way out the front door of the castle toward the apparition point beyond the gates. The sun was just starting to dip below the mountains to the West, casting long shadows over the grounds as they wended their way down the gravel path. Hermione leaned into Severus’ warmth as the breeze picked up, and he found himself placing his arm around her shoulder as they continued their leisurely walk.

With a wave to Hagrid, they made left the school grounds. Once at the apparition point, Severus turned his witch into his arms and pressed a kiss to her lips. “It seems appropriate to kiss you here...I might even make a tradition of it,” he murmured. “Are you ready?”

Hermione simply nodded and held him closer. With deliberation, Severus turned on the spot and apparated them to a concealed spot in Muggle London. Taking Hermione by the hand, he led her into the streets of Soho and toward Kettner’s brasserie. They entered the row of Georgian town houses and Severus gave his name to the maitre d’. They were seated almost immediately in a corner table with a booth bench and chair, graced by an opulent silver candlestick and sparkling wine glasses.

Only once they were seated did Hermione lean forward and place her hand over his. “Severus, this place is incredible. Is it an old restaurant? It seems wonderfully preserved.”

He smiled at her interest. “It’s one of the oldest in London. It was opened in the mid 1800s and used to be a gathering spot for those who’d rather not co-mingle with the hoi polloi. Oscar Wilde used to dine here. I called in a favor to Lucius to get us a seat.”

She laughed and spoke in a low voice. “You’re telling me that Lucius Malfoy likes to slum it and eat
He gave her a look of mock-disapproval. “Lucius is perfectly willing to dine with Muggles if the food is good enough and the spot hot enough. He’s a lovable hypocrite that way. And it helps to have a Lord for a friend, able to call ahead and reserve a table.”

“Well then please extend my gratitude to him. Do you have any recommendations?”

“Well, since it’s a celebration I would think we should have champagne and caviar, don’t you think? It occurs to me that we aren’t just celebrating your victory today.” Hermione looked at him with a furrowed brow, clearly confused. “I believe someone has a birthday on Monday, does she not?”

Hermione flushed pink. “I didn’t realize you remembered.”

“I remember because you were the oldest student in your class, Hermione. Though I admit, I had to go to Minerva and ask the exact date.”

“It’s sweet that you thought to do so.”

He grimaced at that. “Yes, well. Let’s not spread that last part around. But we are dating now...I think it’s my privilege to take you out for your birthday, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is,” she said with a gentle smile. “Champagne and caviar sound like a wonderful way to begin my 26th year. Thank you, Severus.”

They spent the next hour enjoying their drinks and a wonderful dinner. Severus was pleased that they never lacked for conversation -- not that they’d ever struggled in that area -- and found himself asking her about the phrase he’d overheard at the dueling exhibition. “Hermione, what does ‘I ship it’ mean?”

She giggled a bit at the question laying her utensils across the remains of her roast duck breast and sprouts. “It means that the person speaking would enjoy imagining interaction between two people. It’s from a Muggle entertainment called fan-fiction...people who take popular characters and write continued or reimagined stories about them. Why?”

“One of the fourth years said that about us as we dueled today.”

She sighed a bit at that. “I guess the cat is out of the bag, then.”

“Hmm. I’m confused. Why would they want to ‘ship’ us?”

“Well you know that the Prophet likes to write about me. Well, write about all of the war heroes, really. Even Minerva makes an occasional appearance. Now that you’re back in Britain, I wouldn’t be surprised if your name began making more frequent appearances. Some of the students...well, they see themselves as being taught by living celebrities. A few tend to obsess a bit. I’ll guess that it’s fairly harmless in this case, but it makes sense that they’d be interested in an purported relationship between two of their hero faculty.”

Severus frowned down at his the remains of his steak. “I’m not sure I like that idea, Hermione. I rather thought we were being discreet.”

She shrugged. “Well, we haven’t advertised anything, but we haven’t hidden much either. We sit by one another at nearly every meal. You sit near me in faculty meetings. We spend time together in the evenings. And you know Horace and Thurston are the biggest gossips...I’m sure that our kiss last
weekend, if not spoken of directly, has at least influenced some speculation between those two in public spaces. We wouldn’t have been able to hide if we’d tried.”

He pondered her words as he left folded some Muggle money into the black cheque folder. “I think you’re more used to living in the limelight than I.”

“Likely. Just ignore it Severus. I don’t plan to change the way I treat you, and I don’t want you to change the way you treat me. So we’ll just...continue as we see fit and damn anyone who assumes anything else.”

Severus nodded and rose, extending a hand to draw her from her seat. They moved to the front of the restaurant and collected their coats before moving back into the crisp autumn air.

“We’re near the theatre district, and the Royal Opera is performing this evening. Puccini, I believe.”

“You’ll probably think me terribly uncultured, Severus, but I don’t care for opera. I never have. Ballet, on the other hand, I adore.”

Severus chuckled. “Would it be horrible for me to confess that I’m terribly relieved you don’t care for opera? I don’t think I’m a fan of ballet either, to be honest, but I’d be willing to have you try to change my mind on that.”

She smiled up at him. “What if we just walked for a bit. We’re not far from the river, and the view from Waterloo Bridge is lovely at night.”

“Are those shoes alright to walk in?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Severus, I’m a witch. And there are such things as cushioning charms.”

Severus smirked at her response and took her hand in his, leading her toward the bridge. The streets were crowded that evening with patrons rushing to the theatre or enjoying the crisp evening weather after dinner, and they found themselves among several couples viewing the lights of London. There wasn’t much to be said, gazing out over a river devoid of traffic, but Severus found himself pleased when Hermione leaned against his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

They stood that way a long while, hardly speaking as cars moved past and the lights of the city winked before them. Severus thought the view of London against the night sky paled in comparison to the wonder of having Hermione wrapped in his arms, but was content to rest his chin on top of her head and take in the view with her. After a time, she turned and pressed her lips against his gently, allowing the kiss to linger and warm. With a sigh, Hermione rested her head against his shoulder. “Take me home, Severus. Spend the night in my bed. I’ve wanted you there for so long, and I’m so tired of waiting.”
At Last

Chapter Summary

And then they banged. They really do! No coitus interruptus or racked groins, I promise.

Chapter Notes

Sound the smut siren! Seriously, if you don't want to read the sexy bits you should probably just skip this rather-shorter-than-normal chapter.

I've never written a sex scene before, so forgive me if I have stolen every trite sexy thing you have ever read and poured it into this chapter. (Also, my fascination with Regency era romance novels may come to the fore here. Thank goodness for the antiquated language of wizarding Britain!) There are more sexy things planned for future chapters, so if you have a concrete suggestion for ways in which my writing can improve, I'm happy to hear it in the comments.

It was possible that Severus Snape had spent more of the past few weeks speechless, breathless, and otherwise confounded than he had in the past decade. Or two. It was also possible that the source of his mute, air-free confusion had just asked him to take her home. To bed. Her bed.

Mating Merlins on a Pogo-stick, Hermione wanted him in her bed. Tonight. Hyperventilation was not an option, and from the look on his date’s face she was clearly expecting some sort of verbal response to her declaration.

“Buh.” Right. All attempts at urbane and sophisticated repartee had flown out the window. Noting the delightful smirk on his companion’s face, he cleared his throat and tried again. “B-but I thought we were going slow?” Hmm. Better, Severus, but perhaps you should contain your next sentence to a single octave?

Hermione’s smirk was rapidly making Severus’ pants distressingly uncomfortable. “No, Severus,” she purred, placing her hand on his chest. “You were going slow. Infuriatingly slow. Snails and sloths have left you in their wake.” She brought her other hand to the back of his neck and drew his head down to hers to leave a kiss at the corner of his mouth. “So I’m taking control for a bit. Take it for a boon to celebrate my win. Take it for a birthday wish. Just. Take. Me.” Her voice had dropped to a husky contralto and she pressed her body against his and nipped at his jawline.

Severus felt suddenly lightheaded as all the blood in his head retreated south. “I --. Yes.” His eyes darted frantically from one side of the bridge to the other, trying to find a secluded corner in which to apparate and finding none on the tourist-laden bridge. With a jerk and a lurch, he pointed them North, away from the glare of lights and people on Queen’s Walk or milling about the National Theatre that evening. He led Hermione -- bless her eager little soul -- toward the shadowed arches of Somerset House and apparated with little care for potential witnesses to their disappearance.
They arrived with a muffled pop and a sound like a siren outside the Hogwarts gates. Severus had only a moment to puzzle over the whine (the pop he understood) before he realized he was admitting a high-pitched noise (dammit, it wasn’t a squeal) as Hermione, already burrowed into his chest, reached down and ran her hand along his rapidly swelling length. He drew a ragged breath before taking her hand in his own once again. “You need to stop that, love. We still have to get inside.”

“No, you need to get inside.” Her eyes shone in the dim moonlight with barely repressed excitement. He was pleased to see that she was nearly as breathless as he. “Hurry. Hurry hurry.”

Wasting no further time, Severus waved a hand at the gates to have them swing open and damn near jogged down the path with a giggling Hermione in tow. He whirled as a voice called to them nearby, barely suppressing the snarl that wanted to claw its way out of his throat.

Hagrid waved at his friends as they barreled down the path toward the castle. “Professors! Good ev’nin to yeh both! Fancy a nightcap? Me an’ Fang was just settlin’ in fer the night with summat Goblin mead that Filius got in Wales las’ month.”

Severus gesticulated rather wildly as he continued down the path without pause. “Can’t tonight, Hagrid. Thanks. Must run. Important papers to plan. Lessons to grade. Good night!”

Hagrid clearly interpreted this uncharacteristically panicked excuse-making as a sign of ill health. “Wha’? Yer alright there Hermione?”

“Fine! We’re just fine, Hagrid!” she responded through her giggles. “I’ll come see you tomorrow!”

“Don’t count on it.” Severus muttered under his breath, continuing toward his objective with his...other objective in tow and leaving the puzzled groundskeeper behind him.

They managed to make it to their tower without anyone else impeding their progress and with only one small instance of Hermione pulling him into an alcove and shoving her tongue down his throat (though admittedly he didn’t even offer token protest). At long last she lowered her wards and hip-checked her door open, dragging Severus inside by his jacket lapels. The door slammed shut, the sconces lit, and the two would-be lovers stared at one another, panting in Hermione’s warm foyer.

“Five minutes.”

He blinked at her. “Pardon?”

“I need five minutes. Then come upstairs.” She was already racing away in those ridiculous(ly sexy) copper heels, skirts swirling around her legs as she clattered up the spiral stair.

He felt as though he’d slammed into a brick wall. “What the bloody hell do you need five minutes for?”

“Three minutes! Just -- give me three minutes, okay?” she called from upstairs. Severus groaned and scrubbed his hands over his face, pacing across her sitting room and back again as he tried not to grind his teeth. He found himself looking at the railing above him each time a noise made its way down to him. First the splashing of water and the sound of shoes hitting the back of the wardrobe. Then a muffled thud and a curse from somewhere in the vicinity of her bed.
“Are you alright up there?” he called up to the loft.

“I’m fine! Just a sec -- shit --” he heard fabric ripping and a muttered resarcio before seeing the glow of candlelight from above. “Um. You can come up now.”

Thank Merlin. Severus moved toward the stairs with unseemly haste, nearly tripping over his own feet taking the steps two at a time. He was greeted by the sight of Hermione kneeling in the center of her bed, dress flung over the back of the settee and mad hair curling over her shoulders. She looked like a golden goddess, all chestnut hair and brandy eyes in a lacy champagne colored bra and tap pants. Conjured candles levitated around the room, bathing her in soft light. With an elegant twist of her wrist she darkened the sconces on the main-floor of her quarters, leaving the two of them in the dimly-lit warmth of her boudoir.

He felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight of her. His mouth opened and closed as he tried to find the words to describe how she looked to him; he knew she was no longer the girl he’d taught all those years ago, but here she was waiting for him, all wicked curves and alluring eyes wrapped in satin and lace and tied with a bow. He dragged his eyes down her body and up again, worshiping the impossible vision before him. “You’re so damned beautiful. Sometimes it makes me ache just to look at you.”

He registered the surprise in her eyes before she simply smiled and held out a hand to tempt him toward the bed. She tangled a hand into his hair as he sat beside her and pulled his mouth back toward hers. Severus lost himself in her kiss, revelling in the taste of her. He found himself naming every trite metaphor in the proverbial book as her tongue twisted against his. Her skin was softer than silk and her scent was utterly intoxicating. She tasted of fruit and wine and Hermione, a combination so simultaneously comforting and erotic that he thought he might burst out of his skin. For a brief moment he found himself longing for the high-flown language of the Victorian poets so that he could adequately articulate the exquisite feeling of pleasure and rightness of Hermione’s embrace before he focused more closely on the task of seducing and pleasing his witch.

With a guttural groan, he skimmed his hands down her shoulders and arms to rest at her waist, loving the feel of her softness against his callused hands. Hermione, however, was clearly feeling more assertive; she moved her hands to the collar of his shirt and began to slip the buttons loose one at a time in an attempt to bring him to a similar state of dishabille. She broke off the kiss with a frustrated sound as she fought with the buttons at his wrists, tossing those wild curls over her shoulder as she bent her head toward his wrist in an attempt to defeat the tiny interloper that was his button.

With a chuckle, Severus stilled her hand. “Allow me.” He murmured a quick spell and divested himself of his shirt and trousers before returning his attentions to the tempestuous woman in front of him. No longer hindered by his clothes, Hermione pounced. She practically purred as she pushed him back against her pillows, straddling his hips to set her teeth to his neck.

Sweet Circe. Severus’ eyes rolled back and he went hard as stone beneath her. All he could do was grip her hips as she used teeth and tongue and lips to work him into a twitching mass of nerves, nibbling at his neck and tracing her hands over his chest. He mentally began listing the ingredients of Amortientia in the hopes of staving off a very premature finish to the proceedings, intent on exploring thoroughly before finally claiming his witch. He had just enough presence of mind to reach up and unclasp her bra and slip his hands beneath the lacy confection to the flesh below. They both moaned as his thumbs circled over her turgid nipples, he with wondering delight and she with inflamed desire.

When her hands moved toward the waistband of his pants that he realized that not going slow was quickly becoming a race to a finish line that he simply wasn’t ready to see. He twisted his shoulders
and hips and rolled to reverse their positions, pinning Hermione to the bed with his center pressed against hers. “My turn,” he stated with a feral grin, drawing the straps of her bra down her shoulders to discard the concealing garment. He quickly bent to draw her into his mouth, drawing the gentle swells of one breast into his mouth and laving her nipple with his tongue as he filled his other hand with her. He devoted the kind of attention he saved for his potions research to her breasts, suckling her with a devotion that elicited throaty mewls of longing from her throat. She thrust her hips against his as he switched his attention to her other breast, grinding her silk-covered mons against his erection. He groaned against her breast, releasing the nipple that he’d been gently worrying between his teeth to bury his face in her hair. He breathed in, savoring the apricot and jasmine fragrance that clung to her as he thrust his hips against her in an effort to relieve some part of the tension that was throbbing through his veins.

“In me. I want you in me!” she whispered into his ear. “Off.” She tugged and batted at his pants before working at her own.

He panted as her hips thrust against his while fighting off her own knickers. “Hermione, wait.”

“No. Now. Now now now.” She succeeded in kicking the bit of satin and lace to the side and reached for him again.

“Hermione. Please.” He stopped her hand before it could return to the waist of his pants and leaned away from her. “Are you using a contraceptive?”

“Yes. Potion. We’re covered. Now come back here!” she whined.

He flushed crimson as he began slowly tugging at the waist of his pants. Hermione snarled at his hesitancy and simply reached around his neck to draw him closer to her. She worked her tongue into his mouth, thrusting against his in sensuous mimicry of the very act she wanted him to perform.

However much she wanted him, Severus didn’t want to rush. He knew that he wouldn’t last once they joined and wanted so desperately for her to enjoy this as much as he. Rolling to the side, he slipped his hand over her abdomen and further down to the nest of curls concealing her sex. Holding her tightly as they continued to kiss, he slipped one long finger between her lips to find her wet and waiting for him, and used his thumb to tease at the engorged nub, swallowing her delightful moans and cries of pleasure as he slowly -- oh so slowly -- moved his finger into her hot center.

Her hips bucked a bit as she felt him slide inside, but he simply continued to kiss her as stroked and fluttered his finger within her core. She moaned his name against his mouth as her hips squirmed against his hand, seeking satisfaction from at his hands. Severus smiled inwardly at her impatience, hissing as she raked her nails down his back in frustration; resolutely ignoring his own insistent arousal, he shifted to kiss and lick his way down her torso, paying particular attention to the soft skin of her breasts.

After what felt like an eternity for both of them, he set his lips to her and slid a second finger within Hermione’s center, crooking them forward. He began to thrust his fingers in earnest as he sucked and pulsed his tongue against her pearl, drinking in her cries as they rose in volume and her hips began to move in concert with his hand. He was surprised to hear her cursing like a sailor as he fucked her with fingers and tongue, vowing dire retribution on him should he stop and begging him to go faster, press harder. Severus redoubled his efforts and was rewarded by telltale shivers within her abdomen; within moments, she was quaking as she came around his hand.

She shouted her release as her orgasm overtook her. “Fuck! Of fucking shit fuck Severus!” With no small satisfaction, Severus continued to slowly thrust his hand against her sex as she came down
from her high. When her wheezing breaths finally slowed, he withdrew and moved back up her body to devour her mouth, moaning as their tastes mingled on his tongue. She kissed him like a woman possessed, skimming her hands over his back and drawing him on top of her. With one hand, she took hold of his swollen length and guided it toward her sex, canting her hips upward in an attempt to capture him within her.

Finally, finally he began to push into her welcoming heat, moving inexorably forward until he was fully seated. He gasped as he felt her constricting walls tighten around him and resisted the urge to plunge into her like an animal. He wanted to curl up within her and stay there forever, surrounded by her for eternity. He both could and could not remember sex ever feeling this good, and shook his head against the niggling feeling of recognition that threatened to overpower his senses. He pulled back almost completely before driving himself back into with all the force of feeling that was coursing through him.

When he began to move, he set a pace that made the bedstead shake. His time of constraint was done, and it was all he could do to keep himself from pounding her into the mattress with each thrust. Hermione had no complaints, and instead urged him forward with a litany of commands that made his head spin with the thrill of it. He felt a tingle building at the base of his spine and gritted his teeth against it, rotating his hips to drive his pelvis against hers in an attempt to spark her climax. He surged into her, gasping as the sweat rolled down his forehead and his muscles strained at the effort of holding his own orgasm at bay. At last, he felt her walls contract around him and heard, as if from a great distance, her wailing his name to the stone walls of the room. One thrust, two more and he followed her into oblivion as his own climax coursed through him. He collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes as his mind and body shuddered to an abrupt stop. With the last of his strength, he gathered Hermione, this beautiful, wonderful witch of a woman against his side as they allowed the darkness to overtake them both.

Severus jerked awake, freezing cold and in an unfamiliar bed. With a gesture, he settled the duvet over their still damp bodies and looked down at the dozing woman in his arms with a pleased smirk. Things were progressing a bit faster than he’d anticipated, but lo the walls had not crumbled and he did not feel particularly disturbed or in need of running from his lover. Perhaps his fears were unfounded.

He wound an errant ringlet around his finger as Hermione slept, replaying the evening’s proceedings in his head with alacrity. She’d been so responsive to his touches, he couldn’t help but thrill at the thought of taking her again. He’d go slowly this time and take the time to relish her arousal rather than simply drive her toward orgasm. He reached down to stroke himself gently as he thought though all his plans for his witch.

A persistent flash of recognition kept popping into his mind as he thought of making love to Hermione again, and he couldn’t help but worry it like a sore tooth as she slept on. Their lovemaking had felt so familiar, like coming home rather than discovering the new. He glanced down at Hermione as she began to stir and decided to put his theory to the test.

“Mmm. Hello. How long was I asleep?” she murmured drowsily.

He frowned. “I’m not sure. I just woke myself.”
She registered the look on his face with some surprise. “What’s wrong, love?”

“Hermione...forgive me if I sound ridiculous, but have we done this before?” he asked, stroking his hand down her arm.

There was a pause before she looked up at him with some regret in her eyes. He knew before she said a thing what her answer would be. “Yes.”

He shifted to look at her, smoothing a stray curl out of her face. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She sighed and broke eye contact, looking instead out the window toward the dark hills beyond the lake. “Because I didn’t want you to come to me out of a sense of obligation. Or avoid me out of a sense of guilt. I wanted you to want me -- want this -- because it was important to you now, not because it was some sordid part of your past.”

He was quiet as he thought about her words. “I think I can understand that.”

“Are you angry with me?” she sniffed.

He tightened his grip on her to snuggle her closer. “No, love. A little confused, I think, but I’m not angry. I might’ve done the same if our positions had been reversed.”

She simply nodded against his chest, content to be held.

“When did we become lovers? Before, I mean.”

Her voice was muffled as she spoke into his torso. “Halloween night.”

He arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Will you show me? In the morning?”

“Yes. In the morning.” Her voice suddenly sounded drugged as fatigue threatened to drag her under. “You’ll still be here?”

He smiled as he pressed a kiss into her hair. “I believe my orders were to sleep with you in your bed tonight. I’d hate to disappoint you.” Severus cast a quick cleansing charm over them both, then summoned the pillows from where they had been kicked in their earlier enthusiasm. After adjusting a pillow under each of their heads, he pressed a gentle kiss to Hermione’s lips. “Sleep now, Hermione. I’ll still be here in the morning.”

Hermione turned and hooked her leg over his, mumbling “G’night Sev’rus” into his armpit. Within minutes she was asleep, her snuffling snores tickling the skin over his ribs. Tenderly, Severus brushed the hair out of her face and cuddled against her, left to contemplate the meaning of their relationship in light of her revelation as night passed into the lonely hours of morning.
The sun was already high in the sky when Severus awoke on Sunday. He looked around bemusedly for a moment, thrown off by the apparent reversal of all the landmarks of his bedroom before he remembered where he was. And whom he was with.

The whom in question was currently cuddled against his shoulder -- upon which she was drooling a bit, but a wandless evansco took care of that before she could wake and notice. He shifted slightly so that he could look at her sleeping face more directly and found that other parts of him were starting to wake as well. Cautiously, Severus reached out to brush some hair out of Hermione’s face, running a finger down her cheek to her jawline before pressing a kiss to her forehead. He was satisfied when she began to stir beneath these ministrations, cracking open one eye against the weak sunlight streaming through the window.

“G’morning.” she rasped with a little smile. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long.” He found himself returning her smile. “You’re stunning this morning.”

She gave a little laugh and skimmed her hand over his torso, then lower to encounter the evidence of his wakefulness. “Well somebody is ready to greet the day.”

Severus let out a little hiss of pleasure as her hand wrapped around him beneath the duvet. “I haven’t woken like this with regularity since I was a student. I blame you entirely, witch.”

Hermione made a pleased humming noise in her throat, but didn’t stop her hand’s slow rhythm, up and down his shaft. “You can blame me all you want, but don’t you think your time would be better served putting this to use?” The look on her face was absolutely wicked as she wriggled against him.

“What would you call what we did last night, then?”

Her eyes twinkled and she smirked up at him. “Round one. Obviously. Of course, if you’re too tired this morning...”

In answer, Severus’ mouth crashed down on hers. He wasn’t tired -- he’d never felt more awake or alive in his life, for all his slumberous appearance. He took his time with the kiss, pouring every
ounce of feeling he could into it. He didn’t know how to explain what it felt like to wake with this warm, expressive woman in his arms. It was the most invigorating, most comforting experience he could recall. Waking with her was akin to the moment of inhaling the steam and fragrance of a good cup of tea in anticipation of the first sip. Hermione Granger was nothing if not a heady experience, as vital a presence this morning as she possibly could be.

She groaned into the kiss, clinging to Severus and pressing her body against his in an effort to make contact from head to toe. Finally after long minutes, she broke their kiss and rolled to her knees, straddling Severus’ hips. Grasping him once more, she guided him into her, taking him within her in one smooth motion. He gasped at the sensation, allowing himself to simply feel her surrounding him. She rose above him, still in the autumn sunlight, looking to Severus like his grandmother’s amber cameo brought to life. Her hair streamed down her bowed back and her eyes were closed as she held him still within her. He didn’t dare move for fear that he would break the spell and come crashing back to earth.

Slowly, oh so slowly, she began to move over him, rolling her hips in a dance as old as man. He could only watch in wonder as she took her pleasure, her body rhythmically sinking onto his again and again as he came undone beneath her. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed to not grasp her hips and thrust up into her welcoming body. Every cell in his body was urging him to take her, but the slightly muddled rational part of his brain knew that this moment was for her -- he was simply along for the ride.

Gradually, Hermione began to speed up and she began to pant out little breathy moans each time she snapped her hips forward. “Touch me, Severus. Gods, please touch me!” she cried as the pace reached a more frantic level than before.

Taking this as his signal, Severus wasted no time in grasping her hip in one hand and slipping his fingers between them to pulse against her clit as she rode him into oblivion. She was sleek around him, all tight sheath and hot hands, her breasts jiggling with the force of her movements. He could watch her ride him for days and murmured as much as he continued to move his hand against her core. At last, he felt her begin to flutter around him and began to meet her hips with thrusts of his own, spearing up into her as he chased his own orgasm and watching hers wash over her. With a cry, Hermione collapsed atop him as he shouted his release to the ceiling, his hips bucking into her in an effort to bury himself inside her.

She lay across his chest like the dead, panting as the final quivers raced through her body. Wheezing out a breath, Severus raised a shaking hand to stroke her hair as she laughed into his nipple. He felt a kind of languid joy when she propped her chin on her hands to look up at him, grinning her self-satisfaction in the morning light. He croaked out a chuckle at the look on her face. “Well, good morning to you too.”

As much as they might have liked to, they couldn’t stay in bed all day. Severus sent Hermione off to her bath and returned to his own rooms via their shared balcony to see to his ablutions with the promise of breakfast when he was done. He showered quickly, dressing in a warm brown sweater and dark-wash blue jeans before summoning Winky to his quarters. He asked her to bring up some sort of warm breakfast for two, then set about prolonging the romance of the previous evening by transfiguring a small table and two chairs on the balcony. A little extra wandwork kept the air around the table relatively warm and stilled the chilly breeze at the top of the tower. Once Winky had
reappeared with two omelettes, tea, toast, and juice, he cast a stasis over the lot and went back to Hermione’s door.

With a light tap on the door frame, he re-entered Hermione’s rooms just as she was pulling a sweater over her camisole. She turned at the sound of the door opening. “Hmm, you were quick!” she said, dashing forward to kiss his cheek. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. You mentioned something about breakfast?”

“Of course. I thought we’d dine on the balcony. We may not see many days as fine as this now that fall is here.” He gestured toward the still-open door and followed her through.

She bounced out onto the balcony, her still-damp curls swaying behind her. “Oh, Severus! This looks wonderful. I’ve never dined out here; I’m not sure why I never thought of it.”

“Clearly you were waiting for me. I can’t take credit for the breakfast, thought -- that was the elves.”

“They’re so thorough. They even included the Sunday paper.” She took a seat at the table and removed the stasis on her plate before picking up her fork. “Honestly, Severus. This has been the best weekend I’ve had in a long time. Thank you -- for both last night and this morning.” She picked up the front page section of the Prophet and settled in to eat her breakfast.

Content to simply share the warm space and good food with his lover, he favored her with a crooked little smile and picked up the Magical Advances section of the Prophet before digging into his own food. The omelette was spinach, mushroom, and brie and was surprisingly tasty. He was just spreading marmalade on a toast point when he heard Hermione groan into her teacup.

“What is it?” he asked, setting his own newspaper down.

Wordlessly, she handed him her copy of the paper, flipped to the third page.

*Rumors abound that Hogwarts’ love-lorn Transfiguration professor has found new love in the wake of her recent breakup with war-hero Ronald Weasley. Hermione Granger, a plain and ordinary witch, has long cast her lures at famous wizards. It appears she has recently reconciled with past fling Severus Snape, whose disappearance shortly after the Orphan’s Fund Ball in 1998 sparked speculation that Miss Granger had alienated yet another lover in her quest for media-fame. One has to ponder whether the newly-reinstated Professor will be taken in by her womanly wiles once again…

For more on Hermione Granger’s past loves, see page 8.

For more on Severus Snape’s service in the Second Wizarding War, see page 9.

“Damned bitch.” Severus said as his eye caught the article’s by-line. “Rita Skeeter fucking strikes again. How the hell is she getting her information?”

Hermione snorted. “I’m not sure. We haven’t exactly been public, and it’s all so new. We haven’t exactly gone around school frolicking and holding hands, so I doubt her son is sending her the information. I suppose it’s possible that she’s creeping around in her animagus form again. You know she’s a blue beetle, right? She’s registered now, though, so I’m sure Minerva keyed the wards to keep her out.”

“It’s possible there’s a weakness in the wards, I suppose...I haven’t seen anything out of the norm, though, have you?”

“No, and I’d like to think Mrs. Norris would play an interesting game of catch and release with
Skeeter if that were the case.” Hermione sighed a bit as she returned to the paper Severus handed her. “I wish the woman would just leave me alone. She’s not nearly as hard on Harry or Ron. I know I shouldn’t let her get to me, but I don’t seem to have a thick enough skin to deal with our dear Rita.” She sighed as she pushed the remains of her omelette around on her plate.

They continued with their meal, but the romantic mood was somewhat spoiled by Skeeter’s printed presence. Finally, Severus pushed aside the remains of his meal and leaned his elbows on the table. “Hermione, what did Skeeter say after I left the country? I’m getting the impression from this trash he gestured toward the paper “that she was...unkind.”

“Rita and I have a bit of a history, Severus. I’d call it a mutual dislike, but loathing might be a bit more appropriate. I may have...um...kept her in a jar for a couple weeks back in fourth year.”

Severus’ eyes widened at that. “Really? So that’s how you knew about her as an illegal animagus?”

“Yes. I caught her spying during the Triwizard Tournament back in fourth year. Anyway, after you left she intimated that I’m a gold-digging whore who chases after famous wizards. Nothing new, really -- she’s been implying as much for years. As though I’d need to chase after your Order of Merlin prize. I have one of my own!” she huffed a bit at the indignity of being called on the carpet for dating of all things. “It’s such a double standard. Ron cheats on me, knocks up his mistress, and generally acts the part of the Lothario and gets praised to the skies. I dare to date -- and with someone I have an established relationship with -- a few weeks after my engagement breaks up and suddenly I’m a flaming slut. Sometimes I swear the wizarding world is more backward than the Muggle one!” Her voice had risen alarmingly at that last.

Severus reached out and took Hermione’s hand in his and spoke as soothingly as he knew how. “Hermione, love. She doesn’t even know if we’re courting. It’s still new, so there’s no way for her to confirm rumors. We’ve been circumspect here at the school and I suspect we’ll continue to be so. I’m not going to hide the fact that I’m with you, but I don’t want you to worry that I’ll buy into any of Rita Skeeter’s gossipy shit.”

Her voice hitched a bit before she took a steadying breath. “It’s not you I’m worried about, Severus. It’s the Howlers that are sure to arrive at breakfast in the morning.”

His face twisted a bit as he commented wryly, “I doubt you’ll get many. You’re reported to be dating the former Bat of the Dungeons. I don’t think many people will object to you stealing the most loathed professor of all time from beneath the noses of wizard society.”

She sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t put yourself down that way, Severus. I think you’re a catch. I’ve liked you for years and I honestly don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d still been with Ron when you returned from the content.”

He stared at her in stunned silence and she could see that he was not convinced.

“Would you like me to show you? We’re rather overdue for a certain conversation anyway, and I think I can clear up some of your confusion over last night.” She rose and held out a hand, leading him toward his balcony door and the pensieve downstairs.

He nodded his agreement and banished the tray of food back to the kitchens, following her into his apartments.

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Once they’d gathered the pensieve and settled in their customary chairs, Hermione drew a silvery strand of memory from her head with her wand and placed it in the metal bowl. She reached out and touched Severus’ wrist before he could dive into her recollection. “I’m going to join you for this one. There are some things that you may question and still more than I think it’s best to view together. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Hermione, I’m grateful that you’ve chosen to share your memories with me like this. I don’t mind in the least.”

“Alright. Ready?” She leaned toward the wide bowl just as he did, and soon both felt the tugging, spinning disorientation of falling into a memory.

When his vision cleared, Severus looked to his left and saw Hermione standing next to him. She reached out and took his hand as they observed their past selves in conversation.

“I don’t understand why you’re insisting that I attend this insipid event. I don’t even know why Minerva is insisting on hosting it!” growled past-Severus at Hermione.

“I know you hate Halloween, but you can’t not be there. Harry is hosting the party, and he hates the day as much as you do -- for much the same reason.”

“Then why is St. Potter even opening his home today? I thought he got to write his own ticket now that he’d saved all of wizard-kind.” He bit off the words as though they tasted foul.

“Because Minerva requested it of him. Because it’s better than either of you brooding. And because he knew you would be there now that you’re mostly recovered and the Order wants to show his public support of your exoneration and your heroics -- don’t give me that look, you’re a damned hero and you’ll just have to accept that!” Hermione stamped her foot as her frustration with Severus mounted.

Severus rolled his eyes. “You’re the most insufferable -- “

“Bossy, know-it-all of a witch. Yes. So you’ve said. Perhaps you could stop commenting on it, accept that fact, and bloody well move on! Now go put on your damned costume before I hog tie you and dress you myself, you stubborn goat of a man!” She gestured broadly toward the stairs leading to his bedroom.

“COSTUME? I’m not wearing any costume! You’ll have me trussed up like a Christmas goose, you...masochist!”

Hermione threw up her hands in exasperation and stormed off to the guest room. “You bloody well are so because I am too! Now shut up and get your arse upstairs Severus Snape, or so help me I’ll hex your hamstring during your next pilates session!”

He stared at Hermione before making his way up the stairs. Present-Severus wouldn’t admit it out loud, but his past self had a distinct pout on his face.

He turned to Hermione and murmured “you’re really quite lovely when you’re angry.” That comment earned him a small swat on his arse as their past-selves went up the stairs and the scene blurred into one from a couple of hours later.

“Stop fidgeting. You’d look smashing if only you’d only stop trying to shred your cape.” They stood in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, which was almost unrecognizable. Harry had clearly been
remodeling now that his time wasn’t dominated by a search for bits of Voldemort’s soul.

Severus grunted, but stilled his hands. “I can’t believe I allowed you to force me into this getup.”

With some distance, Severus had to admit that the costume was actually fairly flattering. He was wearing an Italian doublet, bloused shirt, pants, and boots, all in black and with silver brocade as trimming. Hermione, he assumed, had done something to his hair to make it look as though it was wet and dangling about his face.

“You look wonderful, Severus. And at least it’s your color. Now calm down and sneer at the good people!” Hermione admonished.

No problem there. His lips were already curling into a sneer. “At least you didn’t shove me into that getup that Arthur is in.”

“I believe he’s supposed to be Falstaff to Molly’s merry wife. You have to admit, since the war he rather comes by the padding naturally. Oh look, there’s Harry.” she exclaimed.

“My joy is complete.” he intoned as he rolled his eyes.

“Hermione! Severus! “ Harry greeted them both. “You both look fantastic!”

Severus had to admit that Harry wasn’t doling out empty flattery. His past-self looked appropriately brooding and Hermione was dressed in a frothy pink dress that he recognized as Glinda the Good Witch from a Muggle movie he’d seen in his youth. Her dress threw off flashes of light each time she shifted under the glow of the floating candles. Despite the saccharine sweetness of her costume and the brooding darkness of his, he couldn’t help but think they looked well-matched.

“Harry! You look wonderful too. Is Ginny here with you?”

Harry blushed and looked down at his medieval wizard robes. “Yeah. She chose our costumes. We’re supposed to be Merlin and Nimue.” He gestured toward Ginny, who was dressed in a flowy gown of bleeding blues, greens, and white. Harry looked distinctly uncomfortable to be embodying the infatuated wizard in public.

“A couples costume?” intoned Severus. “How...quaint.”

“Oh, shut it, Severus.” Harry groused good naturedly.

“Erudite as always Mr -- Harry.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Some things don’t change. Come on, you two. McGonagall made the punch and you’re late, which means you’re entirely too sober to be here.” He dropped his voice as he leaned toward Hermione and stated “Ron is in the kitchen and he’s already been at the punch. You may want to head to the library. Neville and George are already in there.”

Hermione smiled her thanks at Harry and tugged on Severus’ sleeve. “Come on, let’s head to the library. I know where Harry keeps a bottle of Firewhiskey behind a row of books.”

Harry sputtered a protesting “Hey!” as Hermione and Severus made their way toward the library. There they found George and Neville play wizard’s chess -- badly, if Severus’ glance at the board told him anything. It appeared they were just sending the pieces into the fray and watching them bash one another over the head. Pathetic.

“Hermione!” George called when she saw her. “Thank god you’re here, love. That suggestion you
made for messaging pens worked out brilliantly, but I have some ideas for tweaking the protean charm I want to run by you.” Ever the entrepreneur, George rose as though he planned to drag Hermione toward the corner and pick her creative little brain.

“How about I come by the shop next week, George, and we can talk there. And we can talk about my consulting fee for the work I did on the pens and the women’s-issues skiving snackboxes?”

George grumbled something that sounded like “mercenary bint” under his breath, but nodded before making his way out the door to grab more punch. He popped his head back in a moment later with a call to Neville. “Hey Nev, Luna’s just walked in. She’s dancing in the dining room.” Neville quickly made his excuses and fled the room to see his girlfriend.

Hermione flashed Severus a smile. “Just you and me and the…let’s see…” she reached an arm into a far bookcase and the sound of bottles clinking sounded from deep within. “Ah hah! Here it is. 25 year reserve, aged in goblin-mead barrels. I don’t think Harry will miss this!” Severus raised an eyebrow. “Oh, please Severus. I doubt Harry even knows that collection is there. I’m the only person who bothered to explore this room when we all moved in.”

Without ceremony, she plopped on the sofa and patted the cushion next to her for Severus to join. She quickly conjured two tumblers and poured a double measure of Firewhiskey for both. “I won’t say Happy Halloween, Severus. I’ll just raise my glass to the fact that you’re well enough to be here and share a drink with me.” She paused to sip her whiskey. “I know the date doesn’t hold much joy for you, and truth be told I know it doesn’t hold much for Harry either. You know he visited his parents this morning? I offered to go with him, but he said he wanted to go on his own this time.”

Severus glanced down at his own drink before raising it to his lips for a taste. “I didn’t know. I used to go on Lily’s birthday, before Riddle rose again.”

Hermione nodded contemplatively and they sat there in silence for awhile with their drinks. Eventually Hermione rose and went to a bookshelf and withdrew a book -- a rather lurid detective story from the looks of the cover -- and sat back down. “Shall I read for a bit? We can both settle in a bit before we make the rounds of the party, then we can head home.” She plucked the crown off her head and fluffed her hair out a bit as she tossed the flimsy piece of metal onto the coffee table.

It occurred to Severus at that point that Hermione was referring to his home and that she had not, in fact, returned to Grimmauld since first beginning to care for him during his convalescence. She was essentially living in his guest room. He wondered at the fact that his past self seemed to accept this with equanimity.

“What?” was his past self’s only reply as he picked up the bottle and refreshed both their drinks. Hermione scooted next to Severus on the sofa, leaning against his shoulder a bit and drawing her legs under the voluminous folds of her skirt. She began to read aloud from the novel in a low voice, pausing frequently to wet her throat with the whiskey.

They were three chapters and four drinks in when Hermione paused to set the book down. “My throat is getting tired. Do you mind taking over?”

Severus simply picked up the book and began where she’d left off as she snuggled her head into his shoulder and closed her eyes, listening to him read aloud.

Severus turned to present-day Hermione within the pensieve. “Did we often read like this?”

“Yes. After you recovered your voice we read almost every night. We only started taking turns a few days before this.”
He nodded and turned back to their past selves, curled on the sofa in what appeared to be a rather settled and companionable scene.

Hermione’s eyes were closed and she was leaned against him in a near doze when the door to the library burst open and Ron tumbled in. He was clearly three sheets to the wind, but straightened when he spotted Hermione cuddled next to his former Potions professor.

“I fucking knew it.” the boy growled.

“Knew what, Mr. Weasley?” Severus said in a bored tone of voice, not bothering to turn his head.

“I knew you’d make a move on her. Here you are, drinking and enjoying a nice night by the fire with my girl. Were you even bloody injured, or were you just faking it to make her feel sorry for you?”

Hermione sat up at this point, clearly not dozing and not even remotely comfortable. “Ronald, we’ve discussed this.” she said testily. “I’m not your girl. One kiss in the midst of a battle does not make me your girl. I’m not anyone’s girl, and it’s not your business if I choose to help Severus. I don’t wish to have this conversation again.” This last she bit off with a snap.

“You’re just like him. Fucking frigid bitch, aren’t you? I bet you’re only with him because he’ll never get it up for piece like you. Probably can’t, old fucker. I hope you don’t have any grand expectations Professor” he jeered. “Bitch doesn’t put out. Doesn’t even kiss that well if you ask me.”

Hermione simply stood there coolly, calmly and let her drunken friend berate her. Only the whitening of the knuckles on her empty wand hand betrayed the hurt his words brought.

It was at this point Severus rose from his seat. “Mr. Weasley, I realize you cannot hold your liquor like a man, but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and speak to you as one. I am not ‘making a move’ on Miss Granger because such antics are beneath me and not worthy a person who has earned my rarely-awarded respect. Miss Granger has been an invaluable help to me during my recovery. She has shown herself to be a friend to me when I had few to claim as my own, and I am grateful to her. You dishonor your own friendship with her by referring to her in such lewd terms, and I must insist that you cease doing so immediately.”

“Pffff. You’re welcome to her. Plenty of other fishes in the sea. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you when you try to warm your bed with a tray of ice.” Ron stumbled out the door and back toward the party, shouting something about drinking games and the two sourpusses in the library not wanting to play.

Severus lowered himself back to the sofa and turned to Hermione, who sat preternaturally still and erect beside him. “He’s inebriated, Hermione. Don’t pay any mind to anything he says.” He reached out and took her right hand, applying light pressure to the knuckles so that her tight grip would release. He soothed the red crescent shapes she’d dug into her palm.

She sighed and forced her body to relax slightly. “It’s nothing new, Severus. He’s said similar enough things sober, too. It’s why we never would’ve worked out to begin with. He’s just so...young.”

“As I recall, he always has been.”

She turned her face toward him then, her eyes dry and resigned. “Indeed. Thank you for standing up for me. You didn’t have to, but I’m awfully glad you did.” Her lips tilted upward in something approximating a smile, even if it didn’t reach her eyes.
“I meant what I said, Hermione. You helped me through the last few months as no one else could have. You’ve proven yourself to be a true friend when I’ve hardly deserved it, and I know I’ve shown little enough gratitude for it. I am sorry that he hurt you. Ronald really has no right to speak you that way, no matter what your history may be. You’re worth ten Ronald Weasleys.”

Gravely, she looked him in the eye. “It’s not a competition, Severus, but thank you all the same. Truth be told, it’s been nice feeling useful. And you do deserve to be cared for, no matter what you say.”

Even as an onlooker to the past, Severus could feel the force of her gaze. He saw that his past-self did too, but rather than recoiling as he expected to, past-Severus leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Hermione’s forehead.

“Come on. Let’s go make those rounds and head back. I don’t know about you, but the party has quite gone out of me.” He rose to his feet, keeping her hand in his and helping her rise as well.

She laughed now. “You never had any party in you to begin with. A half hour of meet-and-greet, then we can go and you can shed your odious costume. Though I insist you let Dennis get a picture of you first. You do look positively dashing, Severus.”

“We’ll see.” he said, making no promises. They went out the library door and made their way toward the voices in the kitchen.

The scene began to fade to black and Severus expected to be pulled out of the pensieve. When nothing happened, he looked toward Hermione in alarm. She put a hand on his arm and simply said, “Not yet. There’s more you need to see.”
A Novel Romance

Chapter Summary

The Halloween of '98 cliffhanger resolves in a most satisfying fashion.

Also, lemons in this chapter. Avoid the last third or so if you don't want to read the smutty bits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The scenery blurred again and Severus found that he and Hermione were staggering through the front door of his home in Spinner's End.

“I can’t believe Minerva out drank you! Minerva, of all people!” Hermione was giggling helplessly as she leaned her body to the side to hold a piece of wall up.

“You’ve never seen Minerva drink. Why do you think she offers to make the punch at these dos? That woman's bartending skills verge on alchemy. And never let her challenge you to a drinking contest. You’ll wake up wishing your head were detached.”

Hermione waved her hands about her face in some sort of gestural language that was lost on his present day self. “Severus, you let her challenge you to a drinking contest. Which you lost, I might point out.”

“Only because Mr. Weasley also participated in said contest and, unlike me, does not have access to a well-stocked cabinet full of sober-up, anti-nausea, and headache potions. Two of which I should seek out immediately.” He stumbled off toward the kitchen, where a small hutch did in fact contain several rows of carefully brewed potions, thanks to his renewed health and ability to brew and Hermione’s welcome expertise in his basement laboratory over the past two weeks.

Severus quickly grabbed two sober-up potions and nausea potions and wove his way back toward Hermione who seemed to be listing rather sharply to the left and was in danger of causing serious damage to the hall table.

“Here, drink” he said, pressing uncorking the sober-up potion first and pushing it into her hand before uncorking his own and quickly swallowing it down. Such brews were best consumed quickly and chased with...well, just about anything else. He handed her the an anti-nausea potion next before quaffing his own. It tasted better thanks the addition of cinnamon and stevia leaf to the brew; filthy tasting anti-nausea potions tended to be rather ineffective.

Severus braced a hand on the wall over Hermione’s head, breathing slowly through his nose as they waited for the potions to take effect. After a few minutes his head seemed to have cleared. He looked down and Hermione and saw that she was smiling up at him, her eyes clear and her body no longer listing to the side. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and guided her toward the sitting room, quickly conjuring a glass of water for her and then for himself. “Sit. I’ll make tea. Sip at this in the meantime.”
“I can do it. You should rest.”

With an impatient sigh, he waved his hand toward the room at large. “Hermione, just sit down. I’m not so far from recovered that I can’t manage bloody tea.”

She shrugged and plopped onto the sofa, her eyes trailing after him as he moved back toward the galley kitchen at the back of the house. She sipped at the water, wriggling into her normal place on the sofa and picking up her half-finished book on the coffee table. Glancing at the muggle clock on the wall, she was surprised to note it was still early. She mused aloud that she might be able to finish her book tonight.

Severus reflected that she seemed quite at ease in his home. It made a certain sense, he knew -- she was living there, helping to care for the place and for him -- but the rightness of her comfort is what struck him. She was sitting there with her feet tucked under the piles of tulle that were her skirt, leaning against the arm of the sofa with her head propped on her arm as she paged through a paperback novel (a period romance novel, he noted with a sneer). She looked...content. Even knowing that he was looking at the past, the scene gave him a little ache in the chest.

He strode back in carrying a bamboo wood tray with teapot, cups, saucers, milk, and sugar on it, all laid out properly as Eileen Snape would have demanded were she alive. Without a word he placed the tray on the table, sat, and doctored a cup the way he knew she liked it (milky, no sugar) before pouring his own cup (black, two sugars). He sat back and nodded toward her book. “Still reading that thing?”

She merely raised an eyebrow and turned back to her book with her cup of tea.

Not to be deterred, he pushed on. “Honestly, I don’t know how you can read that rubbish.” He took a prim sip of his tea. “Much less read it in front of others.”

This caught her attention. She marked her page and turned toward him, cup in hand. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure I’m understanding you Severus. First of all, why would I be embarrassed to read a book -- any book -- in front of you much less publicly?”

“Because that kind of reading,” he said, his tone dripping with disdain “is as about as edifying as a children’s book. And considerably more lascivious.”

“Have you ever read one?” she queried.

“A romance novel? I think not.”

“Then how would you know that it isn’t edifying?”

“Because I don’t have to read one to know that it isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on.”

She chuckled then, mirthlessly. “Severus, it never fails to shock me how utterly closed-minded you can be for someone with such varied tastes and capacity for truly intelligent thought. Not that it’s any of your business what I read, but allow me to broaden your mind:

The romance genre is the largest selling one in the muggle world. It accounts for more than half of all fiction books sold, but is disregarded as trash, porn, or otherwise intellectually barren. Why do you think that is?”

He shrugged, but he had a feeling he knew where she was going with this.

“This is because most people who snark on about romance novels have never bothered to read one.
They are full of empowered female characters and often complex male characters. They explore love -- not just the sexual parts, though that is always present much as in life, but also the development of healthy, sustaining relationships. Are they realistic? Sometimes, but often not. Are they lascivious? Often, and what’s wrong with that? You imply that by wanting to read a book about a couple that finds happiness after conflict, I’m somehow turning my brain to mush. You imply that I should be embarrassed to read about a sexually loving couple and thus deny my own sexuality. You imply that the book is poorly written, when I assure you it is not -- this author happens to have a PhD in English and teach at an American University. How is reading a romance novel any more or less cathartic, fulfilling, or stimulating than reading any other work of fiction?"*

Severus glowered at her. “It just is .”

She made a pffing noise with her lips. “You’re a moron.”

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, surprised at her vehemence.

“You are! You’re literally judging my book by its cover, and judging me along with it! What, because I’m female I can’t enjoy a good sex scene?”

“You’re reading period romance, Hermione. Hardly the stuff of egalitarian relationships or open-minded sexual ideals.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “Judging without knowing again, Severus! Goodness that’s a bad habit of yours. Do you think that so many of us -- women and men alike, I should point out -- would happily fall into these books if they only depicted repressed women with no interests outside the home? Period romance novelists tend to include heavily proto-feminist characters who have interests and pursuits of their own. This heroine is a budding naturalist who is discovering how to be herself without conforming to the dictates of society -- whether her husband likes it or not. I’ve just gotten to the point that where the husband realizes that he loves the woman more because she has actual depth of feeling for something other than society’s sartorial choices and conforming to the role of a Duke’s wife.”*

“Then that author is, perhaps, the exception to the rule.” Present-Severus recognized the mullish set of his jaw. He’d just realized he was wrong and was trying to double-down without acting a complete arse.

“I’m afraid that this author IS the rule, Severus. Perhaps you should refrain from expressing an opinion about my reading choices until you’re better informed.”

His sneer broadened. “Fine.”

“Good. We’ll say no more of it, then.” She sniffed and turned back to her tea and her novel.

“No, I meant fine, educate me. Read me some of your book.”

She stared at him before a slow grin broke out over her face. “Seriously?”

“Why not? We read to each other almost every night anyway...if it’s so wonderful, why shouldn’t we read your novel?” He was trying very hard to keep the disdain from coating his words. It mostly worked. Kind of.

“You’re absolutely right, Severus. I should start from the beginning then. Get comfortable.” She placed a bookmark in her stopping place and flipped back to the front of the book, settling against the cushions more firmly and beginning to read.
She'd read to him for hours. In that time he'd met the hero and heroine and some of their myriad friends. There had been some sex -- albeit far less than he'd expected -- but it had been horrible and unfulfilling. The heroine was uninitiated into the world of sex and the hero was clueless about taking care of his lover. The heroine fled to the home of a friend where she was convinced to pursue her own interests in naturalism. By the time the casement clock struck two, (somewhere in the middle of the fourth pot of tea), the hero had clued into what he was missing and vowed to woo his entrancing and surprisingly intelligent wife.

Hermione had shifted on the couch and was now leaning against his shoulder. “I think I need to stop there. It’s late and if I read much longer my voice will be good for nothing tomorrow.”

“Ah. I’ve finally discovered the way to silence the Gryffindor know-it-all. Read her into submission!”

“Shut it, you.” she said with a none-too-gentle slap to his chest. “Ugh. I should go to bed, but I don’t feel sleepy at all.”

“Ah, that’s probably my fault. I tweaked the sober-up to include some of the properties of pepper-up. Um. You’ll probably be wired for a couple more hours.”

“Great. Good thing I’m not back at Hogwarts. I’d be livid if I’d wasted an entire weekend partying and recovering rather than revising for N.E.W.T.s.”

He glanced at her. “You’re still planning on going back when it reopens next year?”

“Hmm? Yes. I was talking to Filius about it a bit at the party while you and Minerva were swilling whatever that dreck she mixed with Ronald, Seamus, and Percy -- and Merlin, isn’t he a pathetic drunk...I don’t even know why he was drinking with you unless it was to keep an eye on Ron. Anyway, it sounds like Minerva is going to encourage me to begin work on my Transfiguration mastery while I work on N.E.W.Ts. Since I’ll be 20 by the time I’m back at school, it doesn’t make sense to delay until graduation.”

Severus shifted to look down at Hermione more directly. “That’s...excellent news. Seriously excellent. You’d do very well to apprentice under Minerva.”

“Mmm. Yes. She really is fantastic, isn’t she?” Hermione smiled softly into the distance. “Will you be returning to Hogwarts? I know Minerva would love to have you back as D.A.D.A. professor.”

Severus seemed uncomfortable as he hesitated and broke eye contact. “I -- I haven’t decided yet.”

If Hermione noted the hesitation, she didn’t say anything. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Hermione seemed to notice that she was practically cuddling her former Potions professor and began to draw away. Severus looked back toward her with a little frown on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that we won’t be able to be friends like this if you return to Hogwarts. You’ll be my professor again. It would be...well, it wouldn’t be right.”

He nodded his head and seemed to be debating whether or not to speak. “Honestly, I think whether or not I return to Hogwarts may be your decision rather than mine.”

Hermione looked at him questioningly.

“I um...haven’t been entirely honest with you the past few weeks. Nor was I honest with Mr. Weasley
this evening. About...um...bugger, I’m no good at this.” He scraped a hand through his hair, making it stand on end with all the gunk she’d put in it.

Hermione had reached out to place a hand on his knee. “Severus, what is it? You can tell me.”

He grabbed her hand as though it were lifeline, shifting his body to face hers and forcing himself to look her in the eye once more. “He accused me of ‘making a move’ on you, which I have not. But...butIwouldverymuchliketo. And I can’t very well be your professor ifyousayyes.” He finished in a rush.

Hermione’s face froze for nearly a full minute before her lips tilted up in response. “Really?”

“Yes.” Severus replied, glancing toward their joined hands.

Present-day Severus watched as the grin on Hermione’s face grew broader and broader until, quite to the surprise of both Severuses in the room, she scooted closer to him and pressed her lips to his. Severus felt Present-Hermione’s hand creep into his as they watched her past-self kiss him on in the dim sitting room (which he had to admit, still felt strangely voyeuristic though they were observing themselves).

The kiss broke and a furiously blushing Severus looked down at the woman next to him. “Hermione -- I...honestly have no idea what I was going to say just then.”

“Why say anything? I rather like you too, Severus. And I think I would very much like you to ‘make a move’ on me sometime soon.” Her smile was shy, but genuine. Severus breathed a sigh of relief.

“That went much better than anticipated.”

“Good. Look, I’m still kind of wired. You want to do something with all this excess energy?” The mixed look of outright terror and speculative interest on Severus’ face brought a bark of laughter.

“Not that. I meant...going for a walk or something.”

“Hermione, it’s two in the morning. Spinner’s End is not the type of neighborhood where one goes for a stroll in the middle of the night, magic user or no.”

She sighed. “Right. Back to the book then?”

“I thought your voice was tired,” he said, snaking an arm around her waist to draw her closer.

“It is. You read.” She looked at him expectantly.

He thought for a moment before saying, “Alright. I’ll admit, I’m intrigued to see how the hero and heroine sort this business out. But if you repeat that to anyone, I will hex your jaw shut and toss you in a barrel of Cornish Pixies.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” she responded cheekily.

Severus picked up the book and began to read aloud. It was strange to hear the book in a masculine voice; he supposed the writing felt somehow feminine to him, despite being written in the third person. Perhaps it was just because the book focused so closely on women’s thoughts and conversations...

Soon enough, he found himself flipping pages into what promised to be a rather lengthy scene of seduction. Hermione was cuddled against his shoulder again and he found himself peeking at her to see if she was still awake. She was, but her eyes were only half open as she listened to his voice
tumble over the words in the little book.

Present-Severus was well aware of what must be going on in his past-self’s head. He could see the evidence of his mounting arousal clearly though the tight-pants and open-cut jerkin he was still clothed in. He was sure that his past-self was desperately hoping that Hermione’s usual skills of observation were muted by the lateness of the hour. He found himself shifting uncomfortably while present-Hermione shot him a knowing look. The scene in the book was heating up and Severus found himself uncomfortably warm along with it. Without looking at her, he found himself speaking over the liquid tones of his past-self’s voice. “Hermione, as much as this is entertaining, why are we watching this?”

She squeezed his hand. “It’s important. You’ll see.”

He could see that past-Hermione was very aware of the growing situation, as it were, and that she was just as aroused by the scene his past-self was reading aloud as he was. The pulse in her neck was pulsing quickly as she glanced from Severus’ face to the book in his hands, to the erection in his lap.

Hermione cuddled closer to Severus, shifting the hand on his knee higher, to grip his thigh. His voice wobbled slightly in pitch, but Severus otherwise showed no reaction to this change. Emboldened, she shifted her hand again, this time rolling it inward in his leg so that it was scant inches from his crotch. This caused a very definite hitch in Severus’ vocal stride.

“Why, you sneaky little minx!” present-Severus chuckled.

“Sneaky? Hardly. I’m a Gryffindor. Call it brave.”

A moment later, Hermione truly was brave. With a look of impish glee, she placed her hand directly over Severus’ cock, running her finger down its length, moving her hand with the nap of the velvet fabric. Past-Severus shuddered out a breath. “Hermione…” he breathed in warning.

She stroked him again. “Keep reading.” He shot her a worried look but did as she bade. As the lovers in the book began to explore one another’s bodies, so Hermione began to explore his. She set herself to the task of unlacing the breeches of his costume and slipping her hand inside his shorts.

Present-Severus watched as the young woman began to stroke him as he attempted to continue reading the book aloud. Present-Hermione smirked at him as his normally melodious voice began to wobble like a pubescent teen’s.

Past-Hermione continued to move her hand up and down his length within the confines of his shorts and his voice grew thready with need. As the hero and heroine of the novel reached their climax together, he carefully marked the passage in the book and spoke to the woman half in his lap. “Hermione, not an hour ago you intimated that this was not on the agenda for the evening.”

She looked at him from beneath her lashes as he set the book aside. “I’ve changed my mind. Clearly.”

“Are you sure, pet?” He sounded as though he were on the verge of explosion.

“I’m of sound mind and very horny body, Severus. I’m quite sure that I would like to be with you tonight.”

“Good.” In a move that belied his recently convalescent state, Severus lifted Hermione so that she was straddling his lap. Her full skirt was bunched between them and tulle was tickling his chin. She looked at him and laughed at the annoyed look on his face as he fought with the fabric, finally
waving her hand to dispense with their costumes entirely. They stared at one another with their underthings between them until she leaned in and took his mouth with hers, grinding her pelvis against his straining cock as she did so.

The sound that emerged from Severus’ mouth wasn’t human. It sound like something between a growl and a screech, and he bucked his hips against hers in a mime of action he truly wanted. They devoured one another, hands tangling hair and nails scraping skin, each fighting to shed the other of the last barriers between their skin. Suddenly Hermione broke their kiss and thrust out her hand, panting “Accio wand!” into the heavy air. Her wand slapped into her palm and she pointed it at her belly, incanting the words of a contraceptive charm before tossing the length of wood onto the coffee table behind her.

Turning her attention back to the man beneath her, she took him in her hand and guided him to her waiting core. “Hermione, love. Slow down. Let me --.”

“Now, Severus. I need you now. I’ve been waiting for you all night. Now.” She pressed the tip of him against her and present-Severus watched as his past-self thrust inside in one swift movement.

Hermione released a pained cry, her head dropping back as she gripped at his shoulders. Severus stared at her, barely comprehending what had just happened. “Oh Gods. Hermione, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

She leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his to silence his recriminations. “Severus, it’s fine. I wanted this. It just...hurt more than Ginny and Lavender implied it would. It’s already fading.” She moved her hips atop him tentatively, then, pleased with the sensation, more boldly. “See love. It was only a moment. It’s fine now. Move with me, Severus. Move in me.”

With little choice, Severus allowed his body to take over. He thrust up into his lover gently, allowing her to set the pace as she rode him on his worn leather sofa. The old piece of furniture creaked beneath them, unused to such activities on its soft cushions. Severus reached down between their bodies and found her swollen clitoris. He placed his thumb against it, flicking the little bud back and forth as she rolled her hips, and grinned when she began to come unwound. Her movements became jerky and finally ceased when she bowed her back and dropped her head, keening her orgasm to the room. His arched his own back, thrusting his hips upward, seeking more contact with her spasming body until he too gave a shout as his release claimed him.

As she came down from her high, he drew her close, cradling her to his torso as though she were something precious and fragile. “Thank you.” he whispered into her hair.

She nuzzled at his neck. “Mmm. For what? If anything I should be thanking you.”

“You trusted me to be your first. I’m only sorry I wasn’t more patient with you. You deserved more your first time.”

She raised her head and looked at him with sleepy eyes. “I got exactly what I wanted from my first time, love. I got you.” She gave a soft chuckle. “And I think you might have managed to use up all the energy from that sober-up. Can we go to bed now?”
He looked down at the sofa, a look of regret clear in his eyes. Present-Severus understood this well - he hadn’t even taken her to a bed. “Yes. Come on, pet.” He slowly extricated his softening member from her body and waved a hand to wandlessly cleanse them both, wincing momentarily at the evidence of her innocence on his cock. Taking her hand, he enfolded her in a brief hug, then led her toward the stairs.

The scene faded to black and Severus felt the familiar rush of leaving the pensieve memory.

He looked up at Hermione’s face across from him to find her staring back at him over the enchanted bowl. “So I was your first.”

She nodded. “You were.”

“Did I…was I good to you, that first time?” He hated that his voice sounded so terribly insecure.

Hermione rose from her chair and slid into his lap. “Severus, I didn’t tell you that night because I was afraid you’d balk at the idea of bedding a virgin. You were very good to me that night, and almost every night after for quite some time. I was more than half in love with you by that Halloween, and I went into your arms willingly. Please, don’t berate yourself for being a bit rough. I enjoyed it, and that night remains a treasured memory.”

“Plus you got me to read you a romance novel.” he snorted. Looking into her smiling eyes, he groaned. “Oh, no. Don’t tell me.”

“I got you to read me many romance novels, Severus. I think you rather became a fan.”

“That would explain my penchant for Edith Wharton and Elizabeth Gaskell in recent years. And if you repeat that I’ll --”

“I know, I know. You’ll hex my mouth shut. So you said often enough back then.”

“Yes, well.” In a sudden change of mood he patted her bum to shift her off his lap. “Come on, pet. Let’s go for a walk. I need to stretch my legs and work off some of the second hand lust from that memory.” He proffered an arm toward her, which she took with alacrity as they set off in the direction of the castle grounds.

Chapter End Notes

I read a lot of romance novels, period and otherwise (but mostly Regency through Edwardian era Britain). I love them. I love happy ever afters and fated lovers. I love descriptions of period fashion and balls and society manners. I love empowered women showing their men what it means to love and to be in relationship, and learning those things for themselves in turn. At the end of the day, I still look forward to putting my feet up with a good story.

I was teased mercilessly for this proclivity in college and in grad school. Oh, there was lots of judgment. I took it in stride, mostly, allowing people to make fun of me; eventually I stopped talking about romance altogether. I read other things too, so I talked about my sci-fi or fantasy reads, my academic reads, my journal reads. I never stopped devouring the novels in secret, hiding them on my Kindle instead of on my shelves. And I never stopped seething about the lack of understanding. It took a while, but eventually
I started to talk about my tastes again in greater detail because, in the end, I felt stupid
for allowing them to control my expression of love for books about expressions of love.

*The author I am referencing here is, in fact, Eloisa James...one of my favorite novelists
(right up there with Julia Quinn, Lisa Kleypas, Sarah MacLean...and, this list goes on
for a while...). Hermione is reading An Affair Before Christmas which I have taken the
liberty of pushing into existence a good ten years before it actually came out. It’s magic,
‘kay? Many of the points I am referring to in my rant above refer to the author’s
AMAZING op-ed on romance (written under her professional name, Mary Bly), which
was published in The New York Times. If you’re interested in some really well-
reasoned, analytical arguments to throw in the faces of romance novel nay-sayers, I
highly recommend you search and read “A Fine Romance”, published in NYT Feb 12,
2005.

Also, read on, romance lovers. Read on.
Severus gets some more information on his condition, and Rita Skeeter is a nuisance.

Severus’ life had quickly fallen into a new routine. Wake up, often with Hermione, run to his quarters or chase her from his to prepare for the day. Head downstairs for breakfast in the Great Hall (most days), teach, dine in the Great Hall for dinner (most days), spend the evening reading or grading or lesson planning with Hermione, view a memory or two and discuss, make love or fuck, and sleep. With Hermione. He was surprised to find that nearly every aspect of his life had shifted slightly to make room for her and amazed that he didn’t mind it one bit.

His relationship with the younger woman felt as natural as breathing, a fact that he could only guess had something to do with the memory remnants from their previous relationship. Hermione seemed content as well, sliding into a routine that she admitted felt natural to her too. He congratulated himself on managing to get the whole relationship-with-an-intelligent-woman thing right for once. She’d even liked her birthday gift.

He was pretty proud of that one. He’d spent the better part of the previous weekend formulating a scent tailored not to her, but to her emotions. It was an idea he’d been tinkering with on and off over the years, but he hadn’t found much of a practical application for it and so hadn’t pursued the research. However, the prospect of courting and making love to a woman in the last few weeks had driven him to take his ideas and turn them into reality. The project had come together more quickly than he’d anticipated and with minimal tinkering, almost as though it wanted to come into existence. After testing the potion on himself with no adverse effects, he’d bottled the pale green liquid into a crystal atomizer and placed it into the magically expanded book he’d purchased in Edinburgh on their first date. The book had seemed rather empty with only the lonely perfume bottle suspended there, so he’d literally run to Hogsmeade on Monday morning to purchase a ridiculous number of chocolate roses, sugar quills, and licorice wands to surround the vial. On some level he realized that the act was ludicrous, but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

Hermione, of course, had been thrilled when he presented her with the gift on Monday night. She had immediately sprayed the perfume at her pulse points and spent another five minutes sniffing at her wrists. There may have been leaping followed by an hour of snogging on her sofa during which they’d discovered that “happy” Hermione smelled of satsumas and honeysuckle and “aroused” Hermione smelled of anise hyssop and crème caramel. They’d lain in bed as she plucked chocolate rose petals from her gift and fed them to him. The sugar quills had been used for other activities altogether.

They’d even managed to make tremendous progress on their plans for the advanced animagus course; the syllabus and lesson plans were complete, so the course would begin just before Halloween. His regular classes were going well too. They were on track to being caught up by month’s end and he’d already began to lay the groundwork for their survival course in the spring.

He couldn’t remember a time when he was this satisfied with both his work and personal lives. He
was so preoccupied with containing the smirk that wanted to stretch across his face as he strode into the Great Hall Friday morning that he didn’t notice the speculative looks he was receiving from each of his students. He’d taken his seat next to Hermione and nodded hello to the other faculty members before noticing that half of the students in the hall were openly staring.

Her frowned. “What -- “ He didn’t need to finish his statement before she slid a copy of *The Hogwarts Spectator* slid in front of him.

It would appear that they were front page news. The top headline read “The Dueling Professors” and contained a blow-by-blow of the dueling exhibition the previous weekend. It was quite well-written and struck a good balance between sports commentary and congratulatory excitement for Professor Granger’s win. He quirked an eyebrow at Hermione in confusion -- surely this hadn’t caused the glances he was seeing around the hall.

Then she slid the morning’s copy of *The Daily Prophet* toward him.

The top story’s byline was from one Rita fucking Skeeter.

“Lovers’ Quarrel at Hogwarts! War Heroes’ Violent Battle in Front of Gathered Students!”

The story was absolutely salacious. Not only did it contain allusions to a “tawdry affair” between two already-scandalous professors with questionable pasts -- ignoring the fact that their pasts were only rendered questionable by her vitriolic articles over the years -- but Skeeter had implied that they’d endangered the students by rowing in the Great Hall.

Hermione recoiled when Severus raised his eyes from the article; she hadn’t seen that look on his face since before the final battle. All light had gone out of his eyes when he’d occluded to block the simmering anger that was threatening to erupt after reading the article. He turned his head toward Minerva and ground out “You may want to redirect the mail tomorrow, Minerva. I suspect that several of us will be receiving Howlers.”

The Headmistress nodded at the man crisply. “Already done, Severus.”

He turned his attention toward his breakfast, slicing through his black pudding with a deliberate click of knife on china.

Inside he was seething.

Hermione’s voice filtered through his roiling thoughts. “Clearly one of the students owled an advance copy of the paper to someone at *The Prophet*. I think we can both guess who it is.”

He nodded tersely, not trusting his voice to reply. Severus bit through a piece of unbuttered toast to keep his mouth too full to speak for a few moments longer.

“I’ve already spoken to Luna,” she continued, glancing at the empty chair to her right. “She has promised to take care of the problem and extends her apologies.”

He washed the toast down with a gulp of tea before speaking. “It isn’t Luna’s fault. The article for the school paper was excellent, but Rita has twisted it into something it’s not, just as she always does. I’m not sure there’s a way to combat innuendo.”

She nodded and murmured back *sotto voce*, “Especially when there’s a grain of truth in it.”

“Just so.”
She turned her head toward him with a smile he recognized as sign of a plot afoot. “Then we’ll have to find another way to silence the little beetle. In the meantime, would you like to have a word with Kiefer Skeeter this afternoon? Or shall I?”

He sighed as the first blast of anger started to dissipate. “Allow me. You may have developed a reputation for undesirable detentions, but you aren’t nearly frightening enough yet. You’re too pretty to be truly scary.”

She chuckled. “I think I’ll take that as a compliment. Go easy on him. There’s an off chance he might not be the informant.”

“Kindly do not attempt to give me lessons on how to be a spy, Professor Granger. I’ve been at this far longer than you.”

She snorted and sipped her tea.

By the end of his second class of the day, Severus was at his wit’s end. “Mr. Standish, if you do not desist in harassing Miss Plint I will place you in a body bind and leave you here for Mr. Filch to find this evening.” His students had been full of giggles throughout the first class and close to uncontrollable in the second. He found himself reverting to his old teaching techniques, relying on menacing threats and quiet intimidation by turns. He found that this return to his former persona brought him little joy, particularly after the successes of the past few weeks. He sighed and raked a hand through his hair, noting that it was nearly time for a haircut. He’d have to see if he could get away for the castle for an hour tomorrow and head into Hogsmeade for a --

“Miss Forsythe! If I have forbidden Mr. Standish to pull Miss Plint’s braids, surely you can exercise enough restraint to not chase Mr. Harcourt about the room in an attempt to secure a kiss. I believe you are supposed to be working through the vampire identification scenario I provided, not foisting yourself upon your unsuspecting classmates!”

Forty minutes until the little blighters leave for lunch. I just have to not maim an eleven year-old for forty more minutes. Severus ground his teeth as he counted off the time.

As the last few minutes of the first-year Slytherin-Hufflepuff Defense class ticked by, he rose and approached Kiefer Skeeter. Placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder, he drew him aside from the class. “Mr. Skeeter, lease remain after class.” He saw the boy’s eyes narrow as he nodded and released his shoulder, not wishing to cause the boy any embarrassment. Yet.

The approached him proudly after his classmates had been dismissed. “Do you know why I asked you to remain behind, Mr. Skeeter?”

“Because of The Prophet today, sir,” the boy replied sullenly.

Severus raised an eyebrow. Well that’s cutting straight to the chase . “Yes, Mr. Skeeter. I cannot help but wonder where the paper is getting its information.”

“Professor, I think I can explain a little.” He waited to see Severus’ nod of assent. “People always ask me if I tell my aunt things because we share a last name. I don’t. I barely know her, sir.”

“Aunt? You mean…?”
The boy looked at the toes of his shoes, his cheeks flushing bright pink. “Yes, sir. My father’s sister. They don’t really talk, you see. She said some things about my step-mom when father married her and now the wards won’t let her near our house. But people ask a lot when something gets published because of my last name. They always think I told her, but I don’t. Sir.”

Severus looked at the boy. He felt guilty, singling the boy out as he had; the poor boy clearly dealt with this frequently. “I see, Mr. Skeeter. Thank you for being so forthright about the matter. I was going to ask you if you had spoken to Ms. Skeeter, but I was unaware of the distance between your family connections. I can see now that you are not the source of the gossip that was published this morning and I’ll apologize for embarrassing you. I don’t want you to worry that I will ask again, and I’ll inform Professor Granger our conversation if you don’t mind.”

Kiefer nodded, but continued to stare at his shoes.

After a moment’s thought, Severus continued. “Have others asked you about this recently?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy mumbled.

“I see. Mr. Skeeter -- Kiefer, I have also had to shoulder the blame for things that were not my fault. If you wish to speak to someone about it, I am willing to listen.”

The boy looked up in surprise. “Thank you, Professor Snape. Can I ask...how could you stand it? It’s been like for awhile now.”

“To be truthful, I didn’t handle it well. I internalized it and then took it out on other people. I think you might have heard something about how I used to be when I taught here before, yes?” He shot the boy a wicked grin.

“They said you were horrible, sir.” The boy said it with some relish.

“I’ll tell you a secret, Mr. Skeeter. I was worse. I was a terror. I don’t even know that I was a particularly good teacher back then. I had to be horrible -- it was part of being a spy -- but the constant blame made it worse. I was the meanest, snarkiest git you’d ever met. They used to call me the Bat of the Dungeons, among other things.”

Kiefer giggled, and Severus was glad to see some of the boy’s humor restored.

“So I’ll say this to you. Find people to talk to. You can talk to me or Professor Granger. You can also talk to the Headmistress. Do you have any friends outside of Slytherin House?”

The boy colored again, but didn’t drop his gaze. “Callie Caldwell in Hufflepuff has been very nice.”

“To be truthful, I didn’t handle it well. I internalized it and then took it out on other people. I think you might have heard something about how I used to be when I taught here before, yes?” He shot the boy a wicked grin.

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Severus sighed and sat back in his chair. Clearly that was a dead end...he’d still like to know how the
devil Rita Skeeter was getting advance copies of the school paper, but he supposed that was more Professor Longbottom’s problem than his own. With a sigh, he rose and strode toward the great hall. He could use a pumpkin pasty himself.

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“So Skeeter isn’t his mother?” Hermione asked, curled up next to Severus on his sofa that evening while they did their marking.

Severus tugged at his ear before slashing another short answer through with his red-inked quill. “Apparently not. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me to check the enrollment records; I didn’t even know that she had an older brother.” He frowned down at the parchment in his lap and grumbled “Holy water? Do they not listen to anything I say? Holy water is a muggle myth.”

Hermione sighed a bit, picking her way through her own stack of error-riddled essays -- no, fine china was NOT one of the five exceptions to Gamp’s Elemental Law of Transfiguration. Honestly. “Well, I suppose that would have been too easy a solution. Rita is a lot of things and sneaky is probably the top of the list; she wouldn’t work so obviously.

Severus grunted in response, sipping at his brandy as he continued with his marking. He looked up when a silvery cat bounded into the room and Minerva’s voice emerged. “Severus, would you please attend me in my office as soon as possible?” Just as quickly the cat bounded toward Hermione and repeated the message.

With a sigh, they rose from the couch. “So much for a quiet night in,” he said with a wry smile.

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Severus was surprised to see Kingsley Shacklebolt and Percy Weasley seated at the round table in the Headmistress’ offices when they arrived. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond to the presence of the Minister of Magic and his assistant, so he simply nodded a greeting and turned toward Minerva expectantly.

She didn’t make him wait. “Ah, Severus, Hermione. I’m glad you were both able to come quickly. I’m sorry for disturbing your evening, but Kingsley had some news of progress on your condition.”

“How gracious of him to deliver it himself.” Severus replied, glancing toward Kingsley.

“Oh, stuff it Snape,” the man replied good naturedly. “I came as a friend, and after Harry received Hermione’s missive last week and forwarded it to me,” Severus shot a look to Hermione who rolled her eyes and shrugged, “I thought you might want an update on the progress of the investigation.”

Severus raised his eyebrows. “Investigation? Is it that official, then?”

Kingsley chuckled. “I haven’t broadcast it to the Ministry, if that’s what you’re wondering. I put one of my best aurors on the case; someone whom I know holds no prejudice against you and will work to see this through to its conclusion.”
Severus groaned. “Don’t tell me. You put Potter on the case, didn’t you.”

The Minister gave the younger wizard a cheeky smile. “I did indeed, and he’s made some progress!”

Sighing, Severus held out a chair for Hermione to take a seat, then took his own at the table. “Alright. Please fill me in. I’d like to know what Potter discovered.”

Percy slid a file across the table to Severus as the Kingsley began to speak. “The form of obliviate that used to wipe your memory -- *obliviate granum* -- is essentially a very subtle compulsion spell linked with a obliviation. Part of the problem, as I’m sure you know, is that it was never standardized. Each person who performs the charm leaves a distinct identifying pattern to the magic. Over the past three years or so, I’ve had a small team tracing the various forms of seed obliviation in order to find out who the major political players have been behind the scenes, so to speak. Some of the results of that investigation are in front of you.”

“Excellent work, Minister, but how does that help me?”

“Percy here has been the primary liaison between my office and the investigative team. He has learned the diagnostic spell for identifying the caster of the obliviate. If you’ll allow him, he will analyze you and match your results to our records of known casters. Do you agree?”

Severus slanted his eyes toward the middle Weasley child and nodded. The boy might have been a prig, but he was trustworthy. “Go ahead Mr. Weasley.”

The red-headed bureaucrat stood and picked up his wand. “Thank you, Professor Snape. This won’t take a moment.” Severus felt an electric tingle as the spell was cast, as though the hairs on his arms were standing on end, but it subsided as a series of runes appeared in the air near his head.

Percy frowned at the runes as he jotted them down. “I don’t recognize these. Just a tick and I’ll compare them to the info we have.” He pulled a small black box out of his robes and tapped it with his wand before setting it atop the runes he’d just recorded. The box sat on the parchment, unresponsive.

“That’s odd.” Percy tapped the box again, but received no response. “Sir, I don’t believe we have a match,” he said, turning toward his employer.

Kingsley huffed. “I was afraid of that. It’s not great news, but it isn’t horrible news either. At least we know that none of the current members of the political cabinet or Wizengamot have tampered with you, Severus. I realize it’s not the result you were hoping for, but it’s a beginning.”

Severus shrugged, struggling to mask his disappointment. He should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. “That’s alright, Kingsley. I appreciate you coming out to Hogwarts on a Friday to help me, regardless.”

“Think nothing of it, Severus. We’re going to get to the bottom of this for you, I promise.” He paused as Percy cleared his throat and shot a meaningful look at the Minister. It was apparently the signal that they were out of time, this meeting. “I have a floo-call with the Chinese Minister of Magic soon and need to return to my office, but I’m going to send Potter to you next week for a further interview. We’ll get to the bottom of this.” He turned toward Hermione. “Thank you for contacting Harry with the *granum* theory, Hermione. It’s helped us make more progress in the last week than we have since we found out about this mess. If you have anymore bright theories or suspicions, please send them along.”

Severus nodded politely at the former auror-turned-politician and rose to shake hands. “Thanks again
for your attention to this, Kingsley. I realize it’s a bit below your pay grade these days.”

Kingsley actually looked affronted. “Nonsense, Severus. You’re my friend, a former Order member, and a national hero. If my own personal integrity didn’t insist that I try to help, my political wiles certainly would.” He grinned. “Speaking of, I’m disappointed that you haven’t popped by for a drink since you’ve returned from your travels. I don’t know if you remember, but we used to share the occasional whiskey in the months before you left. It would be nice to do so again and hear about what you got up to over there.”

The dark wizard’s eyes widened at that declaration. “I hadn’t realized, Kingsley. But, well...now that I know, I’d be happy to catch up. Send me an owl with a time and I’ll arrange to be there.”

Percy cleared his throat again. “Alright, jailer. I know, I know!” He chuckled at his assistant. “The man is more punctual than a goblin-made timepiece! Runs me ragged, I tell you. I’ll have Percy get in touch with a time for a drink. Have a good evening, Severus, Hermione. Minerva, your servant.”

With a quick wave, Kingsley strode toward the fire and flooed back to his offices.

Hermione sighed and sank back into her chair. “So we’re nowhere.”

“No, Hermione. That little test allowed the investigation to weed out all the usual suspects. Now they’ll have to start looking in more unusual places,” Minerva replied in her typical no-nonsense way.

“I’ll admit, I do wish that more progress had been made, but they have narrowed the field. None of the usual suspects. Someone at the ball. Likely someone with a grudge against me, but unwilling to physically harm me for some reason. I can cross-reference the list Kingsley provided tonight with the original list of ball attendees and narrow down the suspect list further. It helps, even if not much.”

“I just can’t help but be frustrated with their progress, Severus. Sharing my memories with you is all well and good, but whomever did this stole an entire year from your life. They stole your friendships and the things you felt and your experiences and filled the hole with tripe. It’s not fair that someone who did so much for the wizarding world would be treated this way.”

Severus smiled at Hermione, touched that her sense of justice was still so finely honed and focused on him. He reached out and touched her hand in mute comfort. What else could he say -- she was, after all, perfectly correct.

The move did not go unnoticed by their employer. “It seems that you regained some things from that lost year, Severus. Am I to assume that Rita Skeeter stumbled on a partial truth in her more recent articles?”

Hermione grabbed at his hand before he could snatch it away. “Yes, Minerva. We’re dating. Discretely. We’d ask that it not be spread around though; we don’t intend this to be common knowledge amongst the student population if we can help it.”

The elder witch’s eyes crinkled as her face broke into a soft smile. “Hermione, you may try to hide it but I’ve suspected the direction that things were heading for quite some time. You spend nearly every free minute in each other’s company! And...I’ll admit that I assigned you to the same rounds schedule in the hopes that you’d be able to reestablish your friendship.” She blushed a bit at her meddling.

“Minerva, that’s positively Dumbledorean!” Severus accused.

“Oh, shut it Severus. Don’t pretend you’re not happy with this turn of events.”
“Happy, yes. But not terribly pleased to be manipulated,” he admitted.

“Well, then don’t give me reason to manipulate you again, dear boy!” she said, her eyes twinkling in a nauseatingly familiar fashion. “Now off with you. Friday night is no time to spend in my office, and I have plans of my own to attend to. Go make some trouble. Discretely.”

Chapter End Notes

Shameless self promotion: I have another multi-chapter fic going. It'll update on a weekly(ish) basis as well.
Chapter Summary

Dinner with the Potters, a bit more information on Severus' state of mind, and catching up to the terrible trio who tried to turn Hermione's class into a wet t-shirt contest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 07, 2005

There were times when Severus hated being right. As predicted, the Howlers started arriving the very next morning and didn’t abate for nearly two weeks. Half of the letters chastised them for daring to bring a lover’s tiff to Hogwarts’ august halls (as though that had never happened before); the other half took great delight in castigating either Severus or Hermione -- sometimes both -- for sullying the name of a war hero. A few accused Severus of cradle robbing, though most seemed more interest on attacking Hermione for being a gold-grubbing whore. As though her Order of Merlin hadn’t contained the same monetary award that is had.

Skeeter’s accusations were, of course, scurrilous. They also sold untold papers, which is why the thrice-damned newspaper kept her in ink and Quick Quotes Quills. Normally Severus would have ignored the issue, but his classes were becoming more unruly by the day. Being made a laughing stock was one thing; having his lover’s character steadily assassinated was quite another. His students thought him gullible, taken in by the harpy fame-seeker, and failed to see the irony in their own easy belief of Skeeter’s lies. He would have rolled his eyes if he weren’t so busy trying to keep his students from inadvertently hexing themselves into permanent stupidity. Sadly, Severus found himself relying more and more on the scare tactics of the decade before to subdue the dunderheads in his classroom. Clearly something would have to be done, and soon. He just couldn’t think of what, or more importantly, how to get to Rita blasted Skeeter and her merry band of spies. (Oh, the woman had informants somewhere. He was still spy enough to recognize a megalomaniac mastermind when he saw one.)

An opportunity arrived in the form of an invitation, nestled between three bright red and smoking envelopes when Severus arrived in his rooms after teaching one evening. (He’d taken to having the mail delivered to the his apartments’ hearth, so that they might burst into flame without singeing his belongings.) Lucius Malfoy was hosting a charity ball for Guy Fawkes Day. Interesting. An attached note within read, simply:

S--

Simply respond in the affirmative and spare me your whinging. Bring your “handsy, hellion harlot,” to quote one R. Skeeter. We’re embracing all things Muggle this year; there will be a bonfire and fireworks of many kinds. Dress is formal; for Narcissa’s sake, don’t wear black.

--L
Interesting. Lucius was clearly still attempting to repair the Malfoy reputation by opening his home to all and sundry and spending ungodly amounts of money on food, drink, and political favors. It was comforting to know how little some things changed.

A knock on his door drew Severus’ attention and he opened it to find Hermione there. She greeted him with a quick bus on the cheek before flinging herself into her usual chair by the fire.

“I had a dreadful day. What about you?” she said, toeing off her shoes.

“Merely awful. I suspect next week will hint more at dreadful if my students’ behavior continues to deteriorate at its current rate.”

“Yes, well, I suspect your students just think you easily taken in. Mine thing I’ve suddenly become glory-hound. As if I ever wanted the spotlight to begin with. That was more Ron’s thing.”

“I believe we may have just been offered some assistance.” Severus handed Hermione the embossed invitation and accompanying note, smiling at the snort that escaped her as she read “handsy, hellion harlot”.

“What’s Lucius playing at?” she asked him, looking up.

“I’m not entirely sure, but it’s clear he has something planned for Skeeter -- and that our attendance will be required to pull it off. I’m in a mood to satisfy Lucius’ whim. What say you? Would you like to attend the ball with me, Harlot dearest?” he smirked.

“At least Harlot Hermione is more alliterative than the Gryffindor Princess. Hell, why not? We can get all dressed up and give them the what-for. Shall I play Madonna or whore that night?”

He smiled at her deviousness. “I will leave that choice entirely up to you, pet. All I can say is that I’ll be wearing blue in an attempt to avoid Narcissa’s ire. Can you work with that?”

“Definitely.” she grinned.

“That’s settled then. Come on, get your shoes back on woman. We have rounds to make before we retire.”

The following week saw several events within the castle. During lunch in the Great Hall, Severus spotted three Gryffindor students slinking in through the doors, covered to to armpits in pitch-blank ink. Smothering the smirk that threatened, he waited until the three boys sat at their respective tables before approaching them. Clearly Professor Granger had gotten her revenge for the wet-shirt incident of several weeks past, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t add serious injury to insult. He crept up behind the three boys quickly enough to catch the end of their conversation.

“I still think she did it on purpose! She must have given us the wrong spell.”

“No one else got it wrong, Roy. You must’ve misheard her.”
“She clearly said *Atramento* .”

“Well it’s your bloody fault for using *muffliato* during class. I could barely hear her over your yammering!”

“Will you two pillocks shut it? If we’d just done the fucking reading last night instead of playing Exploding Snap we wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with.”

Severus grinned inwardly as he loomed over the three misfits. “Tut tut, Mr. Spinruck. Ten points from Gryffindor for foul language. And another ten for leaving black footprints throughout the halls for Mr. Filch to clean. Oh, and that’s ten points each.” He dropped his voice into the silky, menacing register that used to strike fear into his potions students. “I would have expected more from three students of the noble House of Gryffindor. Clearly the sorting hat’s standards are falling. How...disappointing.”

Severus whirled away in a flurry of robes (Ah! He’d missed that feeling!) and strode back to the high table, where Hermione was repressing a grin by concentrating on her salad.

“Bloody great bat” he heard over his shoulder. Quick as a snake, he turned back toward the three inky students. "Thank you, Mr. Gibson. That will be detention with Mr. Filch this evening, seven sharp. Do bring your two friends with you.”

He resumed his place at the high table and barely kept his mirth in check. “It’s been an age since I’ve been called the Great Bat. I’d rather missed it” he mused. "You certainly waited long enough to get your revenge on those idiots.”

Hermione sniggered into her meal and speared a mushroom. “You’re the one who taught me that revenge was a dish best served cold. I think those three will think twice before attempting to look through my blouse again.”

Severus snorted into his pumpkin juice. “I highly doubt that, Professor Granger. They are, after all, three teenage boys. And I’m fairly sure *those* three are sharing the same brain between them. I’m curious...what spell were they supposed to be learning?”

“*Andamento*. The assignment was to transfigure a sheet of wood into a mosaic tile floor. They must have misheard me. Mr. Gibson spoke the incantation *Atramento* instead and turned it into a pool of ink. Unfortunately, all three were standing on the wood when this occurred.” She batted her eyes at him guilelessly.

“The horror.”

At that moment Minerva leaned forward and spoke across the table to Hermione. “Well played, my dear. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

Hermione simply nodded at the Headmistress and continued to eat her salad with a self-satisfied air.

“I understand that your first *Animagus* class will be next weekend, Severus. How are you and Hermione getting on with the planning?”

Severus quickly swallowed a bit of lamb pie and responded, “Tolerably well, Minerva. We have the syllabus prepared. We’ll have details of the month of the leaf prepared for next week’s faculty meeting, but I can tell you now that we plan it for January.”

“Excellent news -- and excellent timing as well. We’ll discuss it further next week.” Minerva turned to her left to address Filius, dismissing Severus and Hermione.
Hermione swallowed the last bite of her meal and leaned toward Severus. “You’ll need to request a substitute for our rounds on the 5th as well.”

“Already done. Filius and Pomona will step in. We’ll need to fill in for them on the 12th.”

Hermione nodded before speaking again. “I have a bit of a request for you as well.”

“Yes?”

“Harry and Ginny have asked me to dinner this weekend. I asked if I could bring a date. Will you come?” He couldn’t help but note how insecure the question sounded. Did she doubt him so much?

“I’d be happy to accompany you,” he said without emotion.

“Really? Because you sound as though you’d rather chew glass.”

“Mr. Potter -- Harry -- and I have corresponded only briefly by letter since my return, but it has been polite enough. The memories you have shared with me indicate that we were...cordial before my memory was modified. I see no reason to express undue joy at meeting with the Potters, but I see no reason to make a fuss either. Shall I bring wine, you think?” he asked, reaching for one of the hand-sized biscuits on the serving platter between them.

“That would be appropriate. Harry hasn’t the nose for anything and we end up drinking plonk as often as not. Dinner’s at six on Saturday. Come to my rooms before and we’ll floo from there.”

He nodded his acquiescence. “I have a favor to request in return.”

“Yes?”

He leaned in close to her and dropped his voice that only she could hear. “Wear the blue knickers that night. It’ll entertain me to imagine peeling you out of them after.”

She smiled and dropped her voice in return. “Severus, what makes you think I was planning to wear knickers at all?”

She smirked at him and rose from her seat to prepare for her next class. For his part, Severus spent another ten minutes at the table glowering at each house table in turn while mentally reminding his body that blood needed to flow to appendages other than his cock.

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October 15, 2005

Severus arrived at Hermione’s door at 5:55, dressed casually in a russet button down and black slacks. He’d opted to leave off his robes for the evening, remembering that Potter -- Harry, dammit -- preferred Muggle-style dress. He carried two bottles of a rather spicy Malbec and had his bomber jacket draped over his arm. He was pleased to see he was dressed appropriately; Hermione answered the door in soft tweed pants and a mauve sweater that did wonderful things to the roses in her cheeks. As he stepped into her rooms, he caught a whiff of mandarin, honeysuckle, and something he would only describe as a burbling stream. So she was happy and...what...excited? Nervous?

Suddenly suspicious, he turned toward his lover. “Hermione, does Pot -- do Harry and Ginevra know that we’re seeing each other again?”
She flushed and shook her head. “No. I haven’t told anyone yet. I’d thought to tell them tonight. It’s the kind of news you deliver in person. They know a bit about the memory loss, but not all of our recent theories.”

He frowned. “You haven’t shared many memories of Harry yet. Is there anything I need to know before entering braving your fellow lions?”

“You missed their wedding. Harry had invited you specially and you’d accepted. He was disappointed. You left the month before and we’d all rather hoped you’d come back for it. Me most of all, if only so I could hex your bollocks off and feed them to you.” She gave him a rueful little smile.

“Shit. I’d better start off with an apology then.”

“It wouldn’t hurt. And perhaps follow up with an explanation. Shall we?”

Severus sighed. “I can hardly wait.”

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“Snape?” Harry wheezed as Severus spun out of the floo. “Your date is Snape? Didn’t you learn anything from the first go-round, Hermione?”

“Harry, if you’ll just stop and -- “

“No, dammit. I picked you up off the floor the first time the bastard left you. I’m not doing it again.”

“Harry, we talked about this,” Ginny said in an attempt to calm her husband. “He’s lost his memory - - “

“Bollocks! He’s just trying to keep himself from looking like a bigger arse than he is.”

“Actually Harry, Ginevra is correct. I have lost most of my memories of the year after the battle. Or, rather, they have been taken from me. Hermione has been helping me to remember them through the pensieve. I’m told that I owe you a rather hefty apology for missing your wedding. I hope you’ll accept my regrets that I failed to appear as I said I would.”

Harry simply stopped and stared. Ginny elbowed him in the gut and whispered out of the side of her mouth. “Don’t just stand there like a prat. Say something!"

Severus looked at Harry and waited. “I’ve fought dementors and killed a madman, but nothing has prepared me for Severus Snape apologizing to me. Shit. Harry looked to Hermione. “Did he at least apologize to you as well?” She nodded.

“Indeed. I’ll admit, it’s a novel sensation, apologizing twice in a single year. And to Gryffindors, of all people.” He shot a brief glare at Hermione when she snickered.

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Harry let out a defeated sigh. “Well that, at least, is familiar. Heaven forbid you lose your snarkiness. Come on then. We’ll open one of those bottles you’ve got and talk. I need to hear the rest of this story.”

The bottle disappeared rather more quickly than it should have, and the second followed almost as
rapidly. Severus found himself mildly perturbed that he’d only brought two bottles; eyeing the label of the wine on the counter, he rather thought they’d be stuck with plonk for the meal.

“So you’ve no idea who performed this seed obliviation on you, do you?” Harry asked.

“None whatsoever. Kingsley gave me a list of known users of the spell, but I haven’t had time to cross-reference it with the list of ball attendees yet.”

Hermione looked at him sharply. “Severus, it’s been weeks. Whyever not?”

He shrugged. “It didn’t seem high priority, and I’ve had rather a lot of things to do in the meantime.”

Harry looked thoughtful. “You said that Kingsley was going to assign me to your case, but I haven’t heard anything from him or my commander on the matter. Has an auror spoken to you yet?”

“No. I’d rather wondered about that. I thought I might track Kingsley down at Lucius’ ball in November if I hadn’t heard.”

“Well, you’ve tracked me down instead. I’ll talk to Kings on Monday. Gawain too. And I will come speak to you next week. I can’t think why this has sat on the Minister’s desk this long. It’s an auror matter.”

Severus shrugged again. “Whenever you have time.”

Hermione caught Harry’s eye then in some sort of silent communication that Severus couldn’t fathom. Harry nodded and looked back at him. “Severus, why haven’t you pursued this matter?”

Ginny looked concerned. “That doesn’t sound like the Professor Snape I remember. If someone had gotten the jump on you back when we were in school, you would have chased them to the ends of the earth for vengeance. I don’t think you’ve mellowed so much as to let this slide.”

He sat there in silence for a moment, digesting what Ginny had said. “I...suppose not. It hasn’t seemed like a high priority, but you’re right. That doesn’t sound like me at all.” He looked Harry in the eye. “Has your occlumency improved any since my attempt to teach you?”

Harry smirked. “It has. Occlumency and Legilimency are a standard part of auror training. Gawain taught me. I’m not as good as you, obviously, but I’m not rubbish.”

“And have you learned to look for blocks and coercions?”

Harry nodded.

“Then look, please.” He continued to stare Harry in the eye.

Harry took a deep breath to center himself and withdrew his wand before casting *legilimens* on his best friend’s date.

Severus could feel Harry in his mind; his infiltration was somewhat clumsy and there was a cramping feeling near his frontal cortex.

*Professor Snape, can you hear me?*

Severus winced, but kept his eyes on Harry’s. *Yes, Potter. No need to shout, you’re in my head after all.*
Alright. I’m going to begin my investigation now.

Severus snorted. Proceed.

He could feel Harry rifling through memories rapidly, wading past images and sights and smells in his attempt to look for a blockage or another anomaly. Images of his classes, the scent of his lunch, and a tour of his rooms flitted past. Severus smirked as Harry tumbled across an image of Hermione, naked and screaming in the throes of orgasm. I really really didn’t need to see that, Snape.

I can always obliviate you, Potter.

I may take you up in that, Professor.

Finally, he felt Harry tug on something that felt...decidedly odd.

I think this is what we’re looking for.


I’ve almost got it...there.

Potter don’t touch the -- Severus felt a sudden pull against his mind, like water being pushed from his ear after too long in the tub. Whatever Harry was doing was creating a suction within his head. The physical sensation made his eyes want to cross; he felt his breathing speed up and Hermione’s hand slip into his. He was vaguely aware of yelling at Potter as the boy did...whatever it was he was doing.

It’s like a string. It’s almost done, Snape. Just one more tug...

“Yes!” Harry broke eye contact as Severus gasped for air. His eyes closed and he wavered for a moment, biting back the bile that had risen to his throat when Harry broke whatever that was in his head.

“What. The. Fuck.” Severus whispered, lowering his aching head to his hands. He heard shuffling movement near him and felt Ginny press a potion against his elbow. He glanced at it and recognized the vial of headache relief. “Did your husband brew this?”

“No. I did.” Ginny replied, ignoring Harry’s eye-roll with the ease of long practice.

“That’s fine then.” He sniffed the potion and, smelling that it was what she said it was, swallowed it in a single gulp, chasing it with a healthy swallow of wine. “Will you please explain what you just did?”

“It felt like a string to me, but I think it was a faint look-not curse. Not a very good one, really. Anyone who wasn’t the target would have seen it, but I’m guessing that since you’re the wizarding world’s most famous Occlumens whoever cast it was betting no one else would go looking. I’m not sure what it was protecting. We broke contact before I could tell.”

Severus thought for a moment, occluding from the gathered Gryffindors as he explored his own mind. He could feel a fullness -- almost a bulging of impulses that had been trapped behind a curse intended to make him turn away from his own inner self. He felt a sudden desire to rush back to Hogwarts and scour the list Kingsley had given him for any clue of his attacker.

A sudden worry about the stewardship of his properties and finances also burst forth; why had he left
them in Lucius’ hands so long? Wasn’t it time that he start preparing for his future? And why hadn’t he gone to visit the Malfoys? He hadn’t spent any time with them upon returning to Britain; he’d just sent the odd post card. Following quickly on that fret, he nearly collapsed under a sudden desire to declare his undying love to his girlfriend. This frightened him considerably more than all the other rushing impulses combined.

He took a deep breath. “Well, that explains quite a bit. You’re right, Potter. That was an Incultus curse. Whomever did this locked up other things too, but my desire to explore my own condition was there. I suddenly feel an urge to look at the list Kingsley gave me. And find out why the hell you weren’t notified of your assignment to my case, Harry. This is unacceptable.”

“I agree with you, Snape. I’ll look into it first thing Monday,” Harry promised.

“Fuck that. I’m sending an owl to Kingsley tonight.” Severus growled, standing up to pace.

Hermione stood and placed a gentle hand on his arm, stopping his agitated movement. “What else was blocked, Severus?”

He hedged a moment before responding. “Some rather personal thoughts. The impulse to resume stewardship over my finances and property. The desire to reestablish my friendship with Lucius and Narcissa, and to resume my duties as godfather to Draco. The bastard who cast this locked up every good impulse I’ve had in the last seven years.” He dragged a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends to give himself a good shock. He wanted to hit something.

“Professor, calm yourself.” This from Ginny. “The important thing is that the curse is broken now. You can start mending things in the morning. For now, we’ll have dinner. You and Harry can talk about next steps. And you can tell us when the hell you started dating Hermione again and how much Rita Skeeter got right in her column.” She shot him a cheeky grin.

Severus turned to Harry and shook his head. “Potter, your wife is barking mad.”

Harry shot him a grin and draped an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “I know. Isn’t she great?”

Chapter End Notes

Woo! Chapter! We're cooking with time compression now, folks.
For the first night since they’d first made love, Severus kissed Hermione on the forehead, bade her goodnight, and returned to his quarters alone. He hoped that she understood it had little to do with her, that he’d needed some time to process the deluge of feelings and desires that had been locked behind the *Incultus* curse in his head.

It made sense, he supposed, that the form of obliviation used on him couldn’t negate every motivation he felt; particularly as it had been so poorly cast. The look-not curse had made him disregard his natural impulses -- including the desire to examine his own complacency in eradicating the effects of the obliviation -- for more than seven years! It seemed nearly impossible that he, quite possibly the greatest living Occlumens, had managed to fail so completely at protecting his own mind from some amateur’s bloody tampering!

He’s allowed his communications with Lucius and Narcissa to fall nearly silent.

He hadn’t contacted his godson since he’d returned to Britain, and only rarely whilst traveling.

He hadn’t taken an active hand in managing his own finances and properties.

He had been (was still?) in love with Hermione.

Squelching the sense of panic that suddenly flooded his senses, Severus decided that this particular revelation definitely bore further examination. Later.

The bastard had hidden the few noble impulses in Severus’ character and risked alienating him from the *only* people he had a close connection to...all to keep him from returning to Britain. What was so important about him staying away that his attacker had risked scrambling his mind. Who on that bloody list that Kingsley had sent cared so little for the bloody Dark Hero of the wizarding war that they could so callously ruin his life?

And how could he find the witch or wizard and make them *pay*?

A quick glance at the casement clock on the mantle showed that it wasn’t yet midnight, so he moved toward the hearth and tossed a handful of floo powder into the ashes of the last fire. Severus called out “Malfoy Manor” and dutifully stuck his head in the flames.

His call was answered by an attendant house-elf. “Professor Severus Snape, sir! How might Snaggy help?”

“Is the Master of the house at home? I have a need for a conversation with Lucius.”
“Snaggy will ask, sir!”

Severus sat back on his haunches and waited impatiently when Snaggy’s head disappeared from the fire. He was relieved when Lucius head popped into the flames a few minutes later.

“Severus! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Lucius, I believe I may owe you an apology.”

“I see,” the older wizard replied. “You’d better come through.” The head disappeared from the flames and Severus stepped in after it, whirling away to Malfoy Manor.

He was greeted with a snifter of cognac almost as soon as he stepped out of the fire. It was nice to know that some things never changed.

“Lucius,” he said, nodding his greeting to his long-time friend.

“Severus,” the blond wizard replied with a slight smirk. “So you owe me an apology? I had to hear this in person.”

“Yes, well. It’s come to my attention that I have been remiss in my duties as a friend. I haven’t kept in touch. I haven’t visited until now. And I haven’t been a terribly attentive godfather in recent years. Please allow me to extend my apologies,” he concluded formally.

Lucius made a crude pffting noise and waved his hand in dismissal before seating himself on the chaise and crossing one elegant ankle over his knee. “Is that all? Severus, you went through hell during the war. It’s hardly surprising that you’d want to escape from all of the lunatics -- and I’m including the House of Malfoy in that assessment -- for awhile. But I have to ask, what brought all this on?” He adjusted the pleat on his slacks and sipped at his own snifter of cognac.

Severus sat on the opposite chaise and hunched his shoulders. “I had dinner with Potter and his wife this evening.”

“Really? You astonish me.”

“Yes, well, it was at Hermione’s invitation and --”

“Ah, the ever-present Miss Granger. I assume you’ve rekindled things there, then.”

“Oh, yes. Several weeks ago, though that’s another matter to deal with entirely, particularly after we found out that --“

“A matter to deal with?” asked Lucius. “Whyever would you need to? You seemed happy enough before.”

Severus struggled to maintain a grip on his temper. “Damn it all, Lucius! Will you allow me to finish a sentence?”

Lucius snorted into his snifter and took another sip. “By all means.” He gestured gracefully for Severus to continue speaking.

It was after one in the morning when Severus finished explaining what he knew about his obliviation, the look-not spell, and his rekindled relationship with Hermione Granger. Lucius listened intently, occasionally interrupting with a pointed question.

“Well, my friend. I’ll accept your apology, though from what you’ve said you don’t really owe me
anything. I’ll explain to Draco, though I would suggest you contact him soon. He’s been longing to

talk to you about some pressing personal matters, I think.”

Severus nodded. “What do you think of the situation, though? I’ll admit, I’m not sure what to make

of anything anymore. Since Potter broke the look-not, I’ve been inundated with a surge of...feeling,

for lack of a better word. I don’t know what to do with any of it.”

“Well, the feelings are yours, not insertions from a dark wizard. At least, I don’t know of any dark

wizard that would try to steer you toward the Gryffindor Princess. Again.”

“You knew about my previous relationship with Hermione?”

Lucius laughed and rose to refill his snifter. “My dear chap, I don’t know of anyone who didn’t

know of your relationship with the lovely Miss Granger. You weren’t exactly circumspect.”

Severus blinked at that. “I wasn’t? I was told that I left her after our first public outing?”

The grin that the older wizard shot him was snide, to say the least. “Your first official public event,

perhaps. You were seen out together quite a bit for months before that. Honestly, I thought you’d

been possessed at first. Severus Snape snogging a witch in the middle of Diagon Alley? Not exactly

the actions of the dour man we’ve come to know and love, eh?”

Severus stared. “I didn’t.”

“Oh, you did. Narcissa started keeping a scrapbook!” he chuckled. “Though really, I blame that on

the house arrest. What a boring eighteen months that was. I’ll have her owl it to you so you can see

your past escapades in print.”

“Oh, Merlin.” Severus groaned.

“Yes, well. We even had the two of you to dinner shortly before you fled the country. I have to

admit, you were acting rather out of character. I wasn’t surprised when you up and left. You always

were claustrophobic with women. Not that Miss Granger was clingy, but you were rather

uncharacteristically besotted.”

“I was in love with her.” Severus admitted.

“Were you indeed?” Lucius sat again and leaned toward his long-time friend. “I notice you’re

speaking in past tense. Are you not in love with the chit now?”

“I hardly know.” Severus stared blankly toward the fire, as though to divine the exact point between

his former feelings and his current obsession. “It’s only been a few weeks, and this...feeling of love

just resurfaced tonight. How am I expected to tell whether it’s real or a remnant of what was seven

years ago?”

Lucius smiled smugly at his friend. “In my experience, distrusting feelings of love is of the primary

symptoms of being in love.”

“Seven years ago I might have agreed with you. But I’m not who I was then, and neither is she.

Hermione was engaged to Ronald bloody Weasley, for Circe’s sake.” Severus tugged at the ends of

his hair again, wishing he could hide behind long locks as he used to.

Lucius shrugged. “Yes, well, we all make errors in judgment. You and that Bavarian witch, for

example.”
“Leave Hildegard out of this. Like you were never bewitched by a pair of shapely...by a woman’s charms.”

“Of course not, but I married my obsession. And I suspect that, prior to fleeing the country like your robes were on fire, you were contemplating the same with young Miss Granger. At least, you’d hinted as much to me. It’s why I assumed you’d fled. You’d never been the marrying kind before.”

Severus looked at his friend in shock. “You think I was going to propose?”

“You asked me for a reference to a jeweler. Yes, I think you were going to propose.”

The dark-haired wizard huffed. “Shit.”

“Indeed.” Lucius sipped again.

“What do I do now, then?”

“About Miss Granger? Or about your anonymous attacker?”

“Both.”

“Well, in the case of your relationship with the woman, I suggest you proceed as you have been. And, if you determine that you still love her -- which I suspect you do from the way you’re agonizing over this -- that you finish what you started and propose to the witch. As to your missing memories, I would start with the list Shacklebolt gave you. Better yet, owl me a copy of it and I’ll start making some discreet inquiries of my own.”

Severus found himself nodding. “Thank you. I think -- I think you’re correct on both counts, old friend. And I’d appreciate any help you could give me.”

Lucius looked at his friend, his tone suddenly very serious. “Severus, you’re the closest thing to a brother to me. You’re godfather to my only child. You saved my family from the wrath of Dark Lord more times than I care to count. I would do this and much more for you, as you well know.”

Severus nodded and pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off the sudden wave of emotion that threatened. “I should return to Hogwarts. Hermione and I are teaching our first animagus class in the morning; it wouldn’t do to show up bedraggled and hungover.”

“I imagine not. Well, off with you then. And bring your Professor to dinner next weekend. Narcissa would love to see her, I’m sure.”

“I will. Thank you, Lucius.” Severus pinched some floo powder from the vase on the hearth and threw it into the flames, calling for ‘Severus Snapes’ chambers at Hogwarts’ before stepping into the fire.

As he began spinning out of sight, he heard Lucius shout behind him, “And it was Borogrove Jewelers! Ask for Mome!”

Severus slept poorly. He was plagued by dreams of a harridan Hermione chasing him with a bridal bouquet full of wands. He jolted awake just as she “tossed” her bouquet at the Weasley family,
headed by Ginevra Potter, and transfigured them into manticores with snakes for tails. He honestly
didn’t know what was more frightening: Hermione on a rampage or the face that he was actively
dreaming of Weasleys.

He managed to shake the dream after a bracingly cold shower and a several cups of tea brewed
strong enough to tapdance on. He dressed comfortably, eschewing his normal teaching robes for
comfortable slacks and a dark jumper, preparing himself for multiple transformations into his
animagus form in the first weekend class for the advanced students.

He crossed the hall and knocked on Hermione’s door, giving her a sleepy half-smile when she
answered. “Good morning, pet.” He leaned down and gave her a little peck on the cheek, the stroked
his finger at the corner of her mouth. “You’ve a bit of jam.”

She blushed as he flicked the offending smear away, then licked at the corner of her mouth to
remove it. Severus felt a flash of arousal at the sight of her pink tongue swiping at the sugary residue.
“G’morning,” she returned cheerily, stepping back to admit him to her rooms.

“Are you feeling a bit better today?” she asked.

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand her. He’d been quiet even for his normally reticent personality
when they’d returned from the Potter’s the previous evening. “A bit, yes. I flooed over to Malfoy
Manor and talked to Lucius for awhile. Mended the fence there, I think. We’re invited to dinner next
weekend.”

“Next weekend? But we’ll be there in just over two weeks for their Guy Fawkes Ball.”

“Yes, well, I’m told that we dined there as a couple once before -- which you neglected to inform me
-- and that Narcissa would like to see you again. So we are invited. Would you like to go?”

She nodded. “I would.” Hermione reached out and took his arm. “I wasn’t hiding our previous
evening there. We’ve been dealing with memories in chronological order; we hadn’t gotten that far
yet.”

He smiled and placed a kiss on top of her curls. “I’m not angry, love. I assumed as much.”

She gave him a relieved smile and moved to take her empty teacup to the kitchen. “Did you make
any other grand discoveries while with Lucius?”

“A few. He informs me we were quite the press item for a time; Narcissa is owling over a
scrapbook?”

Hermione paled a bit. “Um. We should probably spend some time with the pensieve before you look
through that. We became news in February of that year. We haven’t even finished the November
memories yet!”

“I haven’t wanted to push you there. Admittedly, I didn’t feel that it was urgent until after the look-
not curse was lifted last night, but I know you can’t do more than a few memories at a time without
getting a migraine.” He shrugged helplessly. “But I’d like to work a bit faster if we’re able. How are
you at occluding?”

“Fair to middling,” she said with a grimace.

“Knowing you, I suspect that means you’re more than decent. Would you allow me to use
legilimency to work through some of the memories? You could occlude anything you don’t wish me
to see. Even behind shaky barriers, I’ll respect your privacy and not delve beyond them. It’ll allow us
to work through memories much more quickly.” He spread his hands in a gesture of acceptance, no matter what her choice.

Hermione looked momentarily nonplussed. “I -- hmm. Severus, I trust you, I do. I just don’t know if I’m good enough at occluding to keep my more private thoughts from you. Can I think about it for awhile? We can work with the pensieve tonight in the meantime, yeah?”

Struggling not to show his disappointment, Severus nodded. “Of course. It’s a lot to ask, I know. I’m just frustrated that I’ve been sitting like a Jarvey at a picnic, making so little progress for the past few weeks. It isn’t like me.”

Hermione gathered her tall wizard to her and gave him a little squeeze. “You dear man. You’ve been obliviated and cursed with a look-not. Of course you’re not yourself. I rather suspect that was the point of the attack. I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to help you get to the bottom of this. Just give me a bit of time, alright?”

Severus hugged her rightly and rubbed his cheek against her soft hair. “Thank you, Hermione. I lo- -” he caught himself and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what I’d do without your support in this.”

“You’ll never have to know.” With a final squeeze she pocketed her wand and slid shoes on over her woolen socks. “Come on, we’re going to be late. Are you still up to making a grand entrance?”

Smirking because he saw she needed it, he quirked an eyebrow. “Have we met?”

Hermione was giggling like a schoolgirl during tea with Minerva, Filius, and Pomona that afternoon. “They left me alone, assuming that I was delivering a letter -- even though nothing was tied to my foot. But Abby Starberry actually tried to shoo poor Severus! You should have heard him squawk!”

Minerva and Pomona were snickering into their heavily whiskey-laced tea as Severus gave a huff of mock indignity. “I would have paid to see it, my dear!” Minerva said, gamely swallowing a guffaw as she moved to refill Severus’ cup. “It’s about time one of those children took a swipe at you!”

“T-I’m sorry, Minerva. I seem to recall several incidents where Professor Granger and her friends did take swipes at me! Surely the passing of years should have rendered me less swipe-at-able?”

This set Pomona and Minerva off again. Even Filius’ eyes were shining brightly, and Severus swore he could see Albus twinkling off in the corner of his garishly overwrought frame on the opposite wall.

Severus allowed himself a silent chuckle. He didn’t generally enjoy being the butt of anyone’s joke, but Hermione somehow made it all sound good natured. He smirked a bit and snagged another piece of shortbread, dunking it in his tea and quickly chasing it to his mouth. “At least none of them sent any hexes at me. They’re a promising group, and I’m afraid anything they shot at me might have actually managed to hit!”

“As if you couldn’t dodge, Severus!” cried Pomona. “Though I’ve never seen your animagus form. Perhaps you’ll let us peek in on your next lesson?”

“Perhaps, Pomona. Though there’s an entrance fee to the show, of course,” Severus said slyly
“And what might that be?” asked Minerva.

“Spice cake,” he said decisively.

“Spice cake?” asked the two women together.

“Yes. I’ve been craving some and the elves simply don’t do it justice. They never use enough clove. Pomona, I remember yours from -- goodness, Christmas a decade ago? I’d like a spice cake. I’ll even share it with the class. Minerva, you can bring the tea.”

The Headmistress gawked at her D.A.D.A. professor. “Severus, are you asking us to bring *treats* for your advanced students?” She elbowed Pomona in the ribs. “Quickly dear, fetch Poppy. I think dear Professor Snape has finally gone ‘round the twist!” The entire group laughed again, enjoying the warmth of good tea and buttery shortbread before settling down into companionable silence. “Now on to more serious matters. Hermione mentioned that you had a bit of a to-do at the Potter’s place last night. What happened?”

“Well, I’ll congratulate each of you -- it seems that the things we taught Potter over the years have stuck, and he’s even managed to build on the skills. He removed a curse from my subconscious.”

This caught Filius’ attention, and he set his teacup down with a snap. “Which curse?”

“*Incultus*. I still don’t know who attacked me, but they managed to nearly sever all my ties with loved ones here in Britain. My dedication to the Malfoys, and to Draco in particular, were locked away. So was my desire to see to my financial affairs and a few other personal matters that I’d rather not discuss.”

Filius’ eyes darkened as he looked at his long-time colleague. “Merlin. That’s not easy magic. I’d be hard pressed to perform a powerful enough look-not to hide away near-familial ties. Your obliviation might have been performed by an amateur, Severus, but it was an amateur with a talent for charms...and a not-insignificant amount of personal power.”

Severus met Filius eyes and saw the worry there. “I thought as much. What aren’t you telling me?”

“*Incultus* requires that the caster continue to maintain a low-grade connection to the subconscious blockage to prevent its failure. It’s simple enough to do, really, even at considerable distance. The fact that Harry dismantled the curse last night likely means he inadvertently alerted your attacker. I would be cautious around those you suspect of foul play, my friend.”

Hermione interrupted at this point. “That might also mean that the person that attacked Severus has begun to panic. If we can narrow down the list that Kings gave us and watch for erratic behavior, it might give us a better clue of who did this to you.”

Minerva sent a sharp look toward Hermione. “While that’s true, dear, I think that might be the point Filius is making. A panicked wizard can be dangerous.”

Hermione shook her head. “A panicked wizard can also be drawn out. Severus, what do you say to a little shopping trip in Diagon Alley tomorrow?”

Severus glanced at Hermione. She truly was devious...for a Gryffindor. “Not a bad idea, love. We might even consider putting on a bit of a display, dropping some hints as to future plans.” He turned toward Minerva. “Headmistress, will we be needed tomorrow?”

Minerva waved a hand. “By all means, go. But you should take an auror with you. I know you two can take care of yourselves, but I’d feel better if there were an official presence near by, even if..."
they're disillusioned. Perhaps Mr. Potter is in need of a shopping trip?"

Chapter End Notes

Woo! Chapter! Some of you may recognize the brother of Mimsy (from Rita Skeeter and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day), Mome, who has a brief mention in this chapter and a cameo in the next.
Finding Purchase

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione embark on a short adventure to Diagon Alley in an attempt to bait his attacker. In the meantime, Severus continues to deal with his new found understanding of his past and, perhaps, current feelings for Hermione.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Right. Let’s go over this one more time before we set off. Hermione, you and Severus will floo to The Leaky Cauldron, then use the back courtyard entrance to Diagon Alley. From there you will proceed to Flourish and Blotts where you will discuss your plans to attend Malfoy’s Ball on the 5th. You will continue this conversation as you pass Madame Malkin’s to window shop. You’ll then go to Scibbulus’ at which point you will part ways after agreeing to meet for tea at Oolong and Ambrosia at 4pm. From there Hermione will enter Malkin’s, ostensibly to shop for robes without Snape’s assistance. Deforge, you’ll be tailing her. Severus, you will proceed to Wiseacre’s and I will follow. Are we all clear?”

Severus sneered. “You’re disturbingly authoritative, Potter. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“All due respect, sir, my boss wasn’t exactly thrilled about this expedition, so I’d appreciate your attention.” Harry snapped.

“Don’t forget the the kissing bit!” Hermione interjected.

Harry shuddered as he confirmed. “Right. And after we’re sure you’ve attracted at least one photographer, you’ll...erm...put on a show?”

Severus turned toward Hermione. “Are you sure about this? Our trip to Diagon Alley will likely be enough to draw my attacker’s attention. You know how word travels amongst the shop keepers.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I want to be positive that word gets ‘round that you and I are an item. It’ll get out eventually, and at least this will head off some of the press speculation. It also ensures that whenever I am reported to attend an event -- and you know they’ll report on that more often than they report on you -- the press will assume you’re attending with me. It makes it that much easier for us to draw your obliviator out.”

“I won’t pretend to like it, Hermione. The Daily Prophet is a leech. They’ll never leave us alone.”

“I’m not ashamed of being with you Severus. Let them snap their damned pictures. It doesn’t change the fact that we are together.” She leaned in to whisper in his ear, “And if we stay together long enough, they’ll eventually lose interest in favor of simply covering our attendance at events. You forget, Severus. I’ve been through this before.” The look on her face was determined.

Harry chose this moment to clear his throat. “Right. Well, if you have that settled then we should depart. We’re already behind schedule.”

Hermione sighed at the ironic rise of Severus’ right eyebrow as he drawled, “Lay on, Mr. Potter.”
With a terse nod, Harry and his partner, Marius Deforge swept on their invisibility cloaks, though Deforge added a disillusionment charm to his imperfect Ministry-issue item. Severus and Harry stepped into the large fire in the staff room and flooed to The Leaky. Hermione and Deforge quickly followed.

Once out in Diagon Alley proper, Severus and Hermione attended to their “errands” according to plan, holding hands in plain sight. While he was uncomfortable with the publicly “declaring” his relationship with Hermione (again, apparently), he understood that this time the press would be able to verify that the duo was, indeed, dating again. Hopefully the press confirmation would bring Severus’ attacker out of the woodwork if their shopping trip and attendant gossip failed to do so.

Flourish and Blotts was not terribly crowded, so Hermione and Severus were able to move freely without fear of losing their disillusioned aurors. They both moved through the shop, each picking up a few new tomes to add to their already overflowing collections before moving to the front counter to make their purchases. As Hermione waited for Severus to pay for his purchases, she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Would you mind terribly if we went past Madam Malkin’s before we Scribbulus’? I want to see if she has anything suitable for the Malfoy’s Ball.”

Severus schooled his features into bland indifference. “Leaving it a bit late, aren’t we? We don’t really have time to have you measured today, my dear.”

“Oh, she has my measurements on file. That’s not an issue...and it’s not as if I don’t have some perfectly serviceable robes. But it’s the Malfoys. I don’t want to wear serviceable to the Manor.” She paused and pouted prettily, affecting the image of the indulged girlfriend with frightening ease. “I wish Lucius had sent the invitation a bit earlier. No one wears off the rack to the Malfoys. I’m going to look a fright.”

Severus drew her hand up to his lips and placed a soft kiss to her knuckles. “You’ll look charming, as you always do. But we can stop by Malkin’s if you wish. Now are you going to purchase those, pet?”

Hermione simpered and moved toward the counter, ignoring the wide eyes of the clerk behind the counter. Severus bet that word of their presence in Diagon Alley would spread like wildfire as soon as they left the shop. Rita Skeeter and her ilk paid handsomely for tips.

As they moved out of the bookshop and toward Madam Malkin’s, Severus felt Hermione squeeze his arm. He leaned down so that she could whisper in his ear, “Does it amuse you to have a high-maintenance, flighty witch on your arm today, dearest?”

Severus turned his head to whisper in return, taking care to appear as though he were responding to something particularly naughty. “You’re not a bad actress, love, but you should probably tone it down. What if my attacker is someone who knows you as well?”

She drew back and sent him a rueful look. “You have a point.” They continued on to the next stop on their agenda in relative silence.

The window of Mabel Malkin’s longtime storefront was crowded with fall and winter formal regalia. The astute shop owner was clearly prepared for both the Malfoy Ball and the upcoming Hogwarts and Ministry Yule Balls. Severus groaned inwardly as Hermione stared at the dress robes and gowns with genuine interest.

“What do you think of that one, Severus?” she said, pointing toward a plum colored fall of silk and chiffon. The gown had a jewel neckline that would make the most of Hermione’s subtle curves, and the skirt flowed from the fitted waist in layers. There were no adornments and none were needed.
The dark material and canny cut were all that were needed to highlight the lovely witch within.

Severus made a sound of approval. “That would be very appropriate for Guy Fawkes Day, and would match well with black or burgundy formal robes. And...what of that one for Hogwarts’ Yule Ball?” He gestured toward a gown near the back of the display, a celadon piece with velvet illusion top and satin skirt with basque waist. He cleared his throat at this point and gestured slightly in with his index finger, drawing Hermione’s attention to the photographer reflected in the window display. The man wasn’t even trying to hide, but was standing across the street with his camera aimed at the hand-holding couple.

Hermione chuckled and leaned in closer, angling her body toward Severus’ and tossing her curls over her shoulder to provide a clear view of her face. “You would choose something green. But I do rather like it. Hm...and perhaps the topaz gown in the back for the Ministry Ball. Which incidentally you still haven’t asked me to.”

“I didn’t ask you to the Hogwarts ball either. I didn’t want to give you the chance to refuse. Are you sure you like that one? It looks...nubbly.”

“That’s Shantung silk, Severus, and it costs the earth. I’m having that one, even if I don’t get the others. I love the way the skirt fishtails near the bottom.” She glanced up at him. “And a girl likes to be asked, you know.”

Heaving a mock sigh of impatience, Severus looked at his lover and said, “Hermione, will you please attend the Hogwarts and Ministry Yule Balls as my partner?”

Granting him a mock curtsey, she replied, “I’d be delighted, thank you.” She shot him a look from under her lashes and with a small smile leaned into him, pressing her lips to his. Hermione drew back slightly and whispered in his ear, “Put your arms around me love. Pretend that it’s just us and that we don’t have an audience.”

Severus did as she asked, sliding his arms around her waist and drawing her against his body. “Better, love?”

“Mmm,” was her only response as she raised her arms to draw his head down toward hers. Her lips parted slightly as their mouths met a second time, and he felt her tongue coaxing his out to play. With an inward sigh, Severus closed his eyes, tuned out the world, and gave himself over to the kiss. He consumed Hermione hungrily -- she was all warm lips and soft curves against his body, and he could smell her perfume shifting with her mounting arousal. The smell of vanilla and caramel, like the candies his father’s mother used to keep on the side table, began to meld into crème caramel and anise hyssop with an edge of...something else. Almost like an American plant that Pomona grew in the green house. Hoja santa. He could only guess that it indicated Hermione’s excitement at the public display and the underlying mission behind their kiss.

He drew back after a long minute, partly because there was a limit to how much fodder he was willing to give the Prophet and partly because he didn’t really want the photographer to get a shot of his obvious arousal once his robes could no longer conceal the...issue. Severus angled his body back toward the display window and drew Hermione into his side, leaving his arm draped possessively around her shoulder. They stared at the window a few minutes more, miming admiration for the various gowns and robes on display before stepping apart and voicing their desire to continue their shopping expedition by purchasing necessaries for their work as the shapers of young minds.

Moving away from the display and toward Scribbulus for quills and ink, Severus commented, “How are you going to keep that topaz dress up anyway? I’ve never understood how those strapless gowns stay in place.”
With a soft giggle, Hermione responded, “Magic.”

They made quick purchases this time ‘round with little dawdling. Upon re-emerging onto the street, Hermione turned to Severus (well aware of the three photographers at her back). “I think I’d like to go back to Malkin’s and order those gowns. It will be nice to have something new for each of the balls, and my old gowns are looking rather dated.”

“Why don’t you go ahead, then. I’ll just go down to Wiseacre’s and pick up a few things for Defence. We can meet for tea at Oolong’s around four. Sound good?” He brushed a curl away from her face, allowing his hand to linger at the sensitive point behind her ear.

She bent her neck slightly to press into his hand before responding. “Perfect. Do try to have some fun, love. And don’t harangue poor Mr. Wendelton!”

Severus waved a hand toward Hermione. The hairs on the back of his neck were starting to crawl, and not from the highly visible photographers in front of him. He affected a nonchalant air. “Go on and get your gowns, witch. I’ll see you in a bit.” With a quick touch on his arm, his lover moved back toward Malkin’s shop.

He turned and walked down to the end of the alley, entering Wiseacre’s but finding little worth perusing. It would seem that Wendelton was between shipments of his bits and bobs, so Severus promised to return in a few week’s time. At loose ends he glanced around the alley, wiggling the two smallest fingers of his left hand in a seemingly nervous gesture -- his signal to Potter that he was fairly sure he was being followed.

To test the theory further, he wandered into the nearest shop. Severus was surprised to see that the sign read “Borogrove’s Fine Jewelry”. While he wasn’t in the market for a bauble, he thought it appropriate to browse through the wares. Perhaps he could find something to go with Hermione’s Yule gown. It might make a nice Christmas gift…

He was bent over one of the display cases when an overly jovial voice jolted him from his inspection. “Good day, sir! Welcome to Borogroves. I’m Mome, and this is my place. How can I help you?”

Severus cleared his throat. “I’m looking for a Christmas gift for my -- girlfriend.” He bit off the last word. Surely there was a better term? “We are attending two Yule Balls and I’d like to purchase a piece to go with both her dresses. Perhaps something in this greenish gold you have?” He pointed at a bracelet that had caught his eye.

Mome moved to pull the bracelet out of the case. “You have a good eye Mr -- “

“Snape.”

“Not Severus Snape? You are very welcome in my shop, sir, very welcome indeed. I’ve heard so much about you and from so many quarters! Now then, this is one of my favorite pieces. The electrum torque -- electrum is the proper name for that greenish gold you so admired, sir -- is styled after an ancient Turkish design. But you see, I have modified it here and here. I can place anything you like at these end bits. Lock and key, initials, whatever you like for your sweetheart, sir.”
“Actually, if you can customize it, I’d like to place a raven’s head at one end, an owl’s head at the other. Somewhat stylized, yes?”

Mome looks unsurprised at the request. “Certainly, sir, that’s easy enough. I can add small jewels for the eyes, if you like.”

Severus pursed his lips as he considered. “Black opal for the raven. And...opalized citrine for the owl, if you can find it.”

“Unusual choices, if I might say. But they will be stunning, just stunning, sir. Let me just pop into the back room and see what stones I have in stock. Please, browse while I look, sir.” And with that Mome disappeared into the back room. He clattered some drawers around to create a bit of a fuss, then quickly dashed off a note to his sister in Hogsmeade. Severus Snape in his shop! And looking at jewelry for a girlfriend. Mimsy would never believe his luck!

While Mome did...whatever Mome was doing in the back room, Severus continued to browse. The feeling of being watched was still very much prevalent as he looked at case after case of unset pendants, rings, and brooches. He saw several pieces of the electrum metal that Mom seemed so proud of. Severus had to admit, he liked the way the dull gold shone like antiqued pieces, as opposed to the more traditional yellow and white gold settings he saw. He’d have to keep that in mind if he ever looked for an engagement ring.

He paused. Where had that come from?

With a little shake of his head, Severus deliberately moved away from the ring settings. It was far too soon to be thinking along those lines. Wasn’t it? How soon was too soon to think of marrying your lover? How soon would Hermione think it was too soon? And why in Merlin’s name was he still thinking about this?

He was saved from his thoughts when Mome returned to the showroom. The little man placed two uncut stones on the counter. “You are in luck, sir! I had both the stones you required in stock. My father found these on his last buying trip to the Americas. Very unusual stones, both of them.”

Severus picked up the larger of the stones, a black opal with swirls of iridescent copper and blue beneath its surface. “Lovely.” The opalized citrine was equally fine, with topaz and milky white swirls of color visible just beneath the surface. “These will do perfectly. I’d like the eyes of the two birds to be cobachons cut from these stones as we discussed. I’d also like an additional sphere placed in the open beaks of the two birds, but in the reverse color.”

“Very good, Mr. Snape. And very creative. I can do that, yes, but it is a shame to use so little of the stones.”

“Yes, well I may have a purpose for those later. I’d like to purchase the stones outright, and for you to deliver the remainder of each with the bracelet. When do you the piece will be completed?” Severus asked.

“For a custom piece, two weeks. Shall I send it to your home, sir?” Mome said deferentially.

“Sent it via owl to Hogwarts.”

“Excellent, sir, excellent!”

The two men quickly settled the bill while Severus cast a quick tempus. He still had an hour before he needed to meet Hermione, and no idea how to spend it. Perhaps a quick stop at Manxome’s
Manly Manes (perhaps a relation to Mome? They looked strangely similar.) for a trim before they had their tea. If he was going to be on display at these blasted balls, he had no desire to appear a shaggy beanpole next to his beautiful lover. Beauty and the beast comparisons were already a foregone conclusion; no reason to give them any more worth than the paper they were written on.

Harry and Deforge removed their cloaks and charms almost as soon as the foursome returned to the castle that evening. Severus had to admit, he was impressed with Harry’s stealth. He’d barely noticed the man’s presence during the expedition.

“Anything to report Marius?” the boy-who-lived-and-became-a-ruddy-auror asked.

“Nothing out of the norm. Miss Granger indicated that she felt she was being watched for a brief period of time in Madam Malkin’s.”

“That right, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“Yes. It didn’t last long. The feeling passed quite rapidly, and then it was just measurements and hem lengths. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help, Harry.” Hermione replied.

Severus frowned. “At what time did you feel you were being watched?”

She thought a moment. “It was when I began talking to Mabel, so perhaps five or ten minutes after entering the shop. It only lasted a few minutes.”

“Whereas I felt I was being watched as I left Wiseacre’s. More than enough time for whomever it was to get from Malkin’s to my location. Did you notice anything while we were in the other shops, Potter?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t use a sneakoscope, though, as it would have made too much noise and blown my cover.” Harry huffed a sigh. “Seems our trip was a waste of time.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. We planted seeds up and down the length of Diagon Alley. Whoever attacked me knows we’ll be at Malfoy’s ball in a few weeks. I suspect that he or she will seek to attend. We can look for them there.”

“I guess I’ll be on duty that night, then. And here I was looking forward to spending that evening with Ginny.” Harry said, ruffling his hair.

Hermione laughed. “Harry, you know she would have insisted on dancing and you *hate* dancing.”

“I don’t hate it!” Harry protested with a grin. “I’m just rubbish at it.”

“Will you stay tonight?” Hermione asked once they’d returned to their tower after dinner.
Severus pressed a kiss to her brow. “Of course. Meet me on the balcony for a drink first?”

“Lovely,” she responded with a smile. Hermione let herself into her rooms, closing the door quietly behind her as Severus did the same across the hall.

He moved through his apartments quickly, tossing his purchases on the dining room table and selecting a decent pinot noir from the small collection on the breakfront there. He mounted the stairs with two wine glasses clinking merrily at his side. He’d barely been able to restrain himself when they’d first returned to the castle after their trip to Diagon Alley. He’d been replaying their kiss over and over in his mind and it occurred to him that he’d given Hermione relatively little in the way of romance since they’d first become intimate. Perhaps tonight he could rectify that to some extent.

Severus placed the wine and glasses on the transfigured table and chairs where he and Hermione had eaten breakfast not so many days ago. He quickly removed the cork with a quick swish and twist of his wand and poured two glasses, allowing the wine to breathe as he set about casting warming charms around the balcony and hovering small, dimly glowing globes at intervals along the rail. He had just finished conjuring a small vase of fall-colored mums on the table when Hermione appeared at her bedroom door. She’s shed her robes in favor of a long, satiny chemise nightdress in black and her hair streamed down her back in a riot of curls. Bare feet with pink toenails poked out from beneath the hem, and a long slit exposed her leg to mid-thigh.

“You’re absolutely breathtaking.” Severus said, holding out a hand to her.

She smiled as she crossed the balcony to him, taking his hand and rising on her toes to kiss him again. “This is lovely,” she said, “Trust you to think of wine and warmth and flowers.”

“It’s one of the best views on the grounds. I didn’t want to waste the last of the autumn evenings before the snow comes. It will be winter all too soon.” He moved behind her, drawing her against his body so that he could wrap his arms around her as they both looked out over the Black Lake. It felt wickedly good to hold her without fear (or desire) of being spotted or snapped. Hell, it felt good to hold her. Full stop.

Perhaps he was in love with her. It didn’t seem so far-fetched when they were standing here, when he could feel the heat of her body reflecting back onto his. When he knew she was just as content to stand in his embrace as he was to embrace her. Here was comfort and arousal and support and friendship, all rolled into one. It was the most delicious feeling threading through him, and he knew he would fight anyone to the death to keep it with him, always.

He wondered if she could possibly feel the same things for him. He hoped she could, and that he was enough to inspire those thoughts in her.

He stepped back and led her to the table, drawing her seat out for her before taking his own and handing her a glass of wine.

“Are we toasting anything?” she asked.

He paused. “I hadn’t thought to. I just wanted to share the night and a glass of wine with you before retiring. Isn’t that celebration enough?”

She blushed a deep crimson and stared into her wine. When she spoke there was a little hitch in her voice. “Honestly, Severus, sometimes you say the most romantic things without even trying.” Hermione waved a hand as if to clear the air. “No toasts then. Just wine with my favorite person, and enjoying the night.” She sipped and he followed suit.
“Really? I’m your favorite person?”

She laughed. “Of course you are. Severus, you must know that.”

He simply stared at her with a half-smile on his face, absurdly pleased with her declaration.

“Severus, I spend nearly all my time with you now. We eat and sleep and fuck and teach together. We practically live on top of one another. Who else would be my favorite person?”

“I thought Potter, perhaps. Or Minerva.”

“Minerva is like a treasured aunt. She’s been my rock and den mother for years, but I’ve never shared with her the things I’ve shared with you. And Harry...I’ll always love Harry. He and Ginny are my best friends, but they’re building their life together now and there’s less room for me in it than there once was. And that’s as it should be. Perhaps with you I’m building something for myself.” She looked up at him with a question in her eyes.

He nodded. “Yes. I -- I feel very much the same. It’s terrifying,” he admitted sheepishly.

She chuckled then, draining her glass. “It is, isn’t it?” She nodded her head toward his glass. “Finish your wine. I feel the urge to terrify you some more, if you’re willing.”

His empty wineglass hit the table with an audible clink.

Chapter End Notes

I cut this chapter a bit short because I’m saving the sexy scene for the next chapter. But hey, sexy scene next chapter right?

Also, we get to meet Mome more formally in this chapter. Mimsy has a mention too.

Edit: I had to make a quick tweak because Mimsy was somehow in both Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley simultaneously. Oops. So meet Manxome, the third sibling in the Borogrove family!
Chapter Summary

Smut sirens are sounding. Run for cover.

Severus has a revelation, though he doesn't quite know what to do with it. Then he has dinner with the Malfoys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus took Hermione’s outstretched hand and followed her into the bedroom. He saw that while he had been gathering wine and preparing the balcony, she had been equally busy inside. She too had made use of small glowing orbs, which she had charmed amber and levitated around the ancient four-poster to bathe it in their warm light. She led him toward that bed, where both duvet and afghan had been removed and folded on the chest at the foot of the bed and fresh sheets had been turned down. The room was staged for seduction, and his own personal siren was here to drag him under her spell.

She paused before the bed, turning to silently remove his clothing. He watched, fascinated, as she methodically stripped away each item of clothing, button by maddening button, leaving him standing before her in nothing at all as the chilled night breeze blew through the room from the open door. Curls and night dress stirred as she traced warm hands over his shoulders, his arms, his pecs. He caught one of those fluttering strands and the silken tress between his fingers, inhaling the scent that he’d created for her, the scent that communicated her desire to him in turn.

Severus raked his gaze down her body, absorbing every detail. “Sometimes I look at you and you’re so lovely it hurts.”

Hermione simply smiled and took a step backward to sit on the bed, drawing him with her.

Severus followed her to the bed, but couldn’t seem to stop himself from babbling the thoughts that were running through his head. “I don’t know what I did to attract you all those years ago. I don’t know why you’re with me now, really. But I can’t help but think that I should be the most grateful man on earth to be...in your affections.” He drank her in, skimming his hands down her arms and leaning toward her to press a kiss to her neck. His lips found the beat of her pulse there, and he suckled at it, licked at her collarbone, dragged his teeth against her skin. He felt himself hardening as he felt her shudder in response.

“I don’t want your gratitude, Severus. I want you ,” she said. “I am with you because I care for you. I am attracted to you because you’re brilliant, and sex on a stick, and thoughtful, and more caring than you’ll ever let anyone know.” She drew a shaky breath as he nipped at the soft juncture between her neck and her shoulder. “For such a brilliant man, you can be rather slow sometimes.”

Severus drew back and looked at her with a little smile on his face. “I think slow is exactly how you’ll like me tonight, pet.”

With that declaration, Severus returned to nuzzling at her neck and brought his hands to her
shoulders. Inch by torturous inch, he drew the straps of her dress down until they caught on her elbows. The silken fabric of her dress clung to her breasts for just a moment before catching on the rapidly tightening nipples beneath, then falling to puddle at her waist. “Exquisite,” he murmured, moving his mouth toward one pink bud.

Hermione gasped as his lips closed around her nipple, and he moved his hand toward her other breast. Severus found himself desperate to give her as much pleasure as he could tonight, to show her what he was feeling through touch and taste where his words failed. He may have been terrified of this newly rediscovered level of connection to his lover, but it also exhilarated him. With a low growl, he worried her bud between his teeth, drawing a long moan from her throat.

Severus continued to pinch and roll a tight peak in one hand as he suckled at the other, but placed his unoccupied hand at her waist to ease her onto her back on the bed. The new position allowed her hips to rise off the bed, and he was nearly driven spare by her rhythmic undulations as she pressed against his thigh. He broke contact with her nipples, drawing back to admire his handy work. They stood away from her body like proud, red soldiers.

Reminding himself of his own promise to go slow, Severus pressed a kiss to her sternum, bending to draw the black gown down her legs and letting it drop to the ground. She regarded him through hooded eyes as he kissed his way down her torso, dipping his tongue into the hollow of her navel, tracing hot trails down her abdomen and hips and toward her sweet smelling sex.

He heard her breath hitch in anticipation as he knelt between her legs, running his hands from ankle to thigh and glorying in the feel of their softness and their strength. “Yes, Severus!” She hissed as he spread her legs apart and bent to press a soft kiss to her mons. Her hips bucked as soon as his hot mouth touched her skin and he had to use one muscled arm to hold her hips in place so he could part her lower lips with gentle fingers.

“Oh, love. You’re so wet for me.” He moaned as he looked at her glistening core, already engorged with her arousal. He slipped two fingers inside her and began to thrust slowly, listening to her little pants of encouragement as he bent his head toward the little bundle of nerves that would send her over the edge.

He pressed the tip of his tongue to her clitoris, pulsing it lightly against the little nub as he continued to move his fingers slowly in and out of her sheath. Hermione’s hands rose and fell limply against the mattress as he teased her with tongue and fingers, torturing himself even as he tortured her. Panting had given way to soft cries, and he could see her head rolling to and fro on the pillow as she spread her legs to give him better access to her center. He smiled inwardly as he pursed his lips to suck at her clit, occasionally swiping at it with the flat of his tongue.

He began to grind his own hips into the bed as those soft cries turned into delighted moans.

Severus eased a third finger into her, slowing the speed of his thrusts and the pressure of his tongue. He could feel that Hermione was on the verge, and he desperately wanted to send her over the edge. He was intoxicated by the sounds she was making and the heady scent of her arousal. Severus wanted her to come, wanted to drink in her cries, wanted to be the source -- the only source -- of her ecstasy. He curled his fingers into her, pressing against that wonderful spongy spot that he knew would make her topple, and pulsed his fingers.

“Come for me, Hermione,” he growled against her. “I want to feel you come. I want to hear you shout my name.”

He felt her contract around his fingers as she gave a hoarse shout. “Severus! Oh, Merlin. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Her hips rose off the bed, dislodging him momentarily before he could bring them back to the
mattress. He gentled his movements within her as she rode the waves of her orgasm, her hands clawing at the bedclothes.

“Oh Gods, love.” Severus groaned as he lay his cheek against one thigh. “I wish you could see what you look like when you come. You’re bloody magnificent.”

A weak laugh was her only response as she caught her breath. He watched her face relax into a lusty smile as he continued to thrust three languid fingers into her now sopping wet pussy. Long minutes passed as he continued to play with her, no longer driving her toward completion as he allowed her body to recover from the high.

Finally Hermione groaned and reached for her lover. “Severus, I want you in me.”

“Not yet. Patience,” he said as he shifted his body more comfortably. He tried to ignore the resounding Yes, take her now! resounding in his brain. The night was young, and he had only just begun to make love to his girlfriend. He removed his fingers from her core to trace a single finger down her perineum. He felt her stiffen almost immediately.

“Severus?” she questioned nervously.

“Trust me?”

“I do, but I’ve never -- “

“I know, pet. I’ll go slow. And you can always say stop. May I?”

She gave him a slow nod and tilted her hips slightly in invitation. He wordlessly cast a quick cleansing charm before rubbing his glistening fingers over the tight rectum. Severus felt her tensing in anticipation as he pressed the pad of his finger against it in a slow rhythm. He played his finger against her as he moved his mouth back toward her core, pressing his tongue in at the same time.

Hermione started as she felt his tongue slide into her, his nose pressed to her clit. “Good Godric!” she shouted, relaxing just enough for him to grant entrance to his finger. He wiggled the digit as it sunk in to the first knuckle and was rewarded with a strangled gasp. He paused his ministrations to look up at her face.

“Alright?” he asked. He saw her nod as she raised her hands to her breasts to tweak at her nipples. “Do you want more?”

She moaned. “Yes, oh please, yes.”

He wandlessly murmured a quick lubricating spell to ease the rest of his finger in. She was clenched so tightly that he thought she might break his finger off, but the pressure eased as he returned the attentions of his tongue to her clitoris. Within minutes he felt her begin to quake again, her muscles drawing tight as she ground against his hand and face.

Hermione was gasping for air as Severus rose above her to press a kiss to her lips. “Gods. Where’s that been hiding?”

He grinned lasciviously. “You hinted that you might like to experiment last week. I thought tonight might be a night to...push some boundaries?”

“I think I like pushing that particular boundary.” She reached up to move a strand of hair off his forehead. “But thank you for asking first as well.”
He leaned his head into her palm so that she was cupping his cheek. “I would never do anything that you didn’t want, Hermione. So tell me...what do you want?”

She groaned and thrust her hips upward toward his straining erection. “What I want is to reciprocate, but what I need -- I need you in me Severus. Now.”

“Far be it for me to deny you what you need,” he replied. He reached between them and aligned himself with her core, pushing forward until his length was fully sheathed within her.

He paused within her, holding himself still as he adjusted. She was wet from his earlier efforts, and oh, so tight in her heightened state of arousal. It took all of his control not to start thrusting into her like a madman, driving himself toward his own orgasm. But he’d wanted to give her romance, not wild fucking. A place and a time for everything, he reminded himself.

Taking a breath to steady himself, he began to move. Hermione seemed to be floating on some kind of alternate plane filled only with moans and sighs. He found himself listening to the symphony of her pleasure, seeking only to stroke into her and draw out another gasp or shriek. The look on her face was one of utter rapture. Severus had just enough brain power left to muse that she had to be, in this moment, the most beautiful creature on earth. Wild curls. Porcelain skin. Too wide smile. And the most forgiving heart. He’d leave Potter to the Ginevra Weasleys of the world; he knew in that moment that this woman, writhing and pleading beneath him just a moment from shattering, was the only woman for him.

His eyes popped wide.

The only woman for him.

Sweet Circe. He was in love with Hermione Granger. He was in love with Hermione Granger.

And it felt fucking fabulous.

A sudden tightening within his stones caused him to arch his back and rear upward, pelvis grinding against her as his release shot forth. He thought he heard stars. Hell, he thought he heard the trumpets of the four horsemen. The last thing he was actively aware of before darkness descended was Hermione’s scream of ecstasy beneath him. Then he was falling, deaf and blind to his surroundings.

The sound of labored chortling brought him back to his senses. “Merlin’s bedpan, Severus. Did you pass out?”

“Leave it to you. I’ve just had the most transcendent orgasm of my life and you’re laughing at me,” he replied gruffly.

She wheezed another laugh out. “Well, when you’ve arrived in Nirvana, would you mind terribly rolling onto your side? I can’t breathe.” She poked him a bit in the ribs to get him moving.

“Sorry.” He swiped a hand over his forehead and found it, and most of his hair, soaked in sweat. He peeked at her through one slanted eye. “Are you alright?”

“Mmm. I’m very alright. Where’d that come from?”

“No idea,” he replied, a little grin tilting up the corners of his mouth. “But if you give me a half hour, we can endeavor to find out.”
Severus cast *tempus* for the fourth time in as many minutes. “Hermione, we need to leave soon if we’re to arrive on time. Narcissa detests tardiness.”

“If you’d leave off pestering me every thirty seconds, I might be ready! Honestly, Severus, you’re worse than a plague of toddlers.”

He poked his head around the corner of the bath to watch her wrestle with her hair, one elegant eyebrow raised to his hairline. “When was the last time you fended off a plague of toddlers?”

“It’s a metaphor -- damn. Come here and help me with this.” She pointed toward the half completed updo that she was attempting to assemble from her mass of curls.

The right eyebrow rose to join the left. “Why not use magic for that?”

She huffed out a breath. “Because I’m bollocks at household and beauty spells and always have been, alright?” She flushed a bit at the admission.

“Hold still.” He pointed his wand carefully at her head and swirled it upward in a curlicue before tapping it atop her head. Her hair immediately straightened, swirled, doubled back on itself, and affixed to her head in a smooth chignon.

“Where the hell did you learn to do that?” she asked in shock.

He smirked. “I’m a man of many talents. Now if I’m not mistaken, we are due to arrive at Malfoy Manor in mere moments.”

“Alright, alright. I’m ready.” She slipped her feet into simple court shoes charmed to match her emerald green sheath dress and bolero. She picked up the black velvet envelope purse and placed her hand on his proffered arm. Within moments they swirled away to the Malfoy manse.

They were greeted not by a house elf, but by Narcissa Malfoy herself. “Severus darling!” she cried, moving forward to embrace him. “I’m so glad you’ve come. And Professor Granger, welcome back.” She bussed Hermione’s cheeks in the French fashion before hold the younger woman at arm’s length. “That dress is stunning. You must tell me where you found it.” So saying she stepped between her two guests and placed an arm through each of theirs, guiding them out of the foyer and toward the informal dining room.

“We’re dining *en famille* this evening as it’s just the five of us. I know you won’t mind Severus.”

Severus nodded his head toward Narcissa in thanks. “Indeed, I’m grateful. The last time I *remember* dining here, I had to shout at you from across that great expanse of timber you call a table in the formal dining room.”

“Hm, yes. Lucius said you were obliviated,” she said with some concern. She took his hand in a gesture of comfort. "I suppose that means you don’t actually recall the last time you dined with us, do you?”

“I’m afraid I do not.” he replied, patting her hand in return. “Or, rather, I recall the last time I dined with you as a formal dinner before the final battle. Nothing after the battle itself.”

“Well, I recall it perfectly” Hermione interjected, “and it was a lovely occasion during which you
called me Hermione, Narcissa.” She smiled at the older woman. “I hope you’ll do so again. I am, of course, flattered to have been invited back.”

“Aren’t you just the most charming creature!” Narcissa exclaimed with what appeared to be a genuine smile. “Now come, Severus, Hermione. Let’s not keep Lucius waiting. Drinks are in the drawing room.”

“Indeed! Let’s not keep Lucius waiting,” a smug voice said from the doorway between the foyer and the drawing room. “Severus,” he said, raising a short glass of amber liquid toward his guests.

“Lucius.” Severus greeted his friend with a simple tilt of the head.

Hermione bit her lip to contain her grin, remembering a similar greeting on her only other social visit to the Manor. “And Professor Granger, of course.”

She smiled. “You called me Hermione once. Of course, that was several years ago.”

Lucius grinned in return. “Ah, but you were not a professor then! I’ve not been able to address you by your formal title since you returned to Hogwarts. So now I have, and done you the justice of acknowledging your accomplishments and status as one of the Hogwarts few. And now you shall be Hermione again, which is my privilege. And you shall call me Lucius, which is, of course, yours.” His eyes laughed at her through his foppish speech before he settled into a more normal -- or at least less affected -- mode of speech. ”Welcome back, my dear.” He stepped forward to place a warm kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, Lucius.”

“Come inside, then. We’ll have drinks before dinner like the civilized do. Sherry, Hermione?”

“Please,” she said.

“Severus?”

Severus gestured toward Lucius’ glass, knowing he preferred aged cognac to fortified wines. “I’ll have what you’re having, thanks.”

Narcissa led their two guests into the drawing room as Lucius moved off to pour drinks. They took seats around the room once each drink had been appropriately served and Severus waited for Narcissa to open the evening’s conversation.

“Draco flooed ahead to let us know he would be late this evening. He’s been held up speaking with dear Astoria’s grandmother. The woman is positively dotty, but she adores Draco.” Narcissa said, leaning toward Hermione confidentially. “If you ask me, I think she’s a bit lonely. Waldorf is hardly what I’d call an attentive son, and Aegina is too busy trying to cut a swath through wizarding society to bother much with her mother-in-law.”

Severus caught the amused gleam in Hermione’s eyes as she made some agreeable noise at Narcissa’s accounting of his godson’s whereabouts. “Will Draco be joining us for dinner, then?”

“Oh, he should, if Antila can be persuaded to let him leave!”

“It’ll be good to see him. I haven’t heard much from him in the past few years. What’s he doing these days?”

It was Lucius who responded. “Ostensibly he’s managing some of the minor Malfoy enterprises, but
now that he’s courting Astoria Greengrass I swear he spends at least half his time at their estate.” The blond man smirked at this, seeming less perturbed at his son’s apparent disregard for his responsibilities than he was amused.

“You were just the same, Lucius.” Severus replied. “I remember your father had to physically remove you from Cissy’s presence if he wanted you to pay any attention to serious matters.”

“I beg your pardon, Severus, but Narcissa was a very serious matter.” He grinned and toasted his wife with his drink. ”And so she remains, is that right my dear?”

Narcissa merely smiled at him and sat on the settee with feline grace.

Severus reflected that it was nice to know that some things never changed. Narcissa and Draco were still the most important things in Lucius’ life, and his devotion for and indulgence of their desires would always trump any slight inconvenience their personal choices may cause. In a way, it was one of Lucius’ best qualities, even if it did make teaching a somewhat spoilt Draco a right pain in the arse.

Hermione sipped at the sherry Lucius had handed her and smiled. “Oh, this is lovely. Amontillado?”

“Thank you, it is.” He turned to Severus. “You should keep her around. Any woman who appreciates a dry sherry is worth knowing.”

“I’ll take that under advisement, Lu. It is, after all, Hermione’s appreciation of spirits that I enjoy rather than her intelligence, beauty, or wit.” He didn’t miss the look of ill-concealed amusement Lucius shot his wife at that statement. Nor did Lucius miss the flush that rose to Hermione’s cheeks at Severus’ compliment.

The next half-hour passed companionably as the foursome sipped their drinks. Draco joined them just as they were rising to go into dinner, much to Narcissa’s delight. “Sorry I’m late, Mother,” the younger man said as Narcissa embraced him. “Uncle, it’s good to see you. Hermione.” He shook Severus’ hand and greeted Hermione with a polite nod before giving his father a short embrace and pouring his own measure of cognac.

“Hello Draco.” Hermione replied. Severus knew that while they weren’t close, Hermione and Draco had a loose friendship of sorts. He was grateful that they were at least not battling with the same ferocity they’d exhibited in their school days, if only because it promised a drama-free dinner.

“Well, let’s not delay dinner any longer. Grimpy will be quite put out if the meal has to be warmed magically.” Narcissa said, rising from her place on the settee. “She’s very keen to ensure that our meal is served at the height of its flavor, rather than being rewarmed repeatedly until we’re ready to dine. She’s quite fastidious, our elf.”

“And you wouldn’t have it any other way, Mother. It’s thanks to Grimpy and her staff that our parties have always boasted the best food.”

Narcissa smiled at her son indulgently. “Yes, well with you and your father in the house it has always been rather a necessity.”

Hermione slanted a furtive glance at Lucius and Draco’s trim figures -- a look that everyone in the room caught. Severus was really going to need to teach her about subtlety when in the company of Slytherins.

Lucius smirked at Hermione. “The Malfoy family has always been blessed with an athletic physique. It’s made every Malfoy heir a superb seeker, in his time.”
Severus merely rolled his eyes, well used to Lucius’ boasting about his glory days. The snide remark was on the tip of his tongue when Narcissa ushered him toward the door. “Hush, Lucius. Hermione doesn’t want to talk about Quidditch tonight, and I doubt Severus does either. Let’s go into dinner. I have such plans for the ball next weekend, Hermione. I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

The group rose as one, the men wisely biting their tongues at the choice of conversation topic as their hostess led them into dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Darling readerly types, I’m so sorry for this very delayed chapter. I flew to Texas to visit my parents for a week, intending to vegetate, read, write, and eat all the breakfast tacos ever (there are no good breakfast tacos in my current state. It is very sad). I ended up building my mother a new computer, cleaning a storage shed, and helping dad clean the office and family rooms instead. (But there were many tacos and a pair of shoes for compensation, so there’s that.)

Alas, I found it somewhat difficult to write while sleeping in my old bedroom, surrounded by the detritus of my childhood. Writing sexy-times while staring at a display case full of dolls is just creepy, y’all. I got half of this written at a local diner last Saturday and managed to finish it today, so here it is...a bit shorter than I’d like and a lot later.
Dinner at the Malfoy Mansion concludes and Severus awakens to a bunch of bad (old) news.

He may have been obliviated, but one of the things Severus had not forgotten was the opulence of a ‘simple’ family dinner at Malfoy Manor. As there was only one person present who could be considered a guest in the more formal sense of the word -- and gauging Narcissa’s enthusiasm for conversing with Hermione, he doubted she’d be classed as a guest much longer -- there would only be six courses for dinner instead of the formal twelve or sixteen that the hostess preferred. This surprised him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen a meal other than breakfast served à la française at her table.

Despite the relative informality of the dinner, the meal was as sumptuous as any he’d seen at the Manor before. Dishes of coquilles Saint-Jacques, blanquette de veau, and a gigot d’agneau pleureur were passed around the table for each person to sample. He noticed that even Hermione’s eyes widened a bit at the amazing amounts of meat and butter in the meal; Hogwarts fare focused on the traditionally British with a few exotic surprises thrown in to appease the Pureblood families in attendance. The Malfoys, however, payed homage to their French antecedents by serving primarily haute cuisine at their table.

He also noted that Hermione had received training in Pureblood dining etiquette at some point in the past seven years. He wondered if he had been the one to instruct her or if she’d attained the knowledge through her own study; she certainly hadn’t picked it up from her former fiancé, if his mealtime manners at Hogwarts were any indication. Hermione waited until Narcissa had picked up her own fork and knife and taken a delicate bite of her lamb before she set her own utensils to work on one of the beautifully presented scallops covered in Gruyere cheese. Her manners were as impeccable as any Pureblood’s, though to compliment her on such -- even privately -- would be the epitome of condescension. With a mental shrug, Severus applied himself to his own meal, sinking his spoon into the crust of the divine soupe à l’oignon gratinée that the Malfoy head kitchen-elf was famed for. He’d missed this. Not even in France could a onion soup like this be found.

The group ate in silence, waiting for the hostess to set the topic of conversation. At last, Narcissa’s voice interrupted Severus’ silent worship of his meal just as he was lowering the spoon after the first mouthful. “So, Severus. How has your return to Hogwarts been this year?”

Severus swallowed the soup, trying not to wince as the molten cheese scalded his larynx. He took a sip of Beaujolais before answering his hostess. “It’s gone better than I expected, Narcissa. The students are behind in defense, but that has been the case for more than two decades now. However, they’re responding well to my accelerated review course and we’ll be able to begin work on year-appropriate curriculum within a few weeks. And Hermione and I have been teaching a course on animagus transformation to some of the advanced seventh years. That’s going very well.”

Draco responded with mild shock. “You’re an animagus? You never mentioned that, Uncle.”
Severus merely winged an eyebrow. “I’m sure you can understand why.”

“Let me guess. You never registered and never told the Dark Lord.” They young man responded with a slight frown on his face.

Severus nodded. “I was not registered until a few weeks ago, and yes I spied in that form. I could not tell you -- or anyone for that matter. I’m sure you understand, Draco.”

The boy grimaced in acceptance and applied himself to his food. Severus knew he still struggled with his Godfather’s role in the Second Wizarding War, particularly as Draco’s own actions had nearly gotten him killed on multiple occasions.

It was Lucius who attempted to lighten the mood. “Let me guess, Severus. Your animagus form matches your new patronus?”

“It does.”

“How...appropriate.” Lucius sneered with good humor, attempting to tease his long-absent friend. “You’ve always been more broody than a flock of Victorian poets. I suppose you run around your classes squawking ‘Nevermore’ at your students?”

Hermione smiled at Severus across the table with warm eyes before responding. “There was only the one incident with squawking, Lucius. Severus’ raven is otherwise the epitome of stoic silence.” The table laughed in response to Hermione’s gentle teasing.

“So you’re an animagus too, Granger?” Draco asked.

“Draco.” Narcissa murmured in admonishment. It wasn’t polite to address dinner guests by their surnames.

“Yes, Draco. I’ve been registered with the Ministry for more than four years and I’m certified to teach transformation. Why? Are you interested in learning for yourself?”

Her erstwhile nemesis grinned in response. “Maybe, eventually. I’m just having fun imagining what you’d transform into. I’m betting a kneazle.”

“You’d be wrong about that. She’s as finely feathered as I.” Severus smirked at his Godson.

“Figures.” Draco muttered.

Gentle chuckles circled around the table again as the meal continued. “So Lucius, Narcissa -- what news is there of the Malfoy family. I’ve apparently missed a great deal in the past few years.”

A little moue of distaste flickered across Narcissa’s face before she responded. “You didn’t miss much the first couple of years. We were unable to leave the estate for eighteen months and rarely left for another six months after that. Ever since then, dear Lucius has been attempting to repair our reputation. It’s been a slow process.”

“But not without its successes, my dear.” Lucius said, raising his glass in a toast to his wife. “In fact, I’ve made another step forward on that front today. My dear, the Malfoy family is now the majority shareholder and head of the board at The Daily Prophet.”


“Why on earth have you been so intent on having our family take part in running that rag, father?
Haven’t they tortured us enough? Or Uncle? Or even Potter and Granger?”

Severus placed his utensils on his plate and dabbed his mouth with his napkin. “Not that I don’t appreciate the sentiment, Draco, but I imagine Lucius wants to have some control over what horrible things the paper writes about any of us.”

“Precisely so, Severus! And do I ever have plans. After dinner we’ll adjourn to the library and I’ll share some of them with you. I heartily suspect both you and Hermione will approve.”

Severus found himself ensconced with Draco and Lucius in the library not long after dinner. Narcissa insisted on taking Hermione on a brief tour through her greenhouse, though he suspected their hostess really wanted to talk about the upcoming charity ball and Hermione’s choice of finery. (Cissy had always been somewhat predictable on this front.)

“So you’ve taken on the *Prophet* as your newest project?” he said to Lucius as the man poured a round of postprandial cognac.

“I have. Mostly so I could force the paper to start reporting some damned news, though I’ll admit that Skeeter was a secondary concern. Especially after her treatment of your Hermione in recent months.”

“Weasley always was an idiot,” muttered Draco, quaffing his drink.

Lucius tilted his head and to regard his son before replying. “True, but that was no reason to attack Hermione. Repeatedly.”

Severus looked at the two, puzzled by their strangely unwavering support for Hermione. “I feel as though I’ve missed something here. Since when have you been so...interested in the public’s approval of Hermione Granger?”

The look Draco shot Severus indicated that his Godson thought he might be missing a few braincells. “Since the parole hearing.”

“Which was when?”

Draco snorted. “At the end of our house arrest? Um...November of -- oh wait, you were gone.”

“Yes.” Severus replied, somewhat testily. “What did she have to do with your parole hearing?”

Lucius swirled the amber liquid in his glass before replying. “She testified for us, Severus. Supported us in our endeavors for reform. Got Potter to stand as our guest of honor at our first charity ball, though she declined to come herself. And she stated that we remained on good terms with you and that this, surely, indicated that we had seen the error of our ways.”

“In essence, Uncle, she’s one of the primary reasons our house arrest was lifted early. And why father has been able to resume his place as a driving force in the Wizarding economy since.” The boy smirked a bit at that last.

“She...never mentioned it.” Severus stated.

Lucius took a dainty sip of his cognac. “Hardly surprising, old friend. It didn’t exactly win her a lot
of supporters. Skeeter was vicious when it happened...but I have plans for her. Oh yes.” Severus could practically hear the man grinning beneath his unruffled appearance.

“Do tell.” Severus said, shelving his thoughts on Hermione until he could examine them at length.

“I’m going to promote the bitch.”

It was Draco who spluttered into his snifter. “You’re going to what? That was not the plan, father!”

“Calm yourself, Draco.” Lucius said it with a dark chuckle. “She’s spent the past fifteen years as the darling of the society section. I think it’s time she employed her...talents elsewhere. I’ve convinced the board that she should have an editorial spot.”

“Lucius, please tell me you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“I’m not. In two weeks time, Skeeter will be our new creative editor of Home and Gardening.” The blond man gave Severus a look that could only be described as unbelievably smug.

“Home and --” Severus caught himself beginning to smile, then gave up and let barked out a laugh. “Oh, Lucius!” he cackled. “I’d forgotten how wonderfully twisted you are!”

Draco shot his father a look of confusion as he watched his Godfather and former bane of his academic existence dissolve into unrefined laughter on the couch.

Lucius looked at his longtime friend’s display with some distaste. “I’ll admit, I’d thought it a good idea but I’m at quite a loss as to why this is so utterly amusing, Severus.”

“Home and Garden!” Severus wheezed. “Pests! You must make her first assignment about the removal of garden pests!” He chortled a bit as he attempted to get himself under control. Really, such an open display of mirth in front of the ever-reserved Malfoy men was unacceptable.

Draco grinned at his father. “I’d nearly forgotten. Her animagus form, father.”

Lucius’ eyes widened with understanding. “Well, that’s poetic justice for you.”

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Hermione was equally amused by Lucius’ decision when Severus explained it later that evening. “Oh, to be a nargle on the wall when that conversation takes place. She won’t be able to refuse as it’s a promotion. It’s brilliant.”

“It is,” he said, stifling a yarn. They’d stayed at the mansion until well past one. “Though I have to admit, a bit unsubtle for Lucius.” He moved to unzip the back of her dress at her gesture before sliding out of his dress shirt and slacks. Thinking back on the evening they’d enjoyed, Severus still couldn’t believe just how well Hermione got on with the Malfoy clan. It seemed so utterly out of character with what he knew about their past interactions. Of course, there’s apparently a lot I don’t know. Like the fact that Hermione helped release them from their house arrest…”

“I wonder who he’ll convince them to bring in to replace her in the society column?” she mused as she struggled to release the charm on her hair. With a huff she gestured toward her head, “Severus, will you --” He finited the hair charm as the continued to disrobe and prepare for bed.
Severus shrugged. “Whomever it is, they’ll need to be well-regarded and able to keep up the sensationalist headlines...without causing the Wizarding public to attack the individuals they report on.” He tossed his clothes in the corner for an elf to take care of in the morning and quickly moved to scrub the day’s dirt from his face.

“Howm. I wonder if Lucius would be open to suggestion there? I’ve got a couple ideas.”

“I daresay he would. He had nothing but praises for you.”

Hermione quirked a curious eyebrow at him.

“I didn’t know you’d helped to end their house arrest,” he said, patting his face dry. He deliberately occluded a bit, still unsure of how he felt that she hadn’t told him of her involvement with his friends.

She made a pssshing noise and waved her hand. “I just had a quiet word with Kingsley and spoke to the Wizengamot. I hadn’t even seen the Malfoys one-on-one since that last dinner with you all those years ago until tonight. It wasn’t much of a thing, really.”

Ah. So she didn’t even think on it as potentially life-changing. Just another day in the life of the Gryffindor Princess, I suppose. Save a pureblood family, teach a class, check the post, and go to bed. “They think it a very big thing, I assure you. They’re grateful, and I think you know how rare it is for the Malfoys -- particularly Draco and Lucius -- to express any form of gratitude to someone not of their circle. Or in their circle, for that matter.”

“Oh!” she said with some surprise. “I hadn’t realized.”

Severus sighed sleepily and moved to embrace her now nightgown-clad form. “Of course you hadn’t. So used to doing good that you don’t even notice the shock you receive when you save a family from further incarceration.”

“Honestly, that’s not why I did it, Severus.”

“I know. You did it because it was the right thing to do. It’s one of the things I like best about you, you know.”

She smiled at him and squeezed some toothpaste on the spare brush she kept in his rooms, then attacking her teeth with a vigor that would make her dentist parents proud. Severus watched her with some amusement as he moved to take care of his own teeth (though admittedly with less violence).

She rinsed and spat just moments before he did the same. “You’re not upset that I didn’t tell you about it, are you?”

“I...no. Why would I be?”

“I don’t know. But you seemed a little upset.”

So much for occluding. He yawned a bit and began moving toward the bed to turn down the covers. “I suppose I’m more upset that I didn’t know at all. It’s been easy here at Hogwarts. My missing memories don’t have as much of an effect here. At least, they’re not shoved in my face every day. But seeing my friends tonight, realizing just how much I don’t know about that year or the six that followed it. It’s frustrating.”

She grimaced. “We haven’t done much memory work lately, have we? It’s been all work and extra classes and dinner with the Malfoys and each other, but not much time with the pensieve.”
“True.” He’d been trying not to think of it, actually. Their lack of progress made him want to rip his hair out at times.

She took a deep breath as she slid between the sheets on what had quickly become her side of the bed. “I’ve been thinking. You asked me last week about legilimency and I asked for time to think about it. I think I can occlude anything I don’t want you to see. It’d be faster than the pensieve, at least.”

Severus’ breath caught slightly as he turned toward her and cupped her face in his hands. “Thank you.” He knew that what she was offering took an incredibly amount of trust.

“You’re welcome. I trust you, Severus. I know you won’t look where you ought not.”

He smiled at her again, on the verge of snuggling her into his arms when his jaw cracked on an enormous yawn. “Sorry,” he said a bit sheepishly. “Way to spoil the moment.”

“Shh, you’re tired love. Go to sleep and we can talk about it more in the morning, yeah?” She waved her hand to extinguish the lights, then snuggled down into his embrace.

“’M lucky to have you, y’know.” He murmured, eyes drifting closed. “I’ve no right to someone this understanding. Hardly any wonder I fell in love you,” he concluded, dropping off into sleep.

He didn’t notice how very still Hermione had gone in his arms, nor did he catch the look of utter surprise on her face.

“Finally,” she whispered, a note of thanks in her voice. She looked at her slumbering lover a moment longer before closing her eyes as well. She’d barely whispered “I love you too, Severus,” before dropping off into sleep beside him.

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Morning came sooner than Severus would have liked. He shivered himself awake, discovering that Hermione had wrapped herself in the duvet like a little burrito during the night. Clearly he’d need to get some spare blankets for both their beds. He was rather tired of waking up feeling like one of Narcissa Malfoy’s ice sculptures.

Deciding to let Hermione sleep a bit longer, he padded down stairs in loose pants and an old t-shirt to go through his morning exercise routine. He’d been neglecting it lately and his body was feeling the difference. He was slightly surprised when he rolled to his back halfway through his routine and spotted Hermione staring at him from the rail of the lofted bedroom.

He quickly stood and looked up at her. “Good morning.”

She gave him a soft smile in return. “G’morning to you too. Don’t let me stop you.”

He ruffled his hair (damn, it really was getting time for a trim) and looked up at her somewhat bashfully. “Um. It’s rather awkward, knowing you’re watching.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I’ve never seen you do this before, Severus. I was there through most of your physical therapy, remember?”
He grinned at that. “I don’t, actually!”

“Git.” But she said it with a smirk. “Fine, I’m going back to my rooms for a shower and a cuppa. Meet you back here in an hour? We can take care of your not remembering.” She’d turned and headed for the balcony door before he could formulate a response. With a mental shrug, he returned to his routine.

He’d only just finished his shower when he heard the peck of an owl at his bedroom door. He recognized the bird as Cana (short for Canaliculatus), Narcissa’s owl. She was carrying a rather large package in her claws, carefully wrapped in brown paper. Severus thanked the bird. “You’re welcome to warm yourself by the fire before you return,” he invited, and was pleased to see that the little bird followed him down to the sitting room to perch on the andirons.

Severus stroked the little bird on the head before sitting in his armchair to unwrap the heavy parcel.

It was a scrapbook.

Good lord, Lucius hadn’t been kidding. Narcissa had compiled a scrapbook. And it was thick.

With some trepidation, he lifted the cover and looked at the cover page. “Severus in Print: 1998 - 2000”

Well, fuck.

He shut the cover of the book quickly, then decided this would be the perfect time to make some tea. He glanced back at the book as he was debating his leaf selection. Within minutes he’d opened it again, tea craving forgotten.

A quick flip through the pages blasted him with Rita Skeeter’s headlines:

June 12, 1998

**Death Eater Pardoned in Death of Dumbledore: What is Minister Shacklebolt Thinking?**

“...the recently pardoned former Death Eater remains in St. Mungo’s for treatment of extensive wounds received in The Battle of Hogwarts. One must ask, however, whether such wounds were truly sustained in defense of our nation’s children, or whether the former Headmaster is hiding their true sources…”

July 31, 1998

**Snape the Spy Released from St. Mungo’s: Too Dark for Healers to Cure?**

“...anonymous sources within the Spell Damage and Reversal Ward indicate that Severus Snape was released from the hospital yesterday, though he remains in rehabilitative care. Dr. Althea Featherplait, the Healer in Charge of the former spy’s care, commented that ‘It is not our practice to speculate on a client’s continued health to the press. I must ask you to leave.’ Never fear, dear readers, this reporter shall persevere!...”

August 14, 1998
Former Headmaster Disappears: Does the Ministry Even Know Where He Is?

“...in the wake of mass funerals and memorials, I have to ask: Where is Snape? His failure to appear at even one ceremony has raised eyebrows as to his true loyalties....

August 20, 1998

Where is the Justice? Parents and Pupils Alike Demand to Know Where Snape Is!

“... anonymous sources close to the Ministry indicate that the newly formed ‘Hogwarts Interlocutors against Peccadillos, Offenses, and Corruption: Reprisal for Yesteryear’s Trespasses” (HIPOCRYT) seeks restitution for Severus Snape’s ‘Year of Terror’ as Hogwarts Headmaster. Untested Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt dismisses the group’s claims as a ‘junk lawsuit’...

August 25, 1998

Gryffindor Princess Tells Press to ‘Sod Off’, Defends Former Headmaster

“...Gryffindor Princess and hero of The Final Battle Hermione Granger, a plain and unassuming girl, demonstrates her capacity for heartless rhetoric as she verbally abuses this Prophet Reporter in defense of dual agent Severus Snape. For more on Granger’s unstable temperament, see page 6...”

August 31, 1998

“Snape threatened to hex me!”: Tell-All Story from Former Thera-witch

“...’he called me names and told me to never darken his doorstep again! I’ve even seen his Dark Mark! It’s horrifying’ states respected Thera-witch Nancy Lawdee. Her new book Therapy for the Wicked Wizard’s Soul will be released in select locations this fall...”

September 10, 1998

“No Comment” from Hero Ronald Weasley on Former Headmaster: What is he Hiding?

“...when asked about the disappearance of Severus Snape from Wizarding London, Ronald Weasley replied ‘dunno. He’s still recovering, isn’t he? Um...and no comment.” One can only ask whether Mr. Weasley and the others of the Golden Trio are deliberately hiding the spymaster from the public eye...”

September 20, 1998

“He’s a hero, why don’t you just let him be?” asks Boy Who Lived: Has Harry Potter Fallen to Snape’s Spell?

“...The Boy Who Lived Twice has spoken at last, though this reporter cannot help but
“question whether it was under duress. His uncharacteristic support of Former Headmaster Snape has left friends and family alike baffled at his behavior…”

November 1, 1998

**Headmaster Snape Threatens Halloween Revels: Makes Unwarranted Appearance at Holiday Party!**

“…Reformed Death Eater Severus Snape arrived at a private Halloween party with Hermione Granger, who has reportedly been helping with his aftercare. The uninvited guest arrived dressed in black and reportedly snarled at partygoers before disappearing. Photographs of Snape’s arrival on page 3. For more on Snape and his history of public snarling, see page 4…”

November 13, 1998

**Spymaster Snape Spotted Snogging in Street! Is Imperius at Work?**

“…wizards and witches alike have expressed grave concerns over the physical and mental health of Hermione Granger, the sole female of the Golden Trio, who was spotted kissing Severus Snape in Diagon Alley yesterday evening. Queries to Harry Potter and St. Mungo’s have thus far remained unanswered…”

November 21, 1998

**Hermione Granger and Severus Snape: More Post-War Pairings to Boggle the Mind**

“…continued from yesterday’s report on the incongruous pairing of Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood, we turn our attentions to Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. While neither witch nor wizard has publicly acknowledged the relationship, they have been spotted in Wizarding and Muggle London no fewer than six times since the first of this month…”

November 23, 1998

**“He’s really a necromancer and Granger’s his Inferi!” Sources Close to Former Headmaster Tell Us the Truth**

“…we caught up with Manchester Manticore Keeper Cormac MacLaggen in the Leaky Cauldron after yesterday’s crushing defeat against Puddlemere United. Keeper MacLaggen swears that Severus Snape is a necromancer and that Granger his undead plaything. ‘I tossed it on his shoes in sixth year to be sure!’ reported MacLaggen…”

December 20, 1998

**Christmas Baby for “Happy Couple”? You be the judge!**

“…So-called consensual couple Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were spotted in
Hogsmeade yesterday, shopping for books. Far be it for me to judge, but it appears that Miss Granger has recently put on some weight...or is that a baby bump I spy? Judge for yourself! Photos on page eight...”

January 9, 1999

**Snape Snaps! Attacks Innocent Bystander and Prophet Contractor, Colbert Clickerton**

“...Reformed Death Eater Severus Snape offered no apologies for his unprovoked attack on freelance photographer Colbert Clickerton in Diagon Alley this morning. Onlookers report that he shouted something akin to ‘leave us ruddy well enough alone!’ before hexing the victim. Mr. Clickerton is recovering nicely at St. Mungo’s after having his camera surgically removed from his posterior…”

And it went on. And on. He heard Hermione come in through the upstairs balcony door and shut the scrapbook with a bang. It took all his willpower to prevent himself from tossing the damned thing into the fire.

“I brought croissants from Winky. Can you put the kettle on -- Severus, what is it?” Hermione asked.

Severus pointed his shaking hand at the scrapbook. “Pest removal is entirely too good for that flaming bitch!”

Chapter End Notes

Whoo! This chapter took forever. It was, however, way too fun to write. I kind of enjoy channeling Rita Skeeter sometimes.
Baby it's Cold Outside

Chapter Summary

Snow falls at Hogwarts, students learn some basic battle tactics, and Severus wants to murder all bureaucrats.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had taken Hermione to calm him down after reading through Narcissa’s collected backlog of articles on the Granger-Snape relationship saga. An hour, two shredded croissants, several bracing cups of tea, and more soothing and platitudes than Severus had thought himself capable of enduring. And he still wanted to track the woman down and squeeze her neck until she turned as blue as her little beetle carapace.

“I told you to wait to read those, Severus.” Hermione had scolded. “I knew you’d flip your wig. You certainly did the first time.”

“Yes, well. I’m supposed to be older and more even tempered now, aren’t I?”

“Hmm” had been her only response.

Hermione had explained that she’d hoped to start their legilimency work that morning, but that he was clearly too upset to root around in her mind with the sort of accuracy he’d need to sort through so many memories. So it was not long after his outburst and silently renewed vow to make Rita Skeeter pay for her transgressions that he he found himself taking rather a brisk walk around the Black Lake with his lover.

He had to admit, the moist, cold air was equal parts bracing and calming. He hadn’t spent much time out of doors since the weather started turning, and he could see that the lake had frozen nearly all the way to the center. As they neared the halfway-point around the lake, the giant squid shot a tentacle up, shattering the thin layer of ice over the deepest part of the lake and sending chunks of frozen water flying for a yards. Severus and Hermione continued to walk in silence, listening to the ice crack and waves slosh from the center of the lake.

Snow began to fall as they neared the end of their walk, sticking to and nesting within Hermione’s curls until she looked like a mythical Nordic queen. His heart clenched at the sight of her, but he merely kissed the tip of her cold-reddened nose and took her hand within his as they climbed the small hill toward the castle.

When they returned to her quarters, they stripped each other of their snow damp clothes and made slow love in front of her fire, touching one another with chilled fingertips until their bodies were warm and their minds still.

It was several hours before Severus realized that he was no longer angry. He couldn’t ever remember calming so quickly after an emotional upset, but it would seem that Hermione had learned to help him settle sometime in their past relationship. He couldn’t help but wonder what secrets of his she held.
Classes resumed that week with a bang and a whimper. The snow the previous night had left the Hogwarts grounds quiet and nestled under a pristine blanket of white that students were raring to desecrate with snow fortresses and epic snowball fights. Their restlessness in lessons rendered classes close to unmanageable, and house point losses nearly trebled in the wake of the sudden surge of energy in each class.

It didn’t help that Severus’ classes were now caught up to the curriculum of each given year, and he was pushing them harder than ever in an attempt to prepare them for the upcoming survival trip in the spring. He met resistance at nearly every turn. Students questioned his choice of subject at nearly every turn. He was frustrated that not even the lesson on blending in with Muggles could keep their attention for more than a half hour. Apparently Muggle sartorial choices and slang were not sufficiently interesting to students who felt hemmed in by the protective castle walls.

During the final lesson of the day, one of his seventh years finally huffed and exclaimed “I don’t understand why I need to learn about blue jeans in a defense class!” (ten points from Gryffindor for insolence), Severus nearly lost his temper before inspiration struck.

“Right! We have nearly two hours left in this lesson and another hour after that before dinner. You have five minutes to summon a winter garment and meet me in the Entrance Hall. Hop to it!” He whirled and left the room in a flurry of robes, summoning his own winter cloak as he walked toward the front of the castle. He rapidly started plotting out the next step of the lesson while he waited for his students to arrive, reshaping his carefully planned exercised to fit the his fidgety students.

Within five minutes, every student had arrived in the entrance hall. “Follow me,” he intoned, setting off at a quick march and leading his students out the front door and down to an empty field beyond the greenhouses.

“Today we are going to enact an inclement-weather battle scenario. I realize we have not discussed such full-scale scenarios in class to date, but rest assured that wizards and witches alike have fought each other in a battle in this very field. Some bled here, and many died. That will not be the case today.” He point his wand at six spots in the vast field, charming six piles of snowballs -- two with small snowballs, two with medium, and two with large. One pile of each sized snowball was red, the other green. He turned back to the students.

“These snowballs represent jinxes, hexes, and curses. The small ones are the easiest to throw, but will do the least damage. These represent the jinxes that you would commonly throw in the hallway where I know none of you actually duel.” He smirked as some of the students shifted guiltily. “The medium snowballs have been charmed to be slightly more difficult to throw. They represent hexes that are more likely to incapacitate you, but no injure. The large snowballs represent curses that will maim or kill you. They have been charmed so that they are very difficult to throw.

Now then. I will take a brief moment to erect some temporary fortifications in this field. Please use this time to cast whatever warming or imperviousness spells you feel are necessary for the exercise.”

He turned away from the group again as they excitedly began to cast spells against wet shoes and socks and spells that would keep them somewhat warm in the cold Scottish air. He nodded his approval when he heard one of his students cast a no-slip spell on the soles of her shoes. At least one
of them is an independent thinker! While his students prepared for the upcoming battle, Severus swept his wand toward the two sides of the field, raising the snow into several small fortresses from which students could gain a few feet of height or hide behind during the epic snowball fight he was about to endorse.

When he looked back to his students, he noticed they looked warmer, if still somewhat wary of the assignment for the afternoon. “Everyone warm and dry?” Severus asked. He saw nods from the assembled students. “Excellent. Put your wands in a pile here, please. You will not need them for the rest of this lesson.” He raised his wand a final time and directed it at the student groups, intoning *picta non dignus* as he flicked it up, down, and then to the side in rapid succession.

“The snowballs, as you can see, are charmed red and green. Gryffindor, you will be on the west side of the field. Slytherin will be on the east. You are to attempt to subdue one another with the snowballs. If you manage to hit an opponent, the charmed snow will leave a temporary stain on your clothing. Once you have been stained in enough spots to be considered incapacitated -- meaning either both arms and legs, a 50% stain to the chest, or a stain to the head -- you will be compelled to leave the field. You may not, under any circumstances, strike another student with anything other than a snowball. Any questions?”

One Slytherin raised his hand. “Yes, sir. As much fun as a good snowball fight sounds, what exactly is the point? Especially if we can’t use our wands?”

“The point, Mr. Harvey, is that you must learn to when to dodge, run, hide, and attack, even if you are missing your wand. Consider this a practical lesson in such basic fighting skills.

And before I forget: The winning team will receive fifty points for their house. Now please take your places on your respective sides. You have five minutes to prepare to attack your opponents.” He waved his wand and conjured the image of a five-minute hour glass in the air.

The students rushed off with alacrity to crouch behind the temporary snow fortresses, quickly discussing tactics to use in the impromptu battle. Severus cast his own charms on his robes and shoes, then formed a pile of snow into a comfortable chair from which to watch the blood snowbath.

Before long, the hourglass was out of sand and a loud gong rang out across the field. WIt a battle cry that made his ears hurt, a small team of Gryffindors and Slytherins popped out from behind each of the fortresses and made for the piles of snowballs. They boys, he noticed, were running toward the medium and large piles while most of the girls were gathering medium snowballs. *Predictable.*

He watched with great interest for more than an hour as the once pristine field quickly transformed into a series of muddy tracks interspersed with blobs of red and green. Severus had to restrain the grin that wanted to stretch across his face as he watched students attempt to throw the heavy, large snowballs -- which he’d charmed to weigh more than a bludger -- at one another. Shrieks were coming from both sides of the field as cold, wet snow slid down collars or struck limbs. Half the students had been eliminated in the first ten minutes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus caught the telltale shimmer of a disillusioned student creeping toward the small snowball pile. His eyebrow quirked -- the student had managed to disillusion themselves wandlessly, which was no mean feat. He watched with some amusement as, one by one, the student moved behind Gryffindor lines and began to walk up to the remaining individuals. Green splotches appeared on the backs of three, then five Gryffindor heads. Even the Slytherin students seemed confused when the five Gryffindors suddenly moved onto the sidelines.

With some interest, he observed as a further two Gryffindors were sidelined by their invisible
attacker. It seemed as though the attacker was unstoppable until three students -- some of the best in
the class -- began following the trail of footprints in the snow. They quickly launched small and
medium curses toward the source of the footprints, crowing with delight when the disillusionment
charm melted off a very proud and very red Megan McAvoy. With a grin, she stuck her tongue out
at her captors as the *picta non dignus* forced her to the edges of the battlefield.

It wrapped up quickly after that, with the last few Gryffindors and Slytherins dashing through the
muddy snow in an attempt to be the last person standing. Finally, the field was clear of all but a series
of red, green, and brown blotches in the snow as his students stood on the sidelines, laughing with
one another and recounting some of the better shots of the match.

Severus approached the recently vanquished with the closest thing to an actual smile his students
might have ever seen. “Well done, both houses. I saw some rather innovative thinking out there. Tell
me, what are some of the takeaways from this exercise?”

Hands shot in the air with more alacrity than he’d seen in some time.

“Learning to move in difficult terrain.”

“Thinking about dodging and not casting.”

“Remembering to use cover and hide when you can.”

“Working together!”

“Wandless charms are useful.” This from Miss McAvoy.

“Excellent answers, and all correct. The last man standing -- woman standing, I should say -- was in
fact a Gryffindor, so fifty points to your house Miss Benedict. You made a good use of both hiding
in the fortresses and launching small jinxes where you could. If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say you
probably nicked at least half of the Slytherin team with that arm of yours.”

Niandra Benedict, a chaser for the Gryffindor team, grinned at that and nodded her head in thanks.

“I’m also going to award ten points to Miss McAvoy for the rather adept use of a disallusionment
charm. How many people did you take out with jinxes to the head, Miss McAvoy?”

“Seven, sir.”

“Make that fourteen points, then. Two for each person.”

Leonard Kanter, a Gryffindor boy, objected to that. “But you said no magic, sir! How is that fair?”

“Ah ah, Mr. Kanter.” Severus scolded. “I believe I said no wands. Miss McAvoy made use of a
wandless charm, and quite well too. It took three of your compatriots to remove her from the
battlefield. She was thinking like a Slytherin, which is a lesson that each of you could use no matter
your house. I believe that deserves an award and my word on this is final.

“Now then. I will expect each of you to think of three new ways to evade, hide, or trick an opponent
in direct confrontation. Come prepared to demonstrate these ideas in our next lesson. For now, you
are dismissed. Go inside to warm and clean yourselves up before dinner.” He turned and began
walking back to the castle and made it three steps before a telltale itch sprung up in the middle of his
back. An itch that felt decisively like a metaphorical target. *They wouldn’t.*

“Sir?” It was McAvoy’s voice.
Against his better judgment, he turned around to face his students. “Yes, Miss McAvoy?”

“You forgot an important part of today’s lesson, sir?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “And that would be?”

“Always be on the lookout for an ambush!” Suddenly Severus found himself facing down nearly forty colored snowballs, both red, and green, as they flew in his direction. He closed his eyes and blocked his face as the deluge fell down on him.

His students waited with baited breath as a rather Christmassy-looking Snape opened his eyes and dusted the snow from his hair, unsure if their prank would be accepted in the spirit it was intended or if they’d just lost all their house points for the year. They were relieved -- and not a little shocked -- when Severus Snape, the most taciturn professor the school had ever known, laughed until he had to bend at the waist to catch his breath.

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“Severus! Goodness, what on earth happened to you all!” The Headmistress rushed toward the returning class with a look of perplexed concern on her face. “You’re all...painted?”

“My apologies, Minerva. A brief exercise in battle tactics. I took my cue from the Muggles and had a bit of a paintball war in the field beyond the greenhouses. Nothing is injured, I assure you, other than my pride.” He gestured at his own garishly colored cloak with a slight smile.

“Dare I ask who won?”

“Gryffindor won this round, though Slytherin made a good show of it. The house points should reflect the win.”

“Well, that’s the best excuse I’ve heard for a good snowball fight in all the time I’ve been here, I’ll admit. I’ll ask the house elves to send some hot chocolate up to the common rooms for you all. Now go clean up before dinner begins!” She shooed off the students who didn’t wait for their instructor’s further approval before fleeing the scene.

Minerva turned back to Severus with a wry smile on her face. “Honestly, Severus. You’d think you were sixteen again.”

He shrugged. “The lesson would have been a loss if I hadn’t gotten them out for a bit. They were going stir-crazy in there. I thought I’d give them a quick lesson on dodging and hiding in a battle environment.”

“Well done, my dear. I know you’d like to go get cleaned up as well, but I’m afraid Percy Weasley is here on behalf of the Minister for you. He’s waiting in my office.”

With a sigh, Severus raked his hand through is snow-damp hair. “Very well, I’ll go speak to him now. Thank you.”

“Not at all Severus. I’ll see you at dinner.” She swept off toward the staff room, muttering under her breath, “Lessons in dodging hexes my foot.”
“Stupid git.” Severus cursed, pulling off his still-damp robes as he stomped into his rooms. “Stupid fucking git.” He toed off his boots and kicked them into the closet.

Percy Weasley had been absolutely no help at all. He’d arrived with a copy of Harry’s report from the shopping excursion -- nothing there he didn’t already know -- as well as the revised list of possible suspects with new additions that they hadn’t bothered to tell him would be made. Then Percy had waxed loquacious as he informed Severus that a formal complaint was finally underway and would he mind appearing at the Ministry in a few days time to file some paperwork? In triplicate, naturally.

He sighed as he plopped down on the sofa. Why Kingsley had saw fit to hire that officious little twit he would never know. Oh, he was sure that the former Head Boy crossed all of his Ts and dotted all his Is, but he was a pain in the neck to work with. Not for the first time, Severus wished there was another intermediary between himself and the Minister for Magic. The red-headed rulemonger had droned on so long that Severus ended up missing dinner.

“Winky?” he called tiredly.

“Yes, sir? You have called for Winky?”

“Yes. Can you please bring me some dinner? I’m afraid I never made it to the Great Hall this evening. Just leftovers from whatever was served will do.”

“Of course, Professor Snape. Winky will return!” The little elf blinked out of the room as quickly as she’d come, just as a knock sounded at his door.

“Enter.” He waved his hand to release the wards to the room and glanced over his shoulder to see Hermione enter with a bottle of wine.

“Oh dear. You do look worn out. You didn’t come to dinner, so I thought you could use and glass of this and a bit of a cuddle tonight.”

He smiled tiredly. “That sounds perfect, actually. Winky was just bringing me some --” Winky popped back into the room carrying a loaded tray with what smelled like Chicken Tikka Masala on it. “ -- dinner. Thank you, Winky. That will be all for tonight.” The elf squeaked with pleasure at Severus’ thanks and blinked out of the room again.

Severus leaned in and breathed in the steam from the red curry and the rice. “Damn, that smells good. I was thinking that I could do with a good curry tonight.”

Hermione smiled and lit the fire before pouring a glass of wine and settling in at the far end of the sofa with her feet pulled beneath her. Severus watched her as he tucked into his meal. “What put you in a mood this evening? Your students seemed in a fine mood at the end of classes today. I assume I have you to thank for the green splotches on the cloaks I saw drying about the Gryffindor common room before dinner?”

He smirked. “The paint should have faded by now. I only charmed it to last a couple of hours.”

“Well, thanks for thinking ahead on that point.”

He grunted and continued eating, spooning another mouthful of the cumin and cardamom scented rice into his mouth. “The students were distracted today, but the battlefield exercise got their
attention. No, the problem is your erstwhile fiancé’s brother. He was bad enough as a student, but now that he works for the Minister…”

Hermione laughed. “Oh, I know. Kings enables him far too much. He’s a right prat now. Always going on about forms and regulations and the intricacies of keeping the Minister’s calendar. Only Molly can stand listening to him.”

“Apparently I need to file the proper paperwork for a formal complaint about my ‘little mishap’ with obliviation. In triplicate. In person.”

She grimaced. “How annoying.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, don’t think on it tonight. You still have a full week ahead of you and another class full of seventh years to teach snow dodgeball to tomorrow.”

He smirked at her. “Minerva’s still sore about that, is she?”

“I think she’s more upset that you didn’t invite her to participate.”

Severus snorted, pushing his tray aside and sitting back with his wine. He regarded Hermione with solemn eyes for a moment before leaning forward to place a quick peck on her cheek. “Thank you.”

She blushed slightly. “You’re welcome. For what?”

“For coming over here with wine and sitting with me even though I was in a foul mood. And for being so perfectly lovely about it. Come here.” He extended an arm so she could move closer, and she cuddled into his side with her bent knees resting across his thighs. He might have thought she seemed made to fit beside him before dismissing it as a too-romantic notion, even for a man who had newly re-discovered himself in love.

They sat in silence for awhile, sipping their wine and staring at the fire before Hermione looked up at him. “This is nice.”

He nodded and bent his head to rest his cheek against her hair. “Yes. Yes it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter, guys! The Guy Fawkes Ball is next and it didn't make any sense to start it here.
November 5, 2005

Saturday found Severus and Hermione staring at the ornate entrance hall of Malfoy Manor once again.

“Stop fidgeting,” he murmured in her ear. “You look lovely. That color becomes you.”

Hermione smiled up at him, knowing that he wasn’t one to offer idle flattery. She brushed her hand down the chiffon overlay of her plum-colored gown -- purchased on that fateful trip to Diagon Alley, then laced her arm through Severus’. “Thank you, love, but it’s a Malfoy ball. Narcissa is sure to be in something bespoke. The entire family is. I’m afraid I’ll look...provincial comparatively.

“So will everyone else, Hermione. That’s rather the point of hosting a ball for the Malfoys. It’s a chance for them to flaunt their superiority while buying goodwill. Off the rack or not, there won’t be a single woman in the room to rival you tonight.” He brushed a hand over the stray curls she’d allowed to tease her neck, trying to soothe her as they waited for the house elf to take their cloaks.

“Flatterer.” She sighed. “I feel stupidly vain every time I prepare for one of these events. I hate being so on display, but I know if I don’t put in the effort Rita Skeeter will eviscerate me in tomorrow’s paper.”

“It’s a good thing she’s being ‘promoted’ then, isn’t it?” He handed their cloaks to the waiting house elf with his thanks and swept her into the Malfoy ballroom.

He heard Hermione catch her breath when the room came into view. Severus could understand...Cissa had certainly pulled out all the stops for the evening. The Malfoy Ballroom hardly needed embellishment to enhance its elegant splendor; the room was sheathed in cool walls of rose-colored marble and the inlaid stone floor had been polished to a high gleam. Someone had summoned tiny, multi-colored mage lights to hover above the dance floor, but at the level of the upper galleries. It looked as though a firework had exploded over the gathered guests, and the entire room seemed to pulse with a warm, rose-toned glow.

Sprays of flowers sat on each of the small cocktail table stationed at the edges of the room, and they too adhered to the theme of Bonfire Night. Allium, torch lily, globe thistle, and spider mums sat amongst a backdrop of stock in tall topaz vases. Each stem was artfully arranged in a deliberate riot of color and shape to appear like a shooting firework. A chamber orchestra was tuning its strings from the East end of the upper gallery.

“Severus! Hermione!” rang the voice of Narcissa Malfoy, who glided forward in a satiny copper
column of a gown. Her pale blond locks were styled in an elegant chignon and the low cowl neckline of the sheath dress provided the perfect frame for the most stunning necklace of topaz, citrine, ruby and diamond -- again, beautifully sculpted in the shape of firework bursts. Matching earrings swung from her ears. The effect was simultaneously elegant and...fun. Not a word Severus had ever thought to apply to his best friend’s wife.

Severus stepped into the cloud of delicate scent that followed Narcissa wherever she went. “Narcissa. You look lovely, as always.”

“Flatterer.” She said it with a smile as she bussed his cheeks before moving toward Hermione.

“And the ballroom...it’s just stunning. I’m almost breathless.” Hermione added as the Malfoy matriarch embraced her in turn.

“Thank you, my dear. The lighting is Draco’s handywork. Make sure to express your approval -- he worked for weeks to perfect the charm.”

“I will, then.” Hermione responded, sending a little smile and wave to Draco where he stood with Astoria Greengrass at the far end of the room.

“Now I believe Mr. Potter said that you would make a convivial party this evening, yes?” Narcissa raised an eyebrow, clearly amused at the Gryffindor’s lack of subterfuge. Harry’s task would be to keep any eye on Severus and ensure no one with malicious intent approached him -- a fact that Severus was sure would disappoint Ginevra Weasley as her husband’s attention would be divided. He’d protested Kingsley’s instance that Potter be there as a second set of eyes to no avail; it would seem that Severus would have a babysitter for the evening.

Hermione was already waving at Ginevra as the younger could make their way toward them. Narcissa moved away to greet another set of guests. “Harry, Ginny!” Hermione exclaimed. “You both look wonderful. That dress is fantastic, Gin.” Severus merely nodded his head in greeting at Potter and wife, though he could silently agree with Hermione’s assessment; the youngest Weasley looked very well in a slim black dress.

Ginny’s smile was a little forced when she leaned in to hug Hermione. “The entire family is here tonight. And I do mean entire family,” she said sotto voce.

Hermione’s smile faltered a bit when she drew away from her friend. “Well, it had to happen sometime, didn’t it? It’s alright Gin. I’ll just avoid them.” Ginny nodded, and Hermione shot a telling glance at Severus. Ah. So Ronald would be in attendance this evening. He grinned inwardly; unlike Hermione and Ginny, he had no issues with Ronald Weasley’s attendance of the Malfoy Bonfire Ball...if only because Mr. Weasley’s loss had quite fortuitously become Severus’ gain.

He slipped his arm around Hermione’s waist in support and leaned in to whisper in her ear, “Shall I dance attendance on you all evening and generally play the role of the very besotted lover?”

Hermione leaned in to peck him on the lips. “I don’t think the former is really necessary, though I do expect you to actually dance with me. As for the latter...whether you realize it or not, Severus, you do that already.” She gave him a cheeky smirk.

Severus quirked an eyebrow. “Indeed.”

The smile she gave him in return was soft. “In your way.”

At this point Harry cleared his throat. “I swear, the two of you become more revolting every time I see you. Were we ever this bad, Gin?”
Ginny rounded on her husband and planted a smacking kiss on his lips in return. “No, Harry. We were worse! Come on you two, we’ve got a table over by the dance floor with George, Angelina, Percy, and Penelope. With you two there we’ll be full up and then my most annoying brother will leave us well enough alone.”

Hermione shot a grateful look at her friend as the two couples made their way across the room toward the waiting couples, who greeted Hermione with enthusiasm. Severus received a rather more lukewarm handshake from Percy and a toothy grin from George. “Professor Snape!” the latter greeted him. “Good to see you, sir. So you’re back with our Hermione then, are you?”

“Subtle as always, George,” Hermione muttered.

George grinned again and pulled Hermione into a bone-jarring hug. “Just looking out for you, love. Haven’t seen you since you left the prat over there. How’ve you been?”

“I’m good. Better than good, really,” she replied with a sly grin, slanting a look toward her escort for the evening.

George waggled his eyebrows in response. “I expect details, darling. Come by the Hogsmeade shop next week. I’ll be there overseeing the setup for our new Wheezes’ Wicked Witches line, but I can take a break for a chat with my favorite honorary sister.”

“I’ll do just that,” she said.

“And you, Professor Snape? How’s it all going then?”

“I have few complaints, but for missing a year of my life Mr. Weasley. Returning to Hogwarts has been very rewarding.” He glanced down at Hermione as the orchestra finished tuning their instruments and played the opening strains of a Bossa Nova. “Much more than I had anticipated.”

“If you two won’t stop it with that business, I have no choice but to ask my wife to dance,” declared Harry, bolting his glass of champagne. “What d’you say, Gin? Fancy risking a few broken toes with me?”

Ginny giggled and set down her still-untouched glass of champagne. “There’s no one else I’d risk my feet for.” With a backward glance, she waved at Hermione and Severus. “Bye, lovebirds.”

Severus leaned in toward Hermione and whispered in her ear. “I can see he’s taking his duties seriously tonight.”

“Oh, he is. It’s part of his act, actually. He’ll have dosed himself with sobriety potion before drinking, and I’m sure he’s got a locator charm on you. It’s hardly an accident he left us with Percy and George; they’re probably serving as extra lookouts for you tonight.” Hermione whispered back.

“Hey, now. None of that you two. You’ll put Angelina off the canapés.”

“Shut it, George. The canapes are delicious and I think they’re sweet. Don’t you Penelope?”

Penelope Weasley, née Clearwater, merely shrugged and poked at her miniature beef tournedo. She looked uncomfortable; her face was flushed and her dress seemed a bit tight. Percy was clearly starting his own branch of the family clan, and Penelope looked exceedingly unhappy to be tapped in the Malfoy manse in a too-tight dress and high-heels.

“If you’ll excuse us, Professor, Hermione, there are some people I should greet. We’ll return shortly. George?” Percy looked at his brother, an unspoken question passing between them. George merely
rolled his eyes and gave his older brother a slight nod. “Come Penelope. I see the Minister has arrived. He'll need me to help with guest names.” Percy offered his wife his arm and the crossed the room to see to Kinglsey’s needs.

“What was that?” asked Hermione, referring to the nod between George and Percy.

“Er, Harry asked Perce and me to keep an eye on Professor Snape for the evening. Since Perce has to do the meet and greet, I get the first shift. Sorry, Professor,” he said, slanting his eyes toward Severus.

Severus sighed. “I think, as you’re playing babysitter for the next bit, it might be best if you addressed me by my given name. After all, I haven’t been your professor for nearly a decade.”

“Right, then. Sev it is.” Severus narrowed his eyes at George as Angelina jabbed her elbow into her husband’s ribs. “Um. I meant Severus. Bloody hell woman, that hurt!”

Angelina just grinned.

“How’s everything going with Puddlemere United, Angie?” asked Hermione.

“Pretty well. Oliver’s out with a head injury this week. It’s his third concussion this season, so they’ve got me breaking in the second string keeper during practice. It’s murder on the arms.” Angelina had been recruited for the Puddlemere Quidditch team five seasons prior and had quickly worked her way out of the second string players to become their star Chaser. Wizards (and a few witches) throughout England were fighting over who the hotter Hogwarts-grad Quidditch player was -- Ginny or Angelina. The running joke in the family was that Oliver, who had just become engaged to Charlie Weasley, was hotter than either of them.

Severus entertained himself by watching Hermione banter with George and Angelina, then Harry and Ginny when they returned to the table. The crowded ballroom had been charmed to mute background noise from a distance, and the three couples were able to chat comfortably as they sipped at their drinks and snacked on the provided canapés (Severus returned for seconds on both the duck confit and the vegetable tureen).

Finally, he turned toward Harry. “If you’d like another chance to maul your wife, I’m going to take Hermione for a turn on the dance floor.” At Harry’s nod, he turned toward Hermione. “Would you like to dance, pet?

Hermione glanced at the dance floor. “Not if you want to do that!” she said.

Severus chuckled. “Narcissa has an affection for the older dances. I believe that’s a Mazurka. Not a favorite of mine.”

“Minerva taught both Neville and me the various social dances found at wizarding balls, but we never learned that. It’s like the polka and the waltz had an awkward, pre-pubescent lovechild.” The look of horror on Hermione’s face said it all, and Severus was forced to cough to cover his own snort of laughter. A few moments later, her face relaxed slightly when she heard the opening strains of the next song. “Oh, I can do this one”

“A foxtrot. Good choice. Come on, before Cissa asks them to play a minuet.” Severus offered his arm to his date and they made their way on to the floor.

They were largely silent as they made their way through the gliding steps and turns of the foxtrot, each concentrating on not looking a fool -- as Harry currently was (oh, poor Ginevra), and they ended the dance with a short curtsey and boy as was tradition. The next piece was another waltz.
Severus merely extended his hand to Hermione again and drew her up against him.

“This is *not* the proper distance for a waltz,” Hermione said to him, shooting him an appreciative look from under her lashes.

“Hmm. You’re right.” He gave her a slight smile and drew her closer as they began to move to the whisper of the strings.

“Minerva would have conniptions if she could see us.”

“Love, I hate to tell you but Minerva *can* see us.” He nodded his head in the direction of the far corner of the ballroom, where the Headmistress was ensconced with Augusta Longbottom and Mohinder Bhatti, who was acting as Minerva’s escort for the evening. The look on Minerva’s face was, indeed, somewhat disapproving.

“I surprised she doesn’t storm over here and force us to stand a few inches apart.”

“I think I’d like to scandalize her a bit further. What do you say?” he said, leaning in close so that his lips hovered a hair’s breadth from hers.

Rather than answer, Hermione simply leaned in and placed a soft kiss on his lips. Their movements paused momentarily as he lingered over the touch before he pulled Hermione to the side of the dance floor to sway in place. Despite the fact that they’d been together for weeks, something about that chaste little kiss made feel weak in the knees.

“Hermione --” He paused, unsure how to proceed.

“Yes?” She sounded just as breathless.

The corner of his mouth quirked up and his eyes softened as he looked at her. “Nothing. I just -- my timing is shite. I think I love you.”

Hermione’s face colored a bit and she rose to press another peck on his lips. “Your timing is perfect. I know you love me. And I love you too.”

They simply continued to sway, caught in the moment and each other a moment longer. Severus breathed a long sigh of relief. “You make this easy, you know.”

“Dancing?” Hermione joked.

“Loving you.” He smiled at her again and was surprised when she glanced away and narrowed her eyes. A moment later, Severus felt a tap on his shoulder.

Ronald Weasley stood there, a guileless smirk on his face. “Can I cut in?”

“No, you bloody well may not!” growled Severus.

Hermione ran her hand down his arm. “It’s alright, love. The dance is half over. I’ll join you at the table after Ronald has had his little publicity dance.” The look on her face said it all; if Weasley wanted a dance with his former fiancée, she was going to make him pay for it. With a curt nod, Severus released Hermione from his arms.

“The next waltz is for me, then.”

The look she shot him could only be described as sultry. “Of course.” She turned to her ex and snapped, “come on Ronald, let’s bloody well get this over with.”
Severus watched with some amusement as Hermione turned Minerva’s dance lessons on their head. She danced with the ginger menace held at arms length, alternately refusing to look at him and sending him looks cold enough to freeze the balls off a plimpie. He noted the photographer on in the upper gallery hadn’t missed a moment of the awkward dance; Hermione was certainly sending a message. When it ended, she ignored his perfunctory bow and stared at the boy without expression. Ronald shifted uncomfortably as the introduction for a Promenade began. He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione merely had to quirk an eyebrow to have him snapping his jaw shut. Severus had never felt so proud.

Weasley was saved further embarrassment by the timely arrival of his brother. Percy stepped in and offered his elbow to Hermione, who smiled gratefully and accepted. They moved away without a word to line up for the dance.

Severus moved back toward the table and sipped at his champagne as his witch danced with her temporary savior.

“Well, that went better than it could have,” said Ginny at his elbow.

“Your brother is, by far, the biggest idiot I have ever had the misfortune to teach.”

Ginny snorted. “He is, for more reasons than you know. Care to indulge in a bit of schadenfreude with me?”

“I’m all ears, Mrs. Potter.”

“His wife is a right shrew. Bitches at him all day and night -- he doesn’t earn enough money, he’s not famous enough, blah blah blah. She expects him to cater to her day and night, and I’ll bet that’ll only get worse as she gets closer to giving birth. And she’s pissed that the pregnancy has ‘derailed her career,’ such as it was. I’ll be she put him up to dancing with Hermione too. She’s greedy for the spotlight -- Prunella, not Hermione, I mean.” Severus could practically hear the sneer on the woman’s face as he continued to watch Hermione dance with Percy.

Severus sighed. “To tell you the truth, I feel a bit sorry for him. I grew up in a home with an unhappy marriage. I don’t envy their child.”

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. “How long do you think it’ll be before he realizes he threw away the best part of his life in favor of a cheap piece of ass?”

Severus shot a glance at Ron, who stood staring at Hermione with something distinctly like a pout on his face as his wife sniped into his ear. “I’d say that’s done already.”

Ginny sighed. She loved her brother, the idiot. “Excuse me. I’m going to go save him from Prunes for a bit.” The promenade was ending, so she grabbed her brother and asked him to dance with her for the next -- hah -- a minuet.

Hermione curtsied to Percy and made to move back toward Severus and their table before Draco stepped forward and requested the dance. With a look of resignation for Severus, she accepted.

“You’ve lost her for at least an hour now, Snape,” said George as he returned to the table with a fresh drink for his wife. “It always happens at functions like this. Every wizard in England wants a dance with the Gryffindor Princess.”

“Hmm. Then I’ll make sure to cut in after a few more dances. Can’t have her forgetting who her escort is tonight, can I?”
George chuckled and popped a stuffed grape leaf in his mouth.

Severus leaned on the table and chose a grape leaf off his own plate to eat. “So tell me about the latest and greatest at your shop. What annoying contraptions do I need to look out for next term?”

George looked surprised at the topic of conversation, but launched into a full description with alacrity. For the next half hour, Severus was treated to a description of giddiness potions, Dream-ful sleep (the opposite of Dreamless Sleep, guaranteed to grant pleasant dreams to its imbibers), and -- the horror -- a new line of women’s ‘pleasure products’ aimed at enhancing the sexual experience. He decided on the spot that he would feign ignorance of that line’s existence.

George was picking Severus’ brain about enhancements for their Dark Arts protection line when Severus realized he couldn’t see Hermione on the dance floor. “Angelina, have you seen Hermione?”

“No. She was dancing with Kingsley, last I saw. Probably dashed off to the loo. Want me to go check?”

“Would you?” Severus asked.

“Not a problem. Back in two shakes.” George watched appreciatively as his wife dashed off in the direction of the ladies retiring room.

She returned a few minutes later. “Nope, just Pansy and Daphne checking each other’s makeup in there.”

Severus’ face creased into a frown. “I’m going to go check the balconies. Do you mind checking the upper gallery?”

“I’ll go with you to the balcony. Angie, love, you want to check the gallery?”

With a nod, the witch turned toward the curving stair at the back of the room.

The balcony was empty but for a somewhat inebriated Draco in a sloppy liplock with Astoria Greengrass. “We’re engaged!” he said to his uncle in a somewhat slurry voice.

Astoria hissed at Draco. “You have to tell your parents first!”

“Aw, Uncle Sev’rus is family.”

Severus paused, knowing that he had to say something. “The feeling is mutual, Draco. Congratulations to you both. I hate to rush through, but we’re looking for Hermione. Have you seen her?”

Draco pouted. “Nope. She’s probably in the library. Or the reading room.” He gestured vaguely toward the ballroom again.

“Thank you, Draco.” Severus turned to George. “This way.”

He knew that he was likely being ridiculous, but not knowing where Hermione was in this crowd made him nervous. He just wanted to ascertain that she was alright after that dance with her ex-fiancé. That was all. It wasn’t like he was worried or anything.

The reading room and library were situated at opposite ends of the North wing of the house. “I’ll check the library. You check the reading room. It’s the eighth door on the left.”
George nodded. “Eighth. Got it.” He scurried off down the hall.

Severus strode into the Malfoy library, feeling the anti-theft wards pulse as he crossed the threshold. Lucius firmly believed in displaying his collection during events like this, and the powerful wards kept the books in their proper place when the house was open to visitors. It was entirely possible that Hermione had wandered in here and become distracted.

Severus moved quickly through the aisles of darkened wood shelves, checking each one briefly for Hermione, lost in a book. He finally spotted her in the second to last aisle, crumpled on the floor. He felt his heart catch in his throat as he drew his wand and rushed toward her prone form. “Hermione, love?” He touched her arm. She was warm and out cold. He raised his wand to cast a *renervate* when suddenly everything went dark.

He didn’t feel his body hit the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger goodness! I know, I know. I’m evil.

So my new hobby: Going to a diner on Friday night with the husband and drinking WAY too much coffee, then coming home and writing into the wee hours. Please forgive any funky typos. I caught myself typing ’manner’ instead of ’manor’ TWICE! Gah!

I’ve missed this story this week. I’ve missed you lovely readers this week. Thanks for sticking with me though the crazy work-times!
Severus was fairly sure his head was attempting to split itself in half. He groaned as he attempted to open his eyes, paying little attention to the voices he heard around him.

“He’s coming round.” That supercilious voice could only belong to Lucius.

“That’s it, Snape. All the way out.” Ugh. Potter.

“Severus?” A soft hand stroked his hair. Hermione.

**Hermione!**

His eyes popped open. “Hermione? You’re alright?” He looked up to see Hermione, George, Lucius, and Harry staring down at him.

The hand shook a bit, then continued stroking. “I’m fine, love. Just a bit sore. How’s your head?”

“Still attached, unfortunately. I don’t suppose there’s a headache potion around here somewhere?” he rasped as he sat up.

Lucius called for a house elf and sent it to fetch a potion for his guest. When it arrived, Severus downed it quickly and waited for it to take effect. “What happened?”

George frowned. “We were hoping you could tell us. I couldn’t have left you alone for more than ten minutes. Came back into the library and found you both on the floor.”

“Why were you in here anyway?” asked Harry.

“Draco mentioned a book and said I should look it up before the end of the evening. I had just found it when someone stunned me. Then I woke up with you hovering over me, Harry.”

“I’m pretty sure the same happened to me. I came looking for you and saw you on the floor. The next thing I knew I was being wakened by you lot.” Severus said, gingerly probing at the knot on his head. “I must’ve knocked my head when I fell.”

The look on Lucius’ face was ferocious. “Hermione, this is the second time you have been attacked in my home. I cannot apologize enough.”

“It’s hardly your fault, Lucius.” Hermione said.

“You are my guest. Your safety is my responsibility. I’ll understand fully if you don’t wish to return here again.”
Severus growled. “Nonsense, Lucius. Hermione said it herself: You had no control over Voldemort when he occupied your home during the war, so she does not blame you for actions taken in his name. And I hardly think you can be blamed for this little mess.”

Hermione gasped and looked at Severus. “What?” he asked.

“How did you know I said that?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Because we talked about it when we were here for dinner, remember?”

Hermione’s eyes were rapidly filling with tears. “Yes, I remember. I’m just surprised you do. We talked about it when we were here for dinner seven years ago.”

Severus looked at Hermione blankly, then shot a confused look at Lucius. “Seven years ago. Yes. We had lamb with mint jelly. And some sort of potato dish with cheese. I recall joking that your house elves were rebelling because it wasn’t French cuisine.”

Lucius smiled. “That’s right. And after dinner?”

“Hermione convinced us to play charades.” Severus chuckled at the memory. “I still can’t believe Narcissa participated.”

“You do remember. Oh, Severus!” Hermione flung herself at him, wrapping him in her arms.

Harry frowned and stepped forward to examine Severus’ head. “D’you think that the knock to his head might’ve brought some of his memories back?”

“A blow to the head would be more likely to make him forget events, not recall them,” said Lucius in his most sardonic tones. “Really, did I teach Potter nothing? thought Severus.

“I think we can hypothesize that my attacker was here tonight,” he said. “And I suspect that he or she thought it...appropriate to restore my memories. Or to try to do so, at least.”

Hermione stroked his hair away from his face, smoothing it down and behind his ears. “Do you remember anything else?”

“Fragments. I suspect it will take awhile to work in full. Either that or my attacker was an idiot and reversed the spell poorly. Mint jelly and charades may be all I ever regain.” He said it with a nonchalant shrug, but he was frustrated by this person getting the drop on him. Again.

“Perhaps we could do some more work with the pensive and -- “

“Hermione,” Lucius interrupted gently. “We should likely explore the options for further memory restoration at another time. I’m sure by now your absence has been noted, and there are press present this evening.” He turned to Severus. “Are you well enough to return to the ballroom?”

Severus nodded. “Yes, though we will likely not stay much longer.”

“Just through the announcements and charity donation presentation, then.” Lucius said.

“Mr. Malfoy, would you mind if I called a couple of my team in to run spell traces in the library? I’d like to see if we can get a match to any of the known wand signatures on file.” Harry already had his wand out and was scanning the area.

“Be my guest, Mr. Potter. Just do so discretely.”
It was gone one by the time Severus and Hermione returned to his rooms for the evening. Severus loosened the cravat of his dress robes with an impatient flick of his hand as they entered, annoyed that Lucius’ presentation to the War Orphan’s Fund had taken well over an hour. The blond ponce certainly could wax loquacious when he wanted to.

“How’s your head?” Hermione asked gently.

“Fine,” he groused. “No need to fuss.”

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. “I’d like to take a bath and wash this gunk off my face and out of my hair. Join me?”

Severus sighed. He was exhausted, but a bath did sound nice. His hip rather ached where he’d landed on the floor, and he suspected that Hermione needed a bit of comforting. Truth be told, so did he. The aurors had found no magical traces in the library, thanks in large part to Lucius’ nigh-unbreakable wards on the valuable room.

Yes, a bath was just the thing.

“I’ll run the water. Do you need anything from your rooms?”

“Just my bathrobe and pyjamas. Back in a tick.” She pecked him on the cheek and dashed out the door and across the hall to her rooms.

With an exhausted huff of air, Severus mounted the stairs to the loft area, then moved into the bathroom to fill the tub with hot water and a mildly scented bubble bath. He disrobed and had just stepped foot into the tub when Hermione returned wearing her bathrobe and a pair of rather ratty bunny slippers.

She quickly shed the robe and slippers and prepared to step into the bath. That was when Severus spotted the developing bruise on her left hip. His eyes darkened.

“You didn’t mention you’d been hurt,” he said.

She looked at him in confusion. “I wasn’t.”

He brushed gentle fingers down her hip. “Look down, pet.”

“Well, shit.”

“Come on in the bath for now. I have some contusion cream we can put on that when we’re done.” He held out a hand to steady her as she gingerly stepped into the steaming water. She hissed. “It’s too hot.”

“You always say that, then you get in anyway. Come on.”

She lowered herself into the water slowly, settling herself between Severus’ legs and leaning her head back against his chest. “I think your memory is coming back. We haven’t bathed together since before you were attacked the first time, but you remember that I always complain about the water
“Hmm,” he said noncommittally. He was afraid to get his hopes up.

“Perhaps we should be thanking your attacker,” she said with a wan smile.

“I think not. And it’s not worth putting marks on you. If I ever get my hands on the person who did this to me...to us...” he trailed off and allowed the implicit threat to hang in the air like so much steam.

“I’m sorry the evening was ruined. But one good thing did come out of it. Other than your memory starting to return, I mean.”

“Oh?”

“Well, you told me you loved me.”

He stroked his hand over her stomach under the water. “So I did. You said you knew. Hardly romantic, that.”

She giggled softly. “I know because you show me every day, Severus. You have since we started seeing each other again. Plus you, um...said it. As you were drifting off to sleep a few nights ago.”

“Again with the impeccable timing.” He rolled his eyes.

“You said it back then, too. Seven years ago, I mean.”

“I know. And I’m sure I meant it then. I know I mean it now.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head as his hand continued stroke her skin under the water.

She snuggled closer to him, and he felt his cock wake up to press against her backside as she slid next to him in the tub. His body’s interest did not go unnoticed, and Hermione began to shift her hips against him ever so slightly.

He growled in her ear. “What are you doing, love?”

“Making sure this night has more than two good things going for it.”

“Oh?” he asked playfully, allowing his hand to drift lower in the water to tease at her mons.

“Mmm. Yes.” She said a bit breathlessly. “Tonight will not be the night you were attacked in the Malfoy library. Tonight will be the night your memory started to return. It will be the night -- “ her breath hitched as he parted her and slipped a finger between her lips to stroke at the hardening nub between them.

“It will be the night I watched you shame Ronald Weasley on the dance floor,” he interrupted.

“Oh, three good things going for it. But please don’t mention that prat when your touching -- oh yes, like that!” she said as he jiggled his finger slightly against her.

“What’s the third thing again?”

“You said you loved me,” she hissed.

“And you said you loved me too. That’s four.” He switched his finger out his thumb, then slid one finger into her core. He smiled at the little squeak of pleasure that came out of her mouth.
“Severus,” she whined.

“Mmm?”

“I want you.”

“You have me, love,” he teased.

“I want you in --”

He chuckled darkly. “In what, pet? Use your words.”

“Bastard. I want you in me. Come into me, Severus.”

“With pleasure.” He removed his hand and lifted Hermione, using her buoyancy to spin her in the water and settle her down so she was sitting astride. He slid his body lower in the bath to give her legs room and slowly drew her down to impale her on his erection. He hissed at the sensation of her surrounding him in the hot bath water.

“Oh, gods. Good. That’s good,” she said. He could feel her walls pulsing and constricting around him, adjusting to his girth and the awkward position. She wriggled a bit. “I can’t push down. The water is -- “ She struggled to get the leverage to move down his shaft.

“Let me.” He leaned forward and drew one rosy nipple between his teeth, worrying it back and forth gently. He wrapped his arms around and up her back, grasping her shoulders from behind to steady her, then thrust his hips upward, driving himself into Hermione.

He set a gentle pace, panting her name out as he stroked himself in her body. “Touch yourself,” he panted, struggling against his own rapidly approaching orgasm. The combined sensations of the water, Hermione, her breasts, the heat, Hermione, her moans. Merlin. It was sensory overload

He felt her begin to tremble just as he began to lose control, and he fancied that it was his shout of ecstasy that shot her over the edge. He felt himself empty into her, his lover and his love, and whispered his affections into her ear as he came down from the high.

Hermione rested her forehead against his as she caught her breath. “Oh, Severus. I love you too.”

Later they lay cuddled up in his bed, buried under blankets and a duvet to keep out the cold Scottish wind.

"Severus?"

"Mmm?" he said, sleepily.

Hermione hesitated. "I don't know if you remember this, but all those years ago we...we talked about the future a bit."

"Did we?" He started searching his own mind for any fragments of the conversation, but came up empty handed.
"We did. And I don't want to push you. Or to rush you. But...I wanted to let you know that my desires haven't changed." She sounded rather unsure of herself, which was unusual enough to have Severus sitting up and facing her.

"What were those desires, Hermione?" he asked.

"Marriage. Children. I still want those things. Not tomorrow, and maybe not even soon. But I do want them, and I want them with you. I...I thought it was fair to let you know. So you weren't wondering if you remembered."

He blinked at her for a moment before feeling the smile slowly stretch across his face. "I don't know if I wanted those things seven years ago or not. I suspect I didn't know then either. But I do want those things, and I know I want them with you. Perhaps not tomorrow, but someday," he said, repeating her words back to her. Perhaps someday soon, he thought to himself.

She smiled at him in return. "Good enough." Her voice choked a bit on the words, and she didn't continue with whatever else she was going to say.

Severus slid down so that he was holding his witch and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Go to sleep. We can figure out the future a little later, yes?"

"Mmm hmm," she murmured in reply. Her eyes slid closed as she snuggled closer to her wizard.

He closed his eyes as well, resting his head against her wild hair.

"Sev'rus?" she said after a moment. "That's five things. Not a bad night, really."

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in one night! WHOO! Might've had too much coffee! WHOO!

Short chapter because it made sense to break it on a "Daaaaw" moment.

I sleep now.
If you notice a sudden reduction in the number of typos, you have Columbina to thank. She graciously offered to beta for me this week! She is also full of awesome and you should tell her so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Several hours after retiring to bed with his love (his love!), Severus awoke to the realization that there was a very real chance that he was willingly submitting himself to choking awake on Hermione’s hair each morning.

Honestly. How did he manage to inhale one of her curls every time they slept together? Considering the law of large numbers, you’d think he could manage to wake just one morning without a hair lodged in his throat, his nostrils, or -- Gods -- between his fecking arse cheeks. Shaking his head in bewilderment, he glanced toward the window and realized that his sleep had been disturbed not by the warm witch in his bed but by some rather annoyed shouting coming from his sitting room. Wand in hand, he slipped from under the sheets and padded to the loft railing to see what was causing the disturbance.

“Severus Snape, don’t make me apparate in there. Answer me, you impossible man!” Minerva McGonagall’s head was poking up in his floo, her hair still clearly braided for bed.

“Why on earth are you shouting at me on a Sunday morning, Minerva?” Severus growled from his perch.

“Because you’ve visitors waiting in my office, you grumpy Gus! Kingsley and Potter are waiting for you, so get a move on. I’ll expect you in a quarter hour. And bring Hermione!” Without further comment, the Headmistress’ head disappeared from view, dragging the crackling green flames with it.

Severus scrubbed a hand over his face in confusion and flicked his wand to check the time. Seven in the morning. Hell. He wondered idly if rude awakening was considered a plausible excuse to maim the Boy-Who-Disturbed and his frisky Ministerial side-kick.

“There’d better be tea,” he grumbled as he dragged himself back toward the bed and poked at Hermione with his wandless hand.

He received only a “mmmmrf” in reply.

“Wake up, Hermione. Minerva wants us.”

“Sssplmmmpt.” She rolled over. One curl was glued to the side of her face.

With an aggravated huff, Severus leaned forward and shook his bedmate. “Come on, sleepy head. We have to be downstairs in fifteen minutes.”

He was rewarded with a semi-comatose snort.
That’s it. Gloves are off. “Hermione! You’re late for your Transfiguration NEWT!”

“What?!” She sat straight up in bed, hair and eyes equally wild. “Where’s my skirt! I need my skirt! Hand me my robe!” Severus merely stood back as he watched a half-awake Hermione dash about the room, looking for her missing Hogwarts robes. She’d managed to pull on his bathrobe before she realized where she was. Her eyes narrowed at him and he held up his hands in a sign of surrender.

“Minerva wants us. Now.”

“Hmph. Fine. You’re still a bastard and you will pay for that later. Now where the fuck did you put my clothes?”

“Good morning Severus, Hermione. Tea should be along in a -- thank you, Marzipan.” Minerva’s personal elf set a small tea service in front of her desk. Percy Weasley moved from his post hovering at the Minister’s shoulder and busied himself preparing and serving tea for Kingsley, then Minerva and Hermione. With a roll of his eyes, Severus moved forward and poured a cup for himself, wondering for a moment if he could just stick his head into the the vessel and absorb the caffeine through his skin. Kingsley watched Severus silently, a look of concern on his face.

Potter, of course, was somewhat less than patient. “We wanted to talk to you both about last night,” he said. “Deforge and I stayed up most of the night and cross referenced the list of attendees at the Malfoy’s ball with the reduced list from the Ministry.” He glanced at Hermione, who merely nodded for Harry to continue.

“There wasn’t a lot to go on, frankly. As you know, there was no magical signature in the library thanks to the wards on that room -- they effectively neutralized it. All we have to go on at this point are accounts of who was visible and who wasn’t, and even that was difficult to gather without letting everyone know that you were attacked.” Harry raked a hand through his hair. “Actually, all we really managed to do was narrow the list to who was at both events, eliminating any individual that we know was visible at the time of the incident in the library.” He handed Severus and Hermione copies of the narrowed list, which now contained around forty names.

Kingsley cleared his throat. “You’ll be happy to know that Lucius Malfoy has been removed from the list of possible suspects. He was clearly visible in the ballroom the entire night, and left only to assist you and Miss Granger after your incident.”

“Well, it’s better than nothing, but it doesn’t really bring us much closer to a solution,” Severus responded with a sigh. “I’m not entirely sure that what happened last night was an attack, though.”

Minerva quirked an eyebrow. “Why do you say that, my dear?”

“Because my memories have begun to return, Min. There’s no reason for an obliviation to spontaneously reverse itself. I believe last night’s culprit was attempting to undo their handywork -- either to protect themselves, or out of some genuine feeling of remorse for their actions. I suspect the former.”

“Your memories have returned? That’s wonderful, Severus!” Minerva reached out to grasp his hand, squeezing his fingers in her elation. Severus cringed a bit and patted her on the hand before
withdrawing it.

“They’ve begun to return. Not in a rush, but in...a very slow trickle. I’m not sure if I’ll end up getting them all back.”

“What has returned?” Kingsley asked.

“Just drabs, really. It seems to come back when something linked happens in my vicinity. Last night, Lucius apologized to Hermione because she has now been attacked in his home twice. I remembered that she told him several years ago that she didn’t blame him for the first attack. I’ve begun to remember a few things about my previous relationship with Hermione as well, though I’d rather keep those private.” He shot Hermione a wry smile.

She smiled back before speaking her own piece. “So it seems as though our current course of action is undeterred. I should continue to work with Severus on memory recovery. Now that the block in his brain has been removed, it might be easier to trigger memory recovery.”

Kingsley and Potter nodded their approval at this. “We’ll continue to have Harry and his team work on your case, Severus, but I’m getting some pressure from the head of MLE. He’s becoming increasingly frustrated with the fact that his most prominent auror is tied to your case. He wants to move Harry to something more high-profile, keep him in the public eye.”

Harry merely rolled his eyes at this. “Dawlish has his eyes set on a Wizengamot position and wants The Boy Who Lived to help him secure the position. Politics, am I right?”

“Yes, well.” Kingsley cleared his throat. “I just mean to warn you that I won’t be able to keep Harry on the case indefinitely. I suspect that if we haven’t made significant progress by the New Year, I’ll be forced to declare your situation a cold case and remove it from active investigation.”

“Significant progress?” cried Hermione. “We were attacked at a public function last night, Kings! It’s obvious that whomever hurt us is still out there. How can you even consider deactivating the investigation?”

“I must say, I’m inclined to agree with Hermione, Minister,” Minerva interjected.

“I understand, Minerva, but I’m getting pressure from beyond the MLE. I can’t fight them on this for long.”

Severus looked at Kingsley stonily. “What exactly are you suggesting I do then, Minister?” he said with a snap. “Refrain from being attacked? Work harder to recover my memories? Because I’m at rather a loss.”

“I’m not making any accusations, Severus. I wanted you to know the lay of the land. There are forces at work within the Ministry that I am helpless to influence, and I didn’t want this to come as a surprise. Now I’m sorry to drop bad news and dash, but I’m afraid I have another meeting. If there is anything within my power that you need, I will work to get it for you. Just reach out to Percy here and we’ll make it happen.” With a nod to Hermione and Minerva, he rose and moved toward the floo. “Harry, I’ll expect your report tomorrow morning. Good day to all of you.” With that both Kingsley and Percy were swept into green flames.

“Well, how do you like that?” Severus murmured to himself.

“Sn -- Severus, I’m really sorry about this. Dawlish is a moron, but he is my boss. I don’t have much of a choice but to follow his orders on this. But we have some time, and I’m determined to make some progress on your case. I have a bit of an idea that I’d like to run by you, but I’m going to need
to get approval from Dawlish before I proceed.”

“What idea, Mr. Potter?” asked Minerva.

“Well, with your permission Headmistress, I’d like to set up what the Muggles call a sting operation during the Hogwarts Yule Ball.”

Severus quirked an eyebrow. “Been watching too many true crime shows lately, have we?”

Harry grinned. “Ginny’s obsessed now that we’ve got a telly to work at Grimmauld. Regardless, I think it’ll work.”

“How so?”

“Well, you’ve been attacked twice now -- both times at balls. Assuming it was the same person, and I’m inclined to think it is, it would seem logical that the next ball you attend would be a prime opportunity to approach you again.”

Severus merely nodded, gesturing for Harry to continue.

“I’ll modify your wand with a version of the trace -- you know, the one they put on magical kids til they’re 17. It’ll monitor your movements and record the magical signatures around you. Hopefully we’ll be able to tag whomever did this to you.”

“I don’t particularly fancy having my wand placed under investigation too, Potter,” Severus snapped.

“Well, it’d be temporary. We’re not allowed to use it often as it is such an invasion of privacy. But I think I can convinced Dawlish that it’s necessary in this case. He’ll be able to wrangle final approval from the Minister.”

“Harry,” Hermione interrupted, “what would be the chances of you getting the modified trace placed on my wand as well? Since I seem to have been bait for Severus last night.”

Severus swiveled to look at Hermione. “No. Absolutely not. We’re not putting you in the position to be hurt again.”

“I wasn’t really hurt yesterday. Just stunned. I don’t think whomever is doing this is trying to hurt us, love.”

“We’ll they’re doing a damned good impression.”

Hermione squeezed his hand. “I’d want a trace too, Harry. Who knows, it might just help us get to the bottom of this.”

“Secure approval from the Ministry, Mr. Potter. I want no argument, Severus. You and Hermione are already both involved in this, so you might as well see it through. Heaven knows you’ve both faced worse things than a stunning spell. Harry, dear. You have two weeks to set things in motion before the ball. Now hop to!” She shooed the younger man toward the floo.

Potter turned at the last moment. “Severus, don’t forget to look through that list of names.” He gestured toward the list on the tea table. “It’s not comprehensive, but it is a place to start.”

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Severus had his nose buried in the list of names -- not for the first time -- two mornings later when it was suddenly covered in bits of egg and beans. A somewhat sleepy and definitely demented looking tawny frogmouth owl had just dropped a small package directly onto his breakfast plate.

“Much obliged.” Severus sneered, waving his hand at the parchment to clear it of food debris. The owl warble-squawked at him and helped himself to the scattered eggs. With a sigh, Severus reached toward the small, brown-paper and twine wrapped package with the seal of “Borogrove Jewelers” partially obscured by baked bean. With a quick glance at Hermione -- who was thoroughly engrossed in a letter from her parents -- he wrapped the little box in his handkerchief and placed it into the deep inner pocket of his robe.

With a small smile for Hermione, he excused himself from the table and rushed back to his rooms. He quickly untied the wrapping and popped the lid off the little box. Inside was a card of thanks offering him 10% off his next commissioned order and two velvet bags -- one contained the remainder of the two stones used in his commission. The other contained Hermione’s torque. His breath caught as he lifted it out of the box; Mome had really done a wonderful job with it. The greenish gold shone dimly in the sunlight streaming from his window and the owl and raven heads at either end of the bangle were exquisitely carved in fine detail. It would make a wonderful gift to Hermione, though he realized he’d need to give it to her early in order for it to be of use for the Yule Balls.

Well, she was his lover. And his love. He could give her gifts whenever he damn well pleased.

Though that did bring into question the issue of Christmas. He glanced back at the two stones in his hand, his mind turning to earring and necklace sets. He laughed a bit as he looked at the semi-precious rocks in his hand. It felt good to be thinking of future gifts and ways to make Hermione smile. He knew that she would love the bracelet. He could remember feeling similarly when he’d bought her ring all those years ago.

With a gasp, Severus shook himself from his reflections. *Wait. Ring. I bought a ring. I bought a ring?*

Frowning, he placed the items in the drawer of the hall table and moved toward the sitting room. He didn’t have classes until after lunch, so there was time enough. He sat in his favorite arm chair and closed his eyes, beginning the deep breaths that saw him through his pre-exercise routine each morning. Deliberately, he concentrated on the fragment of feeling that had accosted him moments before.


Severus opened his eyes and stared blankly into space for a moment.

He had planned to propose. He had planned to propose the very night he was first attacked. His breath caught in his throat as he attempted to swallow the rage that suddenly burbled to the surface.

He had planned to make Hermione his wife. His WIFE! And some sodding arse had decided that Severus Snape needed to leave the country and ruined it all.
He stood on shaky legs and paced the room, dragging a hand through his hair so that it stood in spikes. He’d bought her a ring. So it had been as serious as that. But he hadn’t given it to her, so where was it? He flicked his wand. “Accio Hermione’s engagement ring.” He waited, but nothing happened. 

Well that would’ve been too easy.

Severus moved to the floo and threw a pinch of powder into the hearth, following it with his head. “Headmistress, are you in your office?”

“I am Professor Snape. I was just conferring with Professor Bhatti on his lesson plans for the next term. How can I help?” Minerva’s head and tartan clad shoulders popped into his grate.

“I just wanted to let you know that I needed to run a quick errand off grounds. I’ll use the floo, so I should be back for my first class.”

“Is anything wrong, Severus?” she asked with some concern.

“No, Min. I’ve just recovered a memory and need to follow up on something.”

“Of course, my boy. Off you go then.”

Severus withdrew his head from the grate and took another pinch of floo powder from the container on the mantle. Without pausing, he threw it in down. Stepping into the green flames he took care to clearly enunciate “Prince House!”

He was greeted by Cramps, the head house elf and de facto Major Domo of the Prince House estate. “Master Snape has returned! Welcome back, sir!”

Severus stepped from the hearth and dusted soot from his robes. “Thank you, Cramps. I’m afraid this is a flying visit.” He glanced around the room and saw that it was just as worn and shabby as it had been the last time he visited, though it was of course meticulously clean. “I see you and Primmy have been taking care of the old place while I was gone.”

“Cramps and Primmy are proud to serve Sir, sir. We have dusted every week and polished every month. And sir’s friend has visited each month to assess Primmy and Cramps’ work, sir.”

“Lucius?”

The elf nodded his head, causing the white tufts of hair in his ears to bob in time with his skull. “Master Malfoy, yes, sir.”

“Very good. Thank you for your continued service, Cramps. I will come back soon to discuss the continued running of the estate, but I’m afraid that I have to check something and then return to Hogwarts. Is there anything you and Primmy need before I do so?”

“No, sir! Primmy and Cramps are knowing their jobs, sir. They will wait for you to return.”

Severus breathed a sigh of relief, then dashed through the foyer, up the stairs, and into the master suite of the house. He stood there, waiting as he was suddenly assailed by memories and sensations.
The room was the only one he’d bothered to renovate when he’d acquired Prince House, the home of his late great-grandmother. It had long ago fallen into disrepair, and Holland cloths still covered the majority of its furnishings. He’d intended to make it his primary residence, finally selling Spinner’s End and leaving that portion of his life behind. He’d bought it just prior to his 39th birthday without telling a soul other than Lucius. It was meant to be a home, not just a place to live. *It was meant for a wife. For family.*

He glanced around the space, taking in the large canopied bed, the burgundy velvet drapes and crisp linens. He remembered fishing out and refinishing the matched nightstands that stood on either side of the bed. He’d spent several days sanding and staining them by hand when Hermione had been away with Ginevra for a girls’ weekend at a wizarding spa in Wales. He knew that if he turned, the armoire in the corner would have been magically expanded to hold the wardrobes of two individuals.

Severus clenched his fists as a sob threatened to rip through him. He’d prepared this room for them. He wanted to give it to her as a gift, to ask her to share his home with him. Glancing at the dresser on the far wall, he saw an unopened bottle of champagne and a black velvet box. He sat at the edge of the bed, panting through what surely felt like tears, staring at the little box that he’d once thought held his future.

And that might still.

He summoned the box to him without a word, and lifted the lid. The ring shone as though it had been polished yesterday. With a decided nod, Severus stood and replaced the box on the dresser, looking around the room one last time.

He would be back.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Somewhat short and choppy chapter this time round. I'm strong-arming us toward memory charm resolution. Patience, readerly friends, we're going to get there soon!
Knock About

Chapter Summary

Severus gives Hermione a gift, which leads to our favorite duo taking another step in their relationship.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my beta, Columbina, for editing my typos/style hiccups and fixing my Google-translated Latin. In case you were wondering, Columbina is a real-life unicorn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Severus?”

He looked up from list of names he’d been staring at for the past twenty minutes to find Hermione staring at him with concern.

“Are you alright? You’ve been rather quiet this evening.”

“Because I’m known as such a chatterbox normally,” he replied acerbically.

She smiled gently. “Not so much, lately. What’s wrong, love?”

“I’ve been staring at this list for three days now and I can’t decide who on it is least likely to have attacked me.” He tossed the paper down on the table in frustration.

“Let me see it again.” Hermione picked up the paper and frowned at it, squinting her eyes to peer through the red slashes and question marks and scratched-out comments. “And there’s no one on here who harbors ill will toward you?”

Severus sighed and tugged at his lip. “Nothing more than for the usual things. Being a spy. Lying to their faces. Making them look like fools. Nothing worth the risk of a public attack.”

“Minerva is on this list, you realize. And half the Weasleys. And Mohinder! This is ridiculous. As though your friends and co-workers would attack you! Its as though Harry went and wrote down anyone who wasn’t visible and decided that their lack of visibility made them suspect!”

“I know. I’m not even sure Mohinder should be on that list. Was he even in England seven years ago?”

“He was cultural attaché at the Ministry,” she mumbled. She glanced up and caught sight of his raised eyebrow. “What? I was on his search committee and it was on his resumé.”

“Know-it-all,” he said fondly.

She snorted as she tossed the list down on the table in a mirror of his gesture from moments before.
“I don’t see how we’re going to make head or tails of this list without employing Harry’s suggestion that we use ourselves as bait at the Yule Ball.”

“Unfortunately, I think you’re right,” he replied, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes in an attempt to relieve the headache that was growing there. He hated the idea of offering himself up for attack once again, but the idea of Hermione being placed in harm’s way burned him to the core. It wasn’t that she couldn’t take care of herself -- heaven knew she could hex a man six ways from Sunday. But the idea of putting her in danger to solve what was, essentially, his problem grated. They sat in a frustrated silence for a few more moments before Hermione touched his arm.

“Severus, we haven’t really talked about it since your memories started coming back, but… we can still try Legilimency. I mean, I’m willing to share some my memories with you if you think it will help. Perhaps my memories of the first anniversary ball will help?”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “You know, if I didn’t already know you loved me I’d take that as tacit admission of the fact. No one offers to let me invade their mind, you know.”

She smiled.

“I’d like to see your memories, yes. It will be faster than the pensieve, but mostly it would be… unspeakably intimate to experience our former relationship through your eyes.” He watched as her cheeks colored, savoring the light pink blush and flash of desire that flickered through her eyes. He reached out and drew her closer to his side, pressing a kiss to her hair as she snuggled against him. “We’ll make time this weekend. I’d like for us both to feel rested and remain undisturbed before you allow me into your mind again.”

Hermione nodded her acceptance. “That’s fine. It’ll give me a little time to sort the things I’d rather you not explore too deeply and place them behind my shields. But don’t forget, we have animagus training this Saturday. And Filius is still pestering me about a rematch for the dueling club.”

“Because what we need at this moment is to give Rita Skeeter more fodder for that scurrilous rag.”

“That ‘scurrilous rag’ is the primary source of news in Wizarding Britain, Rita Skeeter or no.”

Severus huffed. “All the more reason to stay out of it! I’ll talk to Filius tomorrow, put him off a bit. Perhaps we can stage our ‘rematch’ for just before the Easter hols.”

“Mmm. Good idea.” Hermione wriggled upward and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Now enough of the serious. When was the last time we did something fun together?”

“You mean other than shagging each other rotten every chance we get?”

She giggled. “Hey, you haven’t shagged me rotten in at least two days. No, I meant...I don’t know, reading a book together. Or taking a walk by the lake. Something other than dwelling on work and that list and social obligations.”

“You’re right. It’s a bit late for a walk by the lake, but we could read together if you like.”

She nodded. “I like very much. And then we’ll shag one another rotten. Okay?”

“More than okay. Why don’t you go choose a book. Tea?”

“Oh, please.” Hermione rose from the sofa to explore his bookshelves.

Deciding not to bother the elves -- Hermione had perhaps made him more conscious that they likely
didn’t get enough undisturbed rest -- Severus went to the kitchenette to put the kettle on and placed some biscuits on a plate. When he returned with the tray she was already ensconced on the sofa, holding a slim volume in her lap.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Trollope? Really? Are you feeling particularly ecclesiastical this evening?”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “I happen to like this series. The BBC did the first two books on the telly when I was little. Mum and I watched them together when they were rebroadcast one summer. I thought that the Victorians might ease us back into some of those romances we used to read together.”

“I have no idea to what you are referring,” he said feigning ignorance.

“That’d be funnier if it weren’t partially true.” Hermione replied, rolling her eyes.

“I’m happy to read whatever you choose, but before any of that I’ve actually been meaning to -- that is, I wanted to give you a -- a gift.” Severus’ palms were suddenly slightly damp as he plucked the flat black box from Borogrove Jewelers off the tea tray and offered it to her.

Hermione peeked up at him curiously. “What’s the occasion?”

“There is no occasion. Well, there was originally. It was intended as a Christmas gift, but I have something else in mind for that. I thought you might get more use out of this for the Yule Ball here at Hogwarts. I believe it will suit your chosen attire admirably.” He knew she’d chosen the pale green dress for that evening, saving the silk one for the Ministry ball.

“You’re the sweetest man.” Hermione said it with a grin before pecking him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. But you really are wonderful, Severus.” His lips twisted into a mock-disapproving frown as he held his breath, waiting for her to flip the lid on her gift.

He let the stream of air out in a relieved stream of air as her eyes widened. “Oh, this is lovely.” She cooed it as she lifted one elegant finger -- and since when had he started romanticizing her hands? -- to stroke it over the carved head of the raven. “You put us in a piece of jewelry. Together.” Her eyes were wet when she glanced up at him.

“I thought the symbolism appropriate.” He shifted uncomfortably, realizing that the gift was unabashedly sentimental.

“Severus, you put so much thought into this. The eyes even match us. It’s...I don’t have words for this. It’s beautiful, and I’ll think of you every minute I wear it.”

“I’m pleased you like it.”

Hermione carefully lowered the lid on the box and replaced it on the tea tray. “I more than like it. I love it, and I love you even more.” She leaned in to press her lips against his, nuzzling his large nose with her smaller one before kissing him again. And again. “Thank you, Severus.”

He gave her a small smile and poured their tea, mentally patting himself on the back for choosing well. “You’re more than welcome, love.”

They read for more than two hours, taking turns working their way through the heavy Victorian language of her chosen book. He stopped when he noticed that her eyes had begun to drift closed. He nudged her softly to bring her back to wakefulness. “Hermione, it’s gone eleven. We should retire.”
“Sadly true.” She sighed and stretched to work the kinks out of her back. “Do you mind if I sleep with you tonight?”

“I don’t. I never mind if you stay with me, love. You don’t have to ask anymore.”

She smiled at him. “See? Told you. Sweet. But I feel the same. I should re-key my wards for you tomorrow.”

“Actually, that’s something I’d rather hoped to talk to you about soon.”

The look she sent him was puzzled. “You don’t want me to reset the wards?”

“No. Well, yes, rather.” He fumbled as he sought the right words. “I meant, I thought we might consider combining our wards.”

“Severus,” she said with some exasperation, “I can’t ward your rooms. The castle won’t allow it -- you can only ward your own quarters.”

“Yes, I am aware of how the castle works, having lived here for nearly two decades before you even came of age, Hermione.” He tried very hard to avoid a full sneer, but didn’t quite succeed. “I meant,” he said, speaking succinctly, “that we might want to consider combining our apartments and sharing them.”

Hermione stared at him.

“You want to move in together?” she asked incredulously.

“I believe that is what I just said.” He hesitated. “Is it too soon?”

“I don’t -- no. It’s not too soon. It’s just a bit surprising. This is the first you’ve mentioned it.”

Severus hunched his shoulders. “I’m not doing this well, am I?”

She laughed a little. “I don’t know, actually. I’ve never had someone ask me to live with him before. I’m not sure there’s a right way to do it.” She turned to face him more directly. “Do you truly want to live with me?”

He smiled. This he could respond to. “I do. I love you Hermione, and I know you love me. We spend nearly every evening together and every night in either my bed or yours. Aside from the fact that I like waking up next to you every morning, it is logical for us to combine our spaces. Unless you don’t want to, that is.”

“Oh, Severus,” she sighed, cuddling into his side. “I most definitely want to. Let’s talk to Minerva tomorrow and see what can be done.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised. You’re both sure of this decision?” Minerva said after dinner the following evening. Seeing their nods of acquiescence, she straightened. “I trust that you’ll behave with the same level of circumspection as the other members of staff who are romantically involved. And that you will refrain from mentioning your shared quarters in the presence of the students unless you choose to marry.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at Severus, but received only stony silence in
“I don’t believe you have ever known me to be indiscrete, Minerva, and Hermione hardly seeks the limelight -- no matter how often it seems to find her.”

“Of course not, dear boy. There is precedent for romantically involved couples cohabitating of course, though I’ll admit that past headmasters have frowned on it.” She shot a look at Dumbledore’s sleeping portrait with frustrated affection. “But these are modern times, and you are a modern witch and wizard. Hogwarts is your home and you are free to treat it as such so long as your behavior in front of the students is above reproach. Which it always has been.”

“Thank you, Minerva.” Hermione said, blushing slightly. Because it wasn’t at all awkward to discuss her relationship with Severus with her employer. “We’d hoped to simply combine our apartments. I remember the procedure from when I helped rebuild seven years ago, but I’d need you to release the wards for those two levels of the tower to do any restructuring. The castle won’t let us make adjustments without your permission as Headmistress.”

Minerva laughed. “I think I know your abilities for transfiguration better than most, my dear. Just try not to knock the place about too much.” With several deft flicks of her wand and murmured aedificarem constructionem permisso in west turrim. “Let me know when you are done restructuring your rooms and I will reset the wards.”

“Thank you, Minerva,” Hermione said with a broad smile, moving to embrace her former mentor and friend. “You’ve been wonderfully understanding about...all of this.”

“Hermione, you’re like the daughter my dear Elphinstone and I never had. I’m just pleased that you’re happy. That said, Severus -- and I speak as a friend here rather than as your employer -- if you hurt my favorite student I will do nothing to prevent her from hexing the living daylights out of you.”

A guffaw escaped before he could clamp his mouth into a straight line. “Understood, Min.”

She smiled indulgently at two of her favorite people. “Very well. Off with you two, then. Have fun breaking the castle!”

Hermione chuckled as she grabbed Severus by the hand and led him back to the floo. She turned to him as they arrived in her sitting room. “We have some time tonight. Should we get started?”

“Do you have a plan for combining our space? Because I’ll admit I hadn’t thought that far.”

“Oh, yes. I did most of the building on these quarters when I helped repair the castle after the battle.” She ran her hand over one of the walls affectionately. “I’m well acquainted with these walls.”

Severus stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced around the room. “Then what do you recommend?”

“I would recommend that, since our spaces are mirror images of one another, we designate one of our rooms as the master with that bath as the en suite. We can turn the other bedroom into a guest room.”

Severus shrugged. He rarely had guests, but he suspected that Potter or, at least, Ginevra, was an occasional guest. “What about our respective laboratories?”

“We can leave them where they are, I suppose. Or...well, I had an idea, but I’m not sure how well it would work.”
“Go on. You have more ideas than I do on this matter.”

“Well, we seal off the corridor between our respective apartments to create one entrance. That gives us two sitting rooms divided by a hallway and two kitchens and dining rooms divided by a wall. I suggest we leave the kitchenettes and dining spaces divided; your laboratory could move from your spare bedroom into the dining room.” She gestured toward her kitchen as she spoke. “It’s a larger space and you’d have a sink nearby for clean-up, plus it’s easy to seal off since it’s at the back of our spaces. I can move my office into my sitting room; I have some larger transfiguration work that I’ve been wanting to experiment with, and the vaulted ceiling will give me the room to work.”

Severus followed her gesticulating hands with a slightly awed look. He considered himself an intelligent man, but he was having some trouble following Hermione’s rapid-fire words and flying arms. “Hermione, I give you leave to change whatever you need structurally. I only need to know two things: Which bedroom will we sleep in and where is my lab moving to?”

She paused mid-flail. “Oh. We’ll essentially use your rooms as they are. My sitting room will become my lab. My dining room and the adjoining kitchen and half-bath will become your lab. My bedroom will become a guest room.”

“Alright. I follow that. What of the current spare bedrooms?”

“I’m sure we’ll find a use for those eventually. For now, I suggest we combine them into one room so we have the ability to traverse between the lofts without going downstairs. Then the room can serve as storage.”

“So we’ll essentially have a three bedroom apartment with two full baths and two half-baths. Not shabby, Granger.” He smirked a bit as he teased her with her surname. “What structural changes will you need to make?”

“Almost none, actually. I’ll be removing the front doors and turning the corridor between into our foyer. Come on, you can help.” She marched to her front door and began twitching her wand back and forth, removing her wards piece by piece before removing the door and dismantling the surrounding stones, setting them aside to reuse. Within minutes, her entrance way was simply an empty square leading into the tower hall. “Can you remove your wards so I can do the same for yours?”

Severus did as she asked, dismantling the protections he’d placed on his apartments. She quickly removed the door and stones, creating a mirrored square on his side of the hall. Just as rapidly, she placed his door a few feet in front of the stair then, with a wave of her wand, reassembled the piles of stones into walls that spanned the width of the hallway. A final wave of her wand conjured sconces on either side of the door for light.

He looked around the new hallway with appreciation. “You really are the cleverest witch,” he said with pride. “That would have taken me at least an hour, and my work wouldn’t have looked half as tidy.”

“Well, we each have our strengths.” She said it flippantly, but her undertone indicated that she was pleased with his compliment. “Now I just need to create a door to your office and remove the wall between our spare bedrooms. Why don’t you gather your laboratory things and bring them over. This won’t take a minute.”

He shook his head, somewhat bewildered by the changes happening around him. He knew asking Hermione to move in had been the right decision, but he hadn’t quite anticipated that she would leap at the shift with such alacrity. Perhaps she had only been waiting for me to raise the subject? Our
relationship seems to have blossomed rapidly...this was the logical next step. It didn’t escape him that she had also managed to create a home that could easily accommodate a child. He knew they were headed down that path, but he was surprised that it neither shocked nor frightened him to have evidence of her thoughts in front of him.

He smiled to himself as he began to shrink down the contents of his laboratory, placing them into his traveling trunk. At least I know we’re on the same page.

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It was nearing midnight before they’d managed to recast the wards (keyed to each of them) and snuggle into their bed together. “We haven’t even talked about redecorating,” he said as Hermione curled up against him sleepily.

“How. I like your apartments as they are, actually. As long as you don’t mind the guest room staying as it is.”

He made a sound of happy agreement and turned to face her in the bed, slipping his arm around her waist. He didn’t really care if Potter had to sleep in her very feminine former bedroom. What he did care about, at the moment, was the very warm witch half-asleep in his arms. “I’ve just had a thought,” he said with a smirk.

Hermione opened one eye and spotted the twinkle in his. “Oh? And what would that thought be?”

“Well, for all that we’ve slept together, we haven’t actually christened our bed, now have we? It was my bed until this evening.”

“You have a point,” she said with a smile. “It would be remiss of us to neglect that activity, I suppose.”

Severus pressed his lips to hers, resting the hook of his nose against her cheek as she shifted to allow his leg to slide between hers. “I am nothing if not thorough.”

Chapter End Notes

Summer from hell isn't over yet. For those of you wondering why updates to my various fics aren't happening faster, blame my boss. Who has given me a workload that is 35% over my max capacity this summer. Not kidding, I'm ripping my hair out.

Hell summer will end the Friday before Labor Day. Until then, hang in there with me readers!
Roger That!

Chapter Summary

Hermione allows Severus to see some of her memories.

Oh, and lemons. Pretty much from the second break on. You have been warned.

Chapter Notes

Oh, my lovely readers. You’ve been so bloody patient. Hell summer ended a week ago and my body promptly threw in the towel by giving me both massive tension headaches and ocular migraines (look it up. They’re oh, so fun.) Plus my mother had a major surgery that kind of had me in a not-good-for-writing kind of place. BUT: Surgery was a success, headaches and migraines have seemingly dissipated, and I’ve caught up on a LOT of missed sleep in the last week. Self-care is important, y’all. So here is a chapter!

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Deep breath, focus on my eyes.”

He braced himself for the onslaught of Hermione’s memories. It had been almost four years since he’d spent a significant amount of time in anyone else’s head, and Hermione’s thoughts were particularly disorienting. She had active internal conversations on at least six different research ideas, lustful thoughts of him and her together, concerns for specific students, her parents, her friends, and banal details of her life. He smirked inwardly as he noted that she had more thoughts than anticipated focused on oral hygiene.

He allowed himself to drift in the sea of her mind as he became acclimated to the threads of memory that were drifting past. He could see that she was focusing on their year together; images of him were passing him with increasing frequency. Severus took a deep breath to center his mind, slowly dropping his own shields to allow her thoughts to filter through his mind. He felt her love for him almost as a tangible thing as he watched absorbed image after image of himself: saving in the morning, reading to her while they sipped tea on his sofa, making love on his sagging mattress. She remembered it all with startling clarity. He allowed himself to be swept away into her memories...

“Well?”

“Hmm?” Severus was staring at a point just beyond her without really seeing anything.

“Did you find any of the answers that you need?”
“It helped fill in some blanks, yes.”

They were silent for a moment.

“And?”

He shifted his eyes toward hers. “And?”

“Well, what can you tell me?” she huffed with some exasperation.

He smiled, then leaned in to place a chaste kiss on her lips. “I can tell you that you have one of the most stunningly beautiful minds that I’ve ever had the privilege to explore.”

Hermione colored a bit, glancing away for a moment. “Thank you, but you know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know. Come here.” He scooted back into the corner of the couch and brought her with him, settling her into his side and running his hand down a length of her curls. “I used a technique that I’ve employed a few times during interrogations; I sort of drifted through your memories, rather than focusing in on anything specific. Learning by osmosis, you might say. It’ll take awhile to process it all, I think.”

He felt her deflate slightly in his arms. “Oh.” She sounded terribly disappointed.

Severus sighed. “I know that you wanted some answers, but the mind is a tricky thing -- as well you know. However, I have your memories in my consciousness now. I think that, when combined with whatever my attacker did to me at the Malfoy’s ball, I might start to recover memories more quickly. At least, that’s what I hope.”

“Oh, Severus. That’s what I hope too.”

She reached up to her shoulder to twine her fingers with his and they both sat in silence, watching the fire.

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Days passed as days tend to do, and Severus found himself more contemplative than normal. Much as he’d hoped, Hermione’s memories served as a springboard for his own and his consciousness worked to stitch together recollections of events that merged her memories of events with his.

This was both a huge step forward and a very confusing experience. On one hand, having access to parts of his year with Hermione was wonderful after spending months in the dark. She had fed him memories of both the mundane and the sublime, from making sandwiches in the sadly dilapidated kitchen at Spinner’s End to making love in the garden while planting a vegetable patch after Easter. He found himself dwelling on the memories he’d seen at inopportune times, often shaking himself out of his reveries in the middle of shielding practices or dark creature identification labs. Luckily his students, who were gratifyingly absorbed in the course materials, failed to notice his inattention.

The downside to this expanded consciousness seemed to come with an inability to reliably separate his own emotions from those in Hermione’s memories. While in the past his memory immersion technique had been useful for extracting a number of memories at the same time, he’d always bottled them for the authorities immediately after extraction. It had never before been his practice to braid his own memories with those of the subject of his explorations, and he found that as Hermione’s thoughts grafted themselves onto his own fractured recollections, her emotions began to influence those pieces of memory that were his own.
Her love for him, even seven years ago, was overwhelming, and he couldn’t help but wonder if the explosive, all-encompassing emotion of her 19 year-old self was the same experience of Hermione at 26. If so, he wasn’t entirely sure how the woman moved through life without breaking into song.

Though he’d never admit it, visiting those memories and allowing her feelings to wash through him throughout his workday was like wrapping himself in an impenetrable security blanket. He’d never truly felt so completely surrounded by a lover before.

He couldn’t, in all honesty, pretend to dislike it.

As a result, Severus found his thoughts turning more and more frequently toward Prince House and the life that he’d once hoped to build there. He was grateful that he’d discovered both his intentions and Hermione’s engagement ring before their Legilimency session the previous weekend. At least he knew that his desire to propose was his, and not the result of her emotions washing over him.

Of course, it wasn’t exactly fair that any proposal would mean that she’d tied her fate to a man whose psyche was a bit of a mess. Perhaps it’s best if I delay proposing until after Christmas; hopefully by then we will have resolved this mess. Assuming Potter is half as good at his job as the Minister keeps implying.

Severus nodded his head, decision made. He would propose after the Ministry Yule Ball, at which point the whole mess of attack and obviate would be cleared up. Or clearing up. Regardless, he was tired of living his life on hold, knowing that he had a wonderful woman with the same plans for the future as he waiting for him to fix his own broken brain. No. He fully intended to have a wedding in the works by Spring and would plan accordingly. He spent the last half hour of the day mentally arranging the rooms of Prince House. The library should definitely be near both offices, but we’ll need to charm it so potions fumes won’t discolor the books. I wonder if she prefers a Northern or Eastern exposure in her office?

After wrapping his final class for the day, he made his way back to his -- no, their -- apartments with a spring in his step. Or as much of a spring in his step as he could inject without students and staff alike sending for mediwizards from the Janus Thickey Ward. He threw off his teaching robes as soon as he walked through the door, calling for Hermione.

He jumped a foot in the air when he felt arms grasp him from behind in a tight embrace. “Merlin’s molars, Hermione! Don’t do that!”

Her response was somewhat muffled by the fact that her face was currently buried between his shoulder blades. “Sorry. But it’s not my fault that you keep forgetting that I can see the door from my office. I saw you come in, silly.”

He smirked a little and allowed his voice to drop to a rumble in his chest. “Silly? You forget yourself, Granger. Severus Snape is never, silly.”

She snickered into his frock coat. “I beg to differ. That song you were singing in the shower this morning was definitely silly.”

“She’s molar. The Evil Professor Snape definitely doesn’t sing in the shower. Or anywhere else for that matter!” he growled.

“Oh, so that wasn’t you singing ‘I’m Hen-ery the Eighth, I am!’ while I was doing my makeup this morning?” she sang at him.

He paused. “What exactly will it take to keep you quiet, Granger?”
“Hmm,” she said playfully. “I believe my silence can be bought, but the price may be too steep for you.”

“Ransoming my good name? One would think you were sorted into Slytherin. Name your price.”

“I demand a jolly good fucking,” she said with a smile in her voice. “I’ve been randy as a goat since lunchtime with no relief in sight. So my price is that you get your kit off and rodger me senseless until dinner. Think you can handle it, oh Evil Professor Snape?”

His own grin could only be described as sly as he spun and pressed her back against the door. “Be careful what you wish for, love.” Without further ado, he leaned forward to devour his witch.

Her head banged against the door as his mouth attacked hers. She gasped at the abruptness of the shift, and he took advantage of her parted lips. He delved into her mouth, his tongue tangling with hers as her fingers began to battle with the buttons of his coat. She deftly popped them open, one by one, as he kissed and nipped and sipped from her lips. She tasted of chocolate and tea and smelled like candied apples and melting wax and sex.

Hermione’s fingers finally succeeded in their mission, and she reached up to strip his coat from his shoulders. As quick as lightning, he yanked her shirt up, hearing the hem rip a bit in his haste. He broke contact to strip it off over her head and toss it to the side, then set his talented mouth to her pulse point and nipped. She moaned and rolled her head to the side, giving him better access to her throat.

He snarled as his finished his work on her neck, smirking in approval at the purple love bite he’d left there, before pulling at the straps of her bra, deflating unhooking it and flinging it after her shirt. He drew back, panting, to admire his handwork as she stood there in her prim teaching skirt and low-heeled pumps, naked from the waist up.

She pawed at his shirt. “Off.”

With a careless wave of his hand, he unbuttoned his shirt and allowed it to pool at his feet. Then he returned to her mouth, allowing their bodies to meet, reveling in the feel of her peaking nipples pressing against his chest. He groaned into her mouth as he fumbled with the zipper of her skirt, pulling it down and dropping the offending garment to the floor. Her hands made quick work of his belt, and soon his trousers and shorts around his ankles. His erection throbbed as all the blood in his body rushed to his groin in the desire to mate with and claim his witch.

He placed his hands under her derriere and lifted her with a jerk, pressing forward so that her legs curled around his waist. Using the door and a whispered spell to support her one-handed, he shoved the damp gusset of her knickers to the side and entered her in one smooth thrust.

They paused for a moment, staring at one another as he gathered his strength to move. And move he did. With little preamble, Severus began to snap his hips into hers in a punishing rhythm concentrating on the pull of her warm muscles around him, the wetness of her pussy, the keening wail from her lips. He pounded into her relentlessly, driving his hips against hers as her head knocked against the door. Neither of them cared to stop.

She came like a steam engine, her orgasm overtaking her before either of them had realized it was building, the wailing of her climax echoing off the foyer walls. She screamed his name as her walls clenched around him. The combination of her tightness and the scent of her arousal and his name on her lips sent him over the edge as he bellowed his own release, groin and buttocks tightening as he pounded into her once, twice more and emptied himself into her.
He slumped against her, allowing the door to support their combined weights as she gingerly put one foot -- still clad in its sensible teaching shoe -- on the floor.

“Fuck,” she said, glancing at the casement clock on her mantle.

Severus looked at her in mute question.

“I negotiated for sex until dinner, but we’ve two hours yet to go. And if we do this again, I don’t think either of us will survive.”

Severus quirked an eyebrow before sending her a smirk that was nothing if not full of male satisfaction. “You should have thought of that before making a deal, my dear. Come along, now. I promised to be thorough, and I am a man of my word.” Without further ado, he scooped her up and tossed her part way over his shoulder, grinning as she laughed into his back and settling them in front of her roaring hearth fire.

Their seats at the high table remained empty that evening.

Severus knew he was dreaming. They were in his bed at Spinner’s End, Hermione’s hair wilder than he was used to and her leg hooked over his as she slept. He was staring at her, marveling at how utterly lucky he was to have such a wonderful woman willing to share his bed with him. To share his life with him, really. Nine months since the Dark Lord fell. Nine months since Nagini nearly took his life. Only three months since he and Hermione had first made love, and she still hadn’t left. He’d even begun referring to his home as theirs -- a shift that she had voiced no objection to.

He shifted a little to watch his lover sleep in the shaft of moonlight shining through the threadbare curtains of his bedroom. He frowned slightly, taking in the shabby surroundings and thought, not for the first time, that he might consider selling the place and finally doing something with Prince House. Spinner’s End was really too small for the two of them to live comfortably, especially if they had children someday.

He grinned at that. Children. Who would have thought he’d ever be planning for children?

His smile softened as he turned his attention back to Hermione, running a gentle finger down her arm from shoulder to elbow, exploring the softness of her skin. She sheet had slipped down as she slept, and her breasts were exposed to the cold January air in his room. The hearth fire had died to embers long ago, and the room was chilly. Her nipples had pebbled in defense against the cold and pointed at him, almost in invitation.

Deciding that Hermione would likely not object to being awakened -- it was his birthday, after all -- he moved his hand slightly to circle first one, then the other nipple, causing them to stiffen further in response. He smirked as she twitched in her sleep, then did it again, eliciting a little moan. Silently, he moved forward and took one in his mouth, circling his tongue gently around the little nub as his hand slid under the covers and toward her mons. Hermione shifted a little, her body near waking, and he seized the moment. He nibbled gently at the flesh of her areola just as he slid a finger between her folds and into the heat at her core.

Hermione’s eyes flew open on a gasp as he sucked and nibbled at her breast and used his thumb to apply a rhythmic pressure on her clitoris. He smiled against her breast as he felt a little tremor race through her body.
She sighed his name then said, simply, “Kiss me.”

How could he deny her?

He reluctantly released her nipple, pleased to see it glisten and stand at attention in the pale moonlight. Shifting his body slightly, he moved to take her mouth, slipping a second finger into her as he maintained the rhythm of his thrusting fingers and pulsing thumb. She moaned against his lips as he applied teeth and tongue to her sweet mouth, drinking in the little mewling cries she made as her hips moved in time with his hand. She was panting between kisses, hands clutching at the bedclothes as her climax approached. He watched her eyes flutter closed as her back arched, her orgasm overtaking her. She gasped her release to the ceiling as he buried his nose into the warm flesh of her neck, slowing his hand as she rode out the pleasure he’d given her.

“Love you,” she murmured as her muscles went lax.

“And I, you,” he replied, drawing the sheets and duvet over their bodies. “Sleep now. I’ll be here when you wake.”

“Promise?” she asked as she snuggled into his side.

Heart full, he watched his love drift off into sleep. “Always,” he whispered in reply.

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“Severus? Severus! Wake up.”

He opened his eyes to see Hermione -- a very naked, very concerned Hermione -- hovering over him. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“You were talking in your sleep. And you’re crying.”

“I’m not,” he said, sitting up. He rubbed his hands on his eyes to clear them of sleep, only to find them wet with tears. “Huh. I am.”

Hermione shifted to wrap her arms around him and draw him close. “Was it a nightmare?”

He shook his head and allowed her to cuddle him into her side, taking comfort in the feel of her arms wrapped around his waist. “No. A dream. A memory, I think. Making love on a cold January night. My birthday. Did that happen?”

He saw her eyes soften and her lips turn up in a little smile. “Yes. That happened.” She pressed a kiss to his nose. “And that made you cry?”

“You were so fucking beautiful. So warm and inviting, and I felt so complete with you in my arms. Like nothing could touch me when I was with you.” He glanced at her face and gave her a little grimace. “I’m not explaining this well.”

“No, I think I understand.”

“It was a little overwhelming,” he said. “But as memories go, definitely one I’m glad to have back.”

“Me too,” she said, pressing a little kiss to his brow. “That was the night I knew I wanted to be with you always.”

“It took you that long?” he joked. “I still want that, Hermione. These last few months...they’re the
happiest I’ve been in years. I think of all the years we’ve lost and it makes me want to scream. So much time, just gone.”

She shushed him and ran a warm hand down his back, encouraging him to slide his arms around her in turn. “As angry as it makes me to know we’ll never have those years back, I’m glad we’re where we are now,” she said contemplatively. “A little older, perhaps. A lot wiser. And nothing has really changed, has it?” she asked. “I still feel complete in your arms.”

“I’m never leaving you again,” he breathed. “I don’t think I could survive it.”

She chuckled mirthlessly. “If you ever tried, I’d track you down and hex you into an early grave.”

“Reason enough to stay then,” he snarked.

“I should think so. You should go back to sleep. We have to teach in a few hours,” she said, wriggling into a more comfortable position. She continued to stroke his back as he drifted back to sleep, holding him as she kept vigil through the rest of the night.
Chapter Summary

A little classroom action and then, finally, we're at the Hogwarts Yule Ball! Hooray!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus watched as his students flicked lazy shielding spells at one another. It was the last class of the last day of Winter term, and the students were clearly feeling as impatient as he to be done with school for a few weeks. He spotted four girls in the back corner of the room, whispering to one another -- about their Yule Ball dresses, no doubt -- rather than practicing projective shielding as they were assigned.

Severus approached stealthily, partially hidden by a pillar, and assumed a stern countenance. “Ladies, as much as I’m sure you wish to dazzle at the ball this evening, Defense class is neither the time nor the place for such socializing. Resume your shielding practice. Ten points from Hufflepuff.”

The girls had the sense to blush before returning to their assigned task, but he could tell attention was not where it should be. There was still a half hour left in class and the misbehaving students meant that he couldn’t reward the class with early release. All the same, this meeting would be worthless if the students didn’t wake up.

“Wands down, please,” Severus called to the class. “Jenkins, Hobarth, Saunders, and Ballard. Up front and center, please.” He watched as his four best students warily approached the dais. “The rest of you, take a moment to hydrate and stretch.”

He turned toward his four students as the rest of the students took a moment to rest. “You four are easily the best with hexes, curses, and jinxes in this class.” He smirked as the four students looked gratified at the compliment. “Your reward for your hard work and prowess is that you’re going to get to attack your classmates.” He discretely handed them each a chunk of Peruvian instant darkness powder. “Place yourselves around the room as I explain this exercise and use this when I speak the words ‘element of surprise.’”

Severus turned back to the room at large. “Everyone rested now? Good. You are all attending the Yule Ball this evening, yes?” He paused to allow the students to nod and babble excitedly. “I do hope you all enjoy yourselves. However, a large gathering of people is a prime target for attack, as we saw at the Quidditch World Cup only a decade ago. A relatively small group was able to entirely scatter a crowd of thousands...and without the direction of the Dark Lord. So today we will practice defending in a crowd scenario.

Misters Jenkins and Ballard and Misses Hobarth and Saunders will be attacking the classroom. They have permission to use any curse, hex, or jinx to create mayhem and havoc that will not directly send someone to the hospital wing. So you four, no slicing or stinging hexes. I encourage you to be creative with your wandwork. You are to restrain your attackers for “arrest” in this scenario, so please do not attempt to harm your fellow classmates. A battle can last from minutes to hours, as was the case in the Battle of Hogwarts. This battle has a time limit of thirty minutes. Now you know who your attackers will be, so I am going to grant them the element of surprise.” As Severus spoke the
He couldn’t see whether the four ‘attackers’ had cast their powder down as well, but assumed they had based on the general screeches heard around the room. Severus quickly disillusioned himself and crouched down in place as the powder began to clear. When light at last began to return to the room, he saw chaos. Hobarth and Jenkins had managed to subdue a number of members of the class with blanket stunning spells and were now picking off individuals as they stumbled over their classmates’ bodies. Ballard and Saunders had chosen the alternative tactic of creating as much havoc as possible. Rather than attacking his peers head-on, Ballard was redirecting curses and jinxes into around the room and smashing them into new targets. This had the unfortunate side effect of occasionally launching desks, chairs, and book bags into the air, but it created distractions and new targets in the process. Saunders, on the other hand, was making use of the levicorpus spell in a manner that was entirely too reminiscent of Death Eater raids from years ago. Though, to be fair, she was using the spell to affix students to the ceiling of the classroom. A small group of Hufflepuffs hung from the rafters like bats, their school robes over their heads and bodies wriggling as they attempted to extract their wand hands from the excess fabric.

Severus almost laughed at the cacophony. He circled the room, taking care not to break his disillusionment as he observed students scrambling to get a bead on one of the attacking students. “Defending” students knocked each other over in an attempt to be the one who brought down an attacker, and helpless giggles sounded every few moments as another student fell over or sent a hex flying to the rafters. It looked as if several of the hanging students had been struck unconscious by stray spells as they swayed precariously from the room’s rafters.

As he made his way toward the back of the room, he spotted Kenneth Ballard as a Hufflepuff managed to petrify him. He noted that the Hufflepuff was one of the four girls who had been chattering just a few minutes before and that those same four girls were, in fact, standing back to back and fighting in tandem. Two of the girls were maintaining shields over their partner while the partner fired at the attacking students. The system seemed to be efficient; within seconds, they’d managed to incapacitate Jemma Saunders as well. Mariah Hobarth had noticed the sudden loss of her hexing partner and took cover behind a table, using it as strategic cover in an attempt to take out the partnered Hufflepuffs but finding no chink in the armor of their shielding spells.

He could almost see the moment the idea struck. Hobarth dove behind a pillar and levitated the heavy wooden table, then swung her wand hand to fling the table at the forward facing shielded duo. The table managed what Hobarth herself could not -- it struck the shield and, rather than break it, forced the quartet of girls down as the weight of the table compressed and pushed the four girls like hamsters in a plastic walking-ball. It was ingenious. Reckless and almost stupidly dangerous, but ingenious.

The battle wound down quickly after that with Hobarth and Jenkins casting finites on their fellow attackers and quickly subduing the rest of the class. When he was left with four sweating, cackling students in the center of the room, Severus removed his own disillusionment charm and moved back toward the dais. “You four, come join me at the front of the room please.” Once they’d done so, he gently lowered the levitated students from the ceiling, then cast a group ennervate on the somnambulant class.

“That,” he said, pausing for effect, “was a far more interesting exercise than I anticipated. We are almost at time and I am sure you are all anticipating spending the next hours preparing yourself for the Yule Ball. Headmistress McGonagall has asked me to remind you that there will be no dinner in the Great Hall tonight as they are preparing for tonight’s festivities, but a light buffet will be arranged in your common room to tide you over until buffet at the ball is served. Now, you have some
homework over break.” He paused again as groans circulated the room. “I want you to spend some of your time over break thinking about what transpired here in the last few minutes. What techniques were effective? What hindered your abilities? Come back from break with a list of five things that you did or saw that you feel worked and five things that you feel failed. I will not collect these, but we will discuss them when you return from break.

More importantly, I want you to consider what would have happened if, say, a group of 10 Death Eaters arrived in the middle of tonight’s Yule Ball. How would you counter the attack? What techniques would you employ? Write yourself some notes and bring them with you after the holidays and we will discuss. I will see you all at the ball this evening, but I will also take this opportunity to wish you a happy winter holiday. You’re dismissed.”

Severus watched as grinning students -- happy that their homework was not onerous -- gathered their things and rushed off for their respective dorms to prepare for the evening’s activities. Severus smirked a bit to himself, tidying his classroom and heading back to the rooms he shared with Hermione to do the same.

The shower was running when he returned to his rooms, and Hermione was singing some sort of Muggle pop that seemed to consist of more rhythmic chanting than actual singing. He didn’t understand the American penchant for completely butchering proper English, but he grinned silently as he listened to Hermione speak-sing her way through the song. He rested his shoulder against the bathroom door jamb and waited for her to emerge from the steamy bath.

Her shriek when she spotted him in the doorway was priceless.

“So why exactly does the singer of that song feel the need to spell the word ‘bananas’ repeatedly?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment before bursting into delighted laughter. “Oh, Severus. I think I need to introduce you to some new music over the winter hols, if only to see the look of horror on your face when I play each song.” She walked up to him and placed a rather damp kiss on his cheek. “Where were you? I thought you’d be back an hour ago?”

He began to strip off his clothes in preparation for his own shower. “Minerva asked me up to her office for a bit. She heard the ruckus my class created at the end of the day and wanted me to explain why a three-hundred year-old table that weighs a half tonne had been unceremoniously flung across the room.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “And why had it?”

“Simulated battle in the classroom. No one was harmed, and it introduced the students to the chaos of a group battle situation. I believe it was an effective exercise.”

“I bet,” she muttered as she began to detangle her hair and massage in a deep conditioner. She waited until he was in the shower before raising her voice. “Severus, do we have any plans for the holidays? I mean, we haven’t really discussed anything. I’ve received a few invitations from friends, but haven’t replied yet.”

He stepped under the spray, grateful as always for the castle’s endless supply of hot water. “I have
also received an invitation. What would you normally do?"

“I used to spend Christmas with the Weasleys, but that’s really not an option. Harry and Ginny have invited me for New Year’s Eve. I usually spend Christmas Eve or New Year’s Day with my parents. And we have the Ministry Yule Ball on the 23rd, don’t forget.”

“Don’t remind me,” he groaned. “Would you object to keeping a similar schedule this year? Without the Weasleys, I mean.”

“Oh. Um, no.” She hesitated. “Do you mind meeting my parents?”

He smiled to himself, glad that she was open to the idea. “I do not. In fact, I quite look forward to it.”

“Then I’d like that. What was your invitation?” He heard the clack of moisturizer bottles and makeup pots hitting the vanity counter.

“The Malfoys have invited us for Boxing Day. And I thought we might spend some time at Prince Manor. Perhaps from New Year’s Day until the term starts?” He waited, holding his breath for her answer.

“I think that sounds wonderful, actually. I didn’t know you had an estate other than Spinner’s End.”

“It’s not much to look at, really. I’ve done next to nothing to it since acquiring it, but I think the elves can get it cleaned up enough for our use. It has a great library and some lovely vistas. Though they’ll be snow-covered, this time of year.”

“Then I look forward to it.”

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Severus had to admit, he rather enjoyed entering the Great Hall with Hermione Granger on his arm. He knew it was shallow of him to focus on her looks, but she was truly resplendent in the celadon green dress, the bracelet he’d given her gleaming dully in the enchanted candlelight and beneath the canopy of stars depicted on the ceiling above. Even her hair took on a lustrous, almost chestnut brown hue in the low light. She paused and looked up as they entered.

“Mistletoe,” she said with a smile.

Severus answered her smile with a tiny quirk of the lips, then leaned in to give her a chaste and entirely appropriate kiss on the lips. The moment was somewhat spoiled by the camera flash from somewhere off to the left. “Ah, I see the press is with us this evening.”

“Goody,” Hermione replied in a growl.

“Come. I see Mr. Potter and and the Longbottoms by the bar. Let’s have a drink and join them, shall we?”

She snickered a bit under her breath. “Aren’t we the social one this evening?”

“If you recall, we need to have Harry apply the trace to our persons. So let’s be social and try to
enjoy the festivities while we are at it, hmm?"

They joined Harry, Neville, and Luna a few minutes later, drinks in hand. Severus had opted for a measure of Tullabardine while Hermione had opted for a rather repulsive looking and heavily brandied eggnog.

“Hermione!” Harry said, reaching out to embrace his friend. “Don’t you look smashing?”

“I could say the same for you, handsome. Where’s Ginny?”

“Minerva’s swept her off to rhapsodize about her baby bump,” he said with a little grin.

“You seem rather supremely unconcerned for your wife’s absence, Harry,” Severus said sardonically. "I thought expectant fathers were supposed to be anxious nutters?"

“Not the third time 'round, we’re not. And we’ve just found out it’s a girl,” Harry replied, grinning from ear to ear. “Minerva was rather excited when we told her. You’ll by auntie to Lily Hermione by May, ‘Mione.”

“Oh, Harry!” she exclaimed, shoving her drink into Severus’ hand. She flung her arms around her best friend and planted a huge kiss on his cheek. “I’m so happy for you of course, but...please don’t give her the name Hermione.”

“Whyever not? She’d be proud to be named after her Godmother?” he asked, looking suddenly like his sixteen year-old self again.

“It’s just such a mouthful for a child. Why not name her Lily Luna?” she asked, looking to her friend for approval. “The names go together so well! I’m sure Gin would agree. Where is she?”

“Right behind you, Granger,” came the voice of the athletic redhead from over Severus’ shoulder. “Get your hands off my husband and find your own man! Such a hussy,” she said, shooting Severus a wink as she joined Harry. She was quickly embraced by an exuberant Hermione, and the entire crowd laughed together at the promise of the birth of the first child of the group.

“Congratulations to you both,” Severus said politely, feeling rather out of his element.

“Thanks!” Ginny replied brightly. “And Harry, I absolutely agree with Hermione on this. Lily Luna would be a beautiful name, assuming Luna agrees?” She glanced at the blonde and saw the girl blush and nod her confirmation, lacing her fingers with Neville’s. “Hermione is a lovely name, but a bit of a much for most kids. Worse than Ginevra, and that’s saying something!” The group laughed as a whole, and Severus felt his chest tighten once at the thought of another Lily Potter coming into the world.

“Alright love, whatever you want.” Harry pressed a kiss to Ginny’s hair before turning to Severus and Hermione. “Now then, a bit of business. Nev, I hate to chase the two of you off, but can you give us five minutes?”

Neville nodded. “Sure. I need to make sure my house is dressed appropriately anyway. We’ll be back in a bit.”

Severus watched as the Longbottoms made their way to a side door and slipped out. “Now then. There are several aurors stationed around the castle tonight who will be keeping tabs on you. I just need to put a quick trace on your wands and we’ll be ready to go. At some point, perhaps mid-way through the evening, one or both of you could slip out of the Great Hall, that would create a good opportunity for your attacker to make himself known.”
“We can do that,” Hermione said, looking up at Severus as she surreptitiously handed Harry her wand. She angled her body to block his movements from view. “We’ll head up to the Astronomy Tower around 10:30. How does that sound?”

“Fine,” Severus replied tersely, handing his own wand to Potter for treatment.

“The charm I cast will wear off in 24 hours, so you don’t need to worry about me following you about forever,” he said with a slight chuckle. “I’ll have my team ready to follow you at 10:30. Until then, we’ll be watching discreetly. Try to enjoy your evening. Gin?” He proffered an arm and, granting a quick smile to Hermione and a nod to Severus, moved off with his wife toward laughing George and Angelina, who seemed to be keeping an enormously pregnant Penelope Weasley company.

“Shall we circulate, Severus?”

“Must we?”

“How else to attract a villain?” she smirked. “And I’ve looked forward to showing you off all week.”

Severus chuckled under his breath. “I’m pretty sure that’s supposed to be my line.”

“Get with the times, darling. It’s 2005 and I’m a modern witch. Come on, let’s make our duty stop with Kingsley. Then you can dance with me.”

“How about I let you do that?”

She slid her arm along his in a gesture of comfort as they began to move toward the knot of people surrounding the Minister of Magic. “You can! Feel the privilege, love.”

“I fully intend to feel something else later.” He whispered as Hermione drove the point of her elbow into his ribcage. They approached Kingsley and his entourage just as the orchestra finished tuning. A jolly foxtrot began and the knot around Kingsley began to disperse as couples moved toward the dance floor.

Kingsley turned toward them as they approached, hailing Severus and bussing Hermione on the cheek. “Professors Snape and Granger. Good evening to you both. Hermione, you look lovely as always.”

“Thank you, Minister,” she replied, raising her voice to be heard over the orchestra. “You’re looking very Ministerial yourself.”

He chuckled a little. “Weasley here won’t let me leave the Ministry unless my robes are in impeccable shape.” Hermione shot a little smile to Percy and received a tight nod in return. “I hear from Minerva that you had quite an eventful class this afternoon. Something about your reputation as a dungeon bat coming back to haunt you?”

Severus stared blankly at Kingsley for a moment before bursting into delighted laughter. “We had an exercise on defense in a crowd situation. Several students ended up affixed to the ceiling thanks to Miss Saunders in the role of attacker.” He gestured toward the student in question, who was standing with a mixed group of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students near the drinks table. “She made used levicorpus to great effect.”

“I’ll make a note to congratulate her, if only for making you laugh in public,” Kingsley replied with a wink before receiving a subtle nap on the shoulder from Percy. “It was good seeing you both. Catch up with me later in the evening if you can. If you’ll excuse me, I need to glad-hand some of the
Board of Governors, including your old friend Lucius.” He gave a brisk nod to both of them before moving off into the crowd, Percy and a ministry photographer trailing in his wake.

Severus turned toward Hermione as the dance master announced that the next piece would be a waltz. More couples -- including a few of the older student pairs, moved toward the floor to take their place in the dance. “Ah. I see Minerva still insists that Heads of House teach the wizarding waltz.” He observed as the students negotiated hand placement with some confusion. “Badly, it would seem. I would’ve expected better from Longbottom’s house. Shall we join the throngs and show them how it’s done?”

Hermione nodded and took the proffered hand. “You do realize I haven’t wizard-waltzed in nearly seven years, don’t you?”

He led her to the center of the dance floor. “Then I believe it’s high time that you did.”

As the opening strains of the piece drifted through the room, he placed his hand on her waist and drew Hermione in. He assumed the rigid stance of the wizarding waltz, which required a bit more concentration than the one taught at cotillions the world over. It was an amalgamation of the Viennese and standard waltzes, which meant a slightly faster tempo and lead shift partway through the set. Severus smirked inwardly as he led Hermione through the dance, containing his pleasure in the dance for the sake of appearances. It would never do for the students to know that Severus Snape enjoyed dancing.

They were still whirling around the floor when he saw Ronald and Prunella Weasley enter the room, the latter’s burgeoning belly highlighted by an orange bow atop the mound of her stomach. “I had no idea that this was a fancy dress ball,” Severus commented. “I see Mrs. Weasley has come dressed as a gift for the Chudley Cannons.”

Hermione followed his line of side and let out a little snort under her breath. “Be kind, Severus. Ginny told me that she’s been simply awful to Ron throughout the pregnancy. I almost feel sorry for him.”

Severus raised an eyebrow as he twirled her in time to the music.

She smiled up at him as he drew her into his body again. “I said almost.”

He continued to keep an eye on the hulking, sulking figure of the red-headed twit and his wife as they made their way toward Harry and Ginevra. Weasley was watching him in return, a look of petulance and, dare he say, longing on his face. “Hermione,” Severus said thoughtfully, “was it long after I left that Ronald began to make overtures toward you?”

“Hmm? No, actually. He didn’t even wait for you to leave. You may not remember it yet, but he was constantly badgering me to toss you and go out with him. He never understood why I was with someone older and smarter when I could be with a ‘fine specimen in his prime’ like him. His arrogance was one of the reasons why it took two years for me to even agree to go on a date with him.”

Severus controlled the frown. He leaned toward his partner to kiss Hermione’s cheek as the waltz came to an end, then escorting her from the dance floor.

“You don’t think he could be the one who -- “

“Ron?” She shook her head. “No. He’s been an arse, I’ll grant you that. But he wouldn’t hurt you to win me. His ego would suffer too much for it; he’d rather wear me down than chase my lover off.
And he's bollocks with memory charms anyway.”

He nodded to two of his students strolling past arm in arm, thinking to himself that a bollocksed memory charm was what had caused this mess to begin with. “If you’re sure. It just seemed convenient timing. Not to mention that he’s looking at you like the last cookie on the plate and he’s been left with only brussels sprouts.”

Hermione coughed out a laugh. “Did you just compare Prunella to boiled mini-cabbages?”

He smiled at her with a little quirk of his lips. “I have no idea to what you’re referring. Come, let’s stand by the punch bowl and look like appropriately stern chaperones. Who do you suppose will try to spike it first this year?”

He listened with half an ear as Hermione explained that she’d helped Minerva charm the punchbowl herself and that there was no way Caldwell Mason -- her vote for biggest troublemaker of the year -- would get past her wards. Severus’ attention was focused squarely on Ronald Weasley as he squired his simpering wife about the room. He distinctly remembered Hermione telling him of an incident involving supposed use of Felix Felicis before a Quidditch game and her outrage that Ronald chose to drink the supposedly doctored beverage despite bans on the potion’s use.

It hardly mattered that the beverage hadn’t been doctored. It was Weasley’s acceptance of the drink that worried him. During his years at school, Mr. Weasley frequently took the easy way out; Hermione wrote the majority of his essays. What homework he did himself was half-arsed at best. Potions were ineffective due to shortcuts.

Would it be so very far-fetched for Weasley to push an obstacle out of his way to win Hermione?

Chapter End Notes

I'm just going to apologize for not updating this sooner. It didn't want to be written.
Yule, Part 1

Chapter Summary

The first Yule Ball wraps up and Minerva makes a bit of an announcement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The evening had been uneventful. Hermione had danced with George and Harry, giggled with Penelope and Ginny over their baby bumps, and sipped at eggnog and snacked on the appetizers she’d helped Minerva organize. She’d even chatted cheerfully with the entire Malfoy clan when they’d taken the time to seek the couple out, and they’d confirmed that Severus and Hermione would in fact join them for dinner on Boxing Day. It had been the epitome of a perfect formal gathering: in a word, boring.

Severus swirled the firewhiskey in his class and side-eyed the He had to hand it to Potter; he’d trained his team well. The aurors were unobtrusive and managed to blend into the crowd, circulating the room with spouses and dates and rarely looking directly at Hermione and Snape. All the same, it made that spot between his shoulderblades itch.

He cast a surreptitious tempus again to note the time. They had half an hour until they needed to head to the Astronomy tower. He decided to entertain himself for a bit by staring at the student couples who chose to dance too closely and was pleased to note that his blank-faced death-stare was still effective at twenty paces. Two seventh years girls jumped apart and dropped their hands at the sight of Severus’ eyes. It warmed his heart a bit to see it.

A little snort sounded next to him. “Having fun, darling?”

He smirked. “Hmm. Need a refill?”

“Yes, thanks. Champagne, please. I don’t think I can handle any more eggnog tonight.”

He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head and scooped up her empty glass. “I’m surprised you can handle any of that noxious stuff. I’ll return momentarily.”

Severus made his way to the bar -- which thankfully had an age line around it, so he needn’t shepherd students away from the area -- and disposed of their empty glasses before procuring another a fizzy water for himself and champagne for Hermione.

When he turned, he spotted Minerva approaching the bar with Mohinder. He greeting them both warmly, “Headmistress, Professor Bhati. How are you both this evening?”

Minerva graced him with a cat-like smile. “We’re doing rather swimmingly, Severus, thank you,” she said, nestling her arm more firmly in the crook of Mohinder’s. Severus quirked an eyebrow.

“ We are, are we?” he said with a smirk. “And when did this happen?”

“Around four years ago, actually,” Mohinder replied, sending Minerva a happy look. “We’d been waiting for the Ministry to approve a spousal hire for ages, but Min’s position as Headmistress and
my former job as an ambassador complicated matters. They were going to restation me last year, but the board came through with an approval for my position just in time. I was informed this morning that my program will become a standard part of the Hogwarts curriculum. So this time, I know I’m staying.”


Minerva blinked, looking decidedly pleased with Severus’ reaction. “We are. We were waiting for Mohinder’s permanent position to be approved before letting it be known to the public. I’ll announce it at the beginning of Spring term.” She swallowed what could only be described as a delighted giggle.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Congratulations to you both,” he said, shaking first Mohinder’s hand and then giving Minerva an awkward hug. “I’m very happy for you, Min,” he said quietly. He’d watched his friend for close to two decades mourn a husband long dead and long for a man with no interest in women. He was thrilled that she seemed to have found someone that made her so happy, and broke into a crooked grin as a result. “I can’t bloody believe it. Married. Wait until I tell Hermione.”

He turned to do just that, but as he did he saw that Ronald Weasley had made use of his absence and was now engaged in what appeared to be a rather heated conversation with Hermione. A quick glance toward the press verified that they’d yet to notice the altercation, but Severus figured he’d only have a few minutes before that fact changed.

“Oh dear.” Minerva said. “It appears Mr. Weasley is rather in his cups. Shall I fetch his wife?”

“No.” Severus replied tersely, already moving toward the table. “Fetch Mr. Potter.” He noted that Ronald’s voice was becoming louder with every passing second; the conversation was most definitely no longer private.

“I just don’t understand why it has to be him of all people, ‘Mione. Did you learn your lesson the first time?” he scolded.

Hermione somehow managed to look down her nose at the hulking red-head. “Learn my lesson, Ronald? You mean like I failed to do with you the first time you cheated on me? Something, I’ll point out, that Severus has never done? I fail to see how it’s any of your business anyway.”

Weasley took a slug from his glass. “Hey, I’m just looking out for you. If you want to let the greasy git pork you, no skin off mine. But don’t expect me to be sympathetic when the bloody vampire attacks you or something. It’s not like anyone will want to go where that sod has been. It still repulses me that I went there.”

George rolled his eyes at his inebriated little brother “Ron, leave off mate. That’s enough.”

“Yes, Ronald. Do leave off before I hex it off. Oh dear, I see Prunella has spotted you. Smart woman to keep tabs on your whereabouts, especially where alcohol and women are present,” Hermione sniffed, turning her back to the oaf.

Weasley grabbed her shoulder and jerked her back around to face him. “Don’t turn away when I’m talking to you, you --”

“I highly suggest you don’t finish that statement, Mr. Weasley.” Severus drawled from behind him. “And I’d further recommend you remove your hands from Professor Granger.”

Ronald spun around and glared at Severus as the latter set the drinks on the table in order to free his
wand hand. “Fuck off, Snape. This is a private conversation.”

“Hardly. The press will likely notice your presence momentarily. Especially if I sever your hands at the wrists for failing to remove them from Hermione’s person.”

“You don’t scare me, Snape. You’re the same coward you always were, just with a better haircut. You’re just here to annoy me and try to worm your way up ‘Mione’s skirt, as always. You disgust me.”

“Mr. Weasley, may I remind you that this is a school and that there are students as well as press present tonight? Kindly keep a civil tongue in your head.” He turned to Hermione. “My dear, the air here is stifling. Will you take a walk with me?” He offered her a hand, which she accepted as he swept her from the scene.

He could hear Ginny ranting at her brother as they walked away. “Ronald Weasley, I cannot believe you. There are times when I wonder how we could be related at all.” Her voice faded away as they made their way out of the Great Hall and toward the central stair.

It was early for it, but Severus figured that the Astronomy tower would be a more subdued environment than the one they left brewing in the Great Hall.

“Thank you,” Hermione said as they mounted the stairs. “I appreciate you stepping in back there.”

He slanted her a glance. “Of course. Not that you needed my help.”

She smiled a little at that. “I didn’t, but it’s nice to know that yours is there if I do ever need it. Love you.”

“And I you.” He looked down and saw that Hermione looked both shaken and sad. “I should tell you, I heard the most delightful news just a few minutes ago…”

Breakfast the next morning was a subdued affair. Half the staff were working through their hangovers while students plowed food in their mouths in preparation for the long train ride back to London for the Winter hols. Chatter was, for once, at a near-acceptable noise level. Severus sipped his tea in frustration.

Nothing had happened on the Astronomy tower. Nothing at all. They’d stood up there for an hour, scaring off a few pairs of fourth and fifth years taking advantage of the lightened patrols during the ball to say their farewells for the holidays. Otherwise, not a peep. Hermione and Severus were finally forced to return to the ball when their warming charms proved insufficient to battle the gusts of chilled wind at the top of the castle. Weasley had, thankfully, left the ball -- as had most of the auror team and Potter himself. They’d said their goodbyes quickly after that and made their way back to their rooms.

A smaller number of morning owls swooped in to deliver papers and last minute missives from parents before the students boarded the train. Severus ignored his own paper in favor of serving himself a rash of bacon and looked up when the noise level suddenly rose. He heard Hermione’s quick intake of breath as she read the front page of her paper, and he hurriedly picked up his own to
see what the matter was.

**December 17, 2005**

**War Hero Ronald Weasley Accosts Auror at Hogwarts Yule Ball, Generally Makes Scene**

Ronald Weasley (OoM1) was escorted from the Hogwarts premises following an altercation with long-time friend Harry Potter (OOM1, Wizarding Star). The event followed what appeared to be a terse conversation with former fiancée Professor Hermione Granger (OoM1) and her new love Professor Severus Snape (OoM1), after which the couple departed the festivities.

Reports indicate that Auror Potter removed his friend from the school citing public drunkenness in the presence of minors. Press representatives at the event indicate that Mr. Weasley was heard shouting “I wish I’d killed the bugger when I’d had the chance!” and forcefully pushing Auror Potter.

We’re informed that Mr. Weasley was spotted leaving the Ministry in the early hours of morning in the company of his wife, Prunella, and his mother, Molly Weasley (OoM2), the latter of whom seemed to be actively attempting to box her son’s ears.

The article continued to recount his past and present relationship with Hermione, Ronald’s past relationship with Hermione, reports of the number of drinks he’d consumed (the press really had been paying attention), and speculation on the reason behind Weasley’s extended stay at the Ministry. Severus was nearly finished with the article when Hermione handed him the letter that had arrived with the morning mail.

**Hermione and Severus --**

You will likely read in the paper this morning that I took Ron in for public drunkenness during the Yule Ball last night. In fact, I removed him for questioning at the DMLE. He was shouting some things that led me to believe that he may have been involved in your attack, but when questioned he said he was actually referring to the incident in the Shrieking Shack during the final battle. The DMLE still considers him a person of interest, but we can’t use Veritaserum without evidence of wrongdoing. My hands are tied.

I’m afraid we’ve hit a dead end there. Kingsley has already informed me that he’s received instructions to cut off official investigation into your attack, Severus. While I’m unable to participate in further investigation in any official capacity, I in no way consider my work on your case done. I’m only sorry that I haven’t been able to help more to date.

Hermione, I know we discussed the possibility of filing an official complaint against Ron a few weeks ago. I don’t know if you’re considering the option, but in my professional opinion that will not be necessary. Once sober, he seemed to regret his actions -- not in the least because Molly and Prunella were taking turns railing at him. I’ll leave the decision up to you, but I think he’ll be staying away from you for awhile.

I’ll be in touch soon with any details I can provide. Ginny sends her love and said to tell
you that her brother may or may not be shitting porcupine quills for the next week. Some new hex she’s been working on, since Ron has learned how to shield against the bat bogies. Not that I know a thing about that, officially.

Best to you both,

Harry

“Well. That was...predictable.” Severus said with a resigned sigh.

“Not as predictable as that,” Hermione said, gesturing toward the door to the Great Hall. Percy Weasley was striding briskly toward the high table.

“Professor Snape, Hermione. I’m sorry to disturb your breakfast. The Minister asked me to deliver this myself as he was unable to make the trip to Hogwarts this morning. He sends his heartfelt apologies.”

“Thank you, Percy.” Hermione said.

Severus took the envelope but made no move to open it. “I assume this is what I think it is, Mr. Weasley?”

“A discontinuation of efforts on your behalf, yes. Again, my apologies.” He scratched at his head a bit, avoiding his former professor’s gaze. “Um, Happy Holidays to you both.” Without further ado he turned and walked out the way he’d come in.

“Well. That’s that, then.” Severus tucked the envelope and Harry’s letter into the deep pocket of his robes and rose from the table. “We have students to escort this morning. I’m going to check in with Hagrid and see if the carriages are ready.” He left the hall, fully aware that the eyes of most of the room were on him -- Hermione’s filled with concern and the rest with idle curiosity over the status of his love life.

He walked quickly not to the front drive, but to his empty classroom, taking care to lock and ward the door before turning his wand on a practice dummy against the far wall. “FUCK!” he shouted, slashing his wand at the dummy and severing it in two. “God damned, bloody, buggering, FUCK!” He slashed again and again, effectively rendering the dummy into bits of fluff and splinters of wood before setting the pile ablaze. He stared at the charring remains of his temper as he considered the situation.

Of course Potter’s hands were tied. Veritaserum was still a highly controlled substance and circumstantial evidence wouldn’t be enough to gain approval for its use. Likely Potter didn’t believe his friend capable of attacking Severus; where would he have learned the charm anyway. Severus had a hard time believing it himself, but lack of any other suspects meant that Ron would be the sole focus of Potter’s efforts on his behalf. Assuming that there were any more efforts on his behalf, despite all of the man’s assurances.

It was over. No more help. No more investigations. The only things Severus would be able to do is continue the investigation on his own or choose to get on with his life.

A knocking at the door interrupted his thoughts. He resignedly flicked his wand toward the locks and watched Hermione enter the room. She didn’t say anything, simply walked to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head against his chest. Severus took comfort in her embrace, closing his eyes and resting his chin on her head as he attempted to bring himself under control.

“What now?” she asked after awhile.
“Now? Nothing. I’m tired of waiting. And I’m tired of fighting. I’ll keep trying to get my memories back, but...I want to get on with my life. With you.” He pressed a kiss to her curls.

“Alright. Minerva was asking for you. It’s time to see the children off to the train.”

He nodded. “Let’s go then.”

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It had taken nearly two hours to herd students onto the Hogwarts Express, but they’d managed it with only two forgotten familiars and one misplaced trunk this year. Almost a record, in Severus’ estimation. Hermione turned to him as they made their way back through Hogsmeade.

“What do you say to inviting Minerva and Mohinder to dinner tonight?” she asked.

He grunted. “I’d rather looked forward to a quiet evening at home with you.”

“You mean you’d rather looked forward to a quiet night of moping. I don’t think so. I’ll make lasagne. Do you still remember how to make Panna cotta?” she asked with a hopeful look on her face.

“Hermione, you could hit me with ten Obliviates and I’d still be able to make Panna cotta in my sleep.” He hesitated. “Is this something we used to do together?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. It’s something we did together once. Oh, look, we can get the ingredients while were here in town!” she said rather over-enthusiastically.

Severus looked at her, tongue in cheek. “You already spoke to Minerva about this didn’t you?”

“Yes, and she graciously accepted our invitation. And offered to bring the wine. So cheer up, love, we’re entertaining tonight.”

And so it was a rather less-dour-than-normal, if somewhat slightly singed, Severus who opened the door to his employer and her husband that evening. “Min, Mohinder, welcome. Hermione is back in the kitchen poking at our dinner. There was a small incident in the kitchen that needed clearing up.”

“I suppose that you forgot that Hermione is not quite what we’d call a dab hand in the kitchen, Severus?” Minerva asked with a smirk, handing him a bottle of Chianti.

“Yes. Not to worry. Winky saved the day. And dinner. She also provided some appetizers, if you’ll come into the sitting room. Hermione just ran upstairs to clean up. She’ll be down in a moment.” He took the wine into the dining room and quickly decanting it through an aerator. “Can I offer you a drink before dinner?” he asked as he re-entered the room. He was somewhat shocked to see Minerva cuddled into Mohinder’s side as she nibbled on a piece of Bruschetta.

“Fizzy water if you have it, please” Minerva said, reaching for a piece of proscuitto-wrapped red pepper asked Mohinder asked for the same.

“I have to say, I like how you’ve rearranged things in here.”

“Thank you. We didn’t change much, though our personal offices have moved. Hermione took over her old sitting room and I’m using her old kitchen. It’s worked out fairly well, actually.”
“And can I expect to hear that you two have made it official soon?” she asked with a familiar twinkle in her eye.

“Mind your business, Min,” Mohinder said under his breath. “Ignore her, Severus. She’s the worst busybody.”

“I know that very well, Moh,” he replied with a chuckle.

“I rather resent that remark!” Minerva said with a laugh. Honestly, Severus hadn’t seen her so happy in years. It was nice to see.

“I think you mean you rather resemble that remark, Minerva,” Hermione chimed in as she came down the stairs. “Hello to you both,” she said, kissing them both on the cheeks. “I understand that some rather belated congratulations are in order?”

“Yes,” Mohinder said, flushing slightly at the attention. “We don’t want to announce it right away though. I’m a bit worried that there will be a scandal.”

“Because she’s your employer?” Severus asked, handing a water to Hermione before sitting down himself.

“No, no, that was all done through the School Board. Technically, Minerva didn’t even hire me. It’s more that --”

“He’s afraid that the press will comment on the age difference,” Minerva said dryly. “They’ll accuse me of being a panther or somesuch, or Moh of being after my war portion. It’s utter rot, of course.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “I think you mean cougar, Min. And Moh’s right, they will. Didn’t you see any of the tripe they printed about Severus and me all those years back?”

“My dear, you were still a teenager and he’d once been your professor. It was expected.” Minerva said with a shrug.

“And Rita Skeeter is still publishing,” Hermione returned, a worried look on her face. “She’ll make a comment, I guarantee. And you will receive horrid letters from the public. There are only nineteen years between Severus and me. There’s...what, thirty or thirty-five between you? She’ll have a field day.”

“I won’t keep my marriage a secret, Hermione,” Minerva responded angrily. “I’m not ashamed of loving Moh, and I’m not ashamed of his age. The public can go stuff itself.”

Severus glanced at Mohinder and saw him looking at his wife with a look of astonished pride on his face. “I don’t think Hermione is suggesting you hide it, Min,” he said gently.

“Then what?”

“I’d recommend you grant an interview. Have Luna do it and publish it in the Quibbler. That way the truth -- or what of your relationship you’re willing to reveal publicly -- is out there on your terms. And written by someone you trust,” Hermione said.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually. What do you think, Moh?” Minerva looked at her husband questioningly.

“I think I’m tired of our relationship living in the shadows. I’m tired of returning to my rooms at night, only to floo to yours. It’s time to live in the open, my dear. We’ve nothing to hide.”
“Then I’ll contact Luna in the morning. I’m sorry I snapped at you my dear,” she said to Hermione.

“It’s alright Min. I’d feel the same way if I thought someone were attacking my relationship with Severus.” She shot him a glance that spoke volumes for her feelings about him. “Dinner’s ready, thanks to Winky, and Severus has promised a lovely dessert. Shall we head into the dining room?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm really aware that I've rather shoehorned in a plot point here. But I did sort of hint at it before. Like, ten chapters ago. So it's not totally out of the blue. The final scene is in there because I needed a bit of transitionish filler before moving into the second Yule Ball (which is next chapter!)

Shameless plug: Come visit me on Tumblr! I love hearing from people and seeing what you post. I even like it when people chat with me through the Tumblr chat function. It's a thing that makes me happy. Come out and play people! http://persnicketyfics DOT tumblr DOT com
Minerva took Hermione’s advice and worked quickly to approach Luna about arranging a meeting before the Yule Ball assuming, quite rightly, that news of her marriage to Mohinder would rapidly be eclipsed by reports on those who were deemed most and least fashionable at the ball. Skeeter’s drivel was nothing if not predictable, and Luna’s story -- with no little editorializing on her part -- appeared in the Quibbler a scant two days before the ball and was duly picked up by the Prophet the next day. Luna had opted to send the proceeds from the story to the War Orphan’s Fund in honor of the Headmistress and her new husband.

The staff had taken the news rather well, all things considered. Sinistra and Poppy had both looked hurt to have been excluded from the secret, but any dented feelings were rapidly shelved in favor of congratulating their long-time friend and employer. Unfortunately the public had not reacted in a similarly accepting and welcoming manner.

The howlers hadn’t begun to arrive until after The Daily Prophet published Luna’s story, and said public had been as capricious as ever. Most, oddly enough, had been directed at Mohinder rather than Minerva. He was accused of preying on a “lonely” and “elderly” war hero, using his so-called sexual prowess to maneuver his way into her life and her bed. They’d been alarmed when the first letter for the younger professor had arrived during breakfast the day of the Yule Ball, and Mohinder himself had watched in horror as the red envelope unsealed itself and began to screech. It was until the words “seduced her with your foreign ways and your fancy sex!” that he’d begun to chuckle. Hermione had shrieked and hidden behind her hands and even Severus had chuckled at the look of shocked amusement on the man’s face.

Minerva was somewhat less amused and had to be convinced that sending a reply howler was not in her best interests.

Never threaten a Gryffindor’s family, Severus thought. Lionesses defend their kin to the death.

He sent a look over to Hermione and reflected that she would likely be just as outraged if he were similarly maligned. The knowledge left him with only warm feelings.

The hubbub around Minerva’s announcement certainly served as adequate reaction for those staff who had remained at Hogwarts before the Ministry ball. Everyone who fought in and survived the Battle of Hogwarts had been invited, which mean that the entire teaching faculty and Argus Filch had been extended invitations. Longbottom had been hard-pressed to convince the crotchety caretaker that Mrs. Norris would not be an appropriate escort to the ball. Such arguments were somewhat set back by Mrs. Longbottom’s comments that the cat would indeed look “lovely in her holiday finery” and that she was “too well behaved to shed on the Minister of Magic.” Severus had rolled his eyes at Luna, now well used to her antics after months of off-kilter comments in the staff room, but Hermione had actively participated in Longbottom’s attempts to convince the caretaker
that Mrs. Norris would be better served catting around the castle and enjoying a celebratory sardine supper while her owner was wined and dined at the ball.

At long last, Saturday came. While Hermione and Severus were old news on the ballroom circuit -- thanks in large part to the Malfoy gala just six weeks prior -- Hermione was still determined to look her best. Severus suspected that it was, in part, to give the Skeeter bitch no quarter when it came to critiques of her appearance at such a formal event. She’d spent the morning bathing and buffing as he’d watched in fascination. First she’d cleansed, then she’d rubbed her skin with what he thought looked like sugar granules suspended in oil. It smelled like apricots and had left the bath slippery enough that he’d nearly bashed his nose into the wall during his own shower. Then she’d smeared mud on her face and product in her hair and lotions on her skin. When she’d finished, he hadn’t thought Hermione had looked noticeably different, though he did make sure to make agreeable noises when she held out one smooth leg for his inspection.

He thought she’d be beautiful if she had skin like sandpaper and wore a burlap sack that evening, but he could appreciate her efforts even if he didn’t understand them.

Of course, all that primping had meant that she’d firmly resisted his pre-ball overtures toward seduction. It was hardly fair when she was so wonderfully soft and smelled like sin.

Severus smirked to himself in the mirror as he adjusted the collar of the crisp white shirt that he would wear beneath his dress robes. He’d opted for an onyx stud rather than formal cravat and paired it with a jacket with velvet labels. He thought it looked rather smart and hoped that Hermione would feel the same. The last thing he wanted was for Rita fucking Skeeter to take him to task for his appearance in comparison to his lover’s.

He’d just donned the dark green, charmed robes and was working to fasten them at his shoulders when Hermione emerged from the bath, hair coiffed and clad only in her undergarments.

And what undergarments they were. She was a vision in champagne colored lace that lifted and shaped her already lovely body into the stuff of fantasies. Thigh-high stockings were charmed in place on her legs so that they seemed to shimmer as she moved through toward the wardrobe, oblivious to the thoroughly gobstruck wizard in front of the mirror. His eyes darkened as he watched her remove her gown from from the cabinet and step into it, pulling the snug silk up over her hips and one arm. He committed every move to memory, convinced that this was one he’d preserve in a pensieve so that he could revisit it again and again. There was an almost heady sense of intimacy associated with watching Hermione -- his Hermione -- prepare for the evening and knowing that he would be the one to unwrap her upon their return home.

Of course, there was intimacy in knowing that he was the only one who got to see her in a bathrobe with her hair sticking out at all angles too. The Hermione of their private hours was just as cherished as the golden goddess before him.

She fastened the row of buttons at the back of her gown with a quick swish of the wand, drawing the draping fabric closed so that it would mold around her form like a second skin. It was topaz silk tonight -- the same ‘shantung’ confection she’d spotted in Malkin’s window months ago -- that gripped her closely from bust to knee, then flared to pool around her feet. A single, draping scar gripped her upper left arm and left her collarbones and shoulders bare. Moments later, she withdrew a gold-embroidered, amber velvet cloak from the clothes press and affixed it to the outer edges of her neckline. Finally she slipped her feet into dull, golden court shoes and turned to face him.

“Like what you see, darling?” she purred at him.

Severus allowed the lusty smirk that had been on his face to soften into a gentle smile. “You’ll be the
belle of the ball and the highlight of the Golden Trio. As you well know. But I was just thinking that I’m the lucky man who gets to see you with your hair in a nest and your pyjama bottoms askew every morning. That’s the woman I love. This one, while stunning, is far too untouchable for daily life.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead as he finished his statement.

She smiled in return. “And the pyjama-clad, mad-haired woman with morning breath and smeared mascara will be all yours again tomorrow morning. As much as it’s fun to be a girly-girl on occasion, I prefer knowing that you love me no matter what I wear.” She tilted her head up to to peck a kiss on his lips, then followed it with a brush of her fingers to remove the stain of the lipstick she’d left behind. “Though I have to say, I rather like formal-Severus this evening. You’re all buttoned up again. Like in school. Sexy Professor Snape,” she laughed, waggling her eyebrows.

“Mmm,” he said, leaning in to steal another kiss and catching the scent of her birthday perfume on her skin. Almonds and honeysuckle tonight, a playful scent to match her mood. He deliberately lowered his voice to a sultry timbre as he rumbled in her ear, “I believe that will be detention, Miss Granger. Meet me in the Ministry reading room at midnight.”

“Of course, Professor Snape,” she said, batting her eyelashes. “Will I be polishing cauldrons?”

“I think not, my dear.” Straightening, he smoothed a hand over her cloak to remove a wrinkle, then offered an arm. “Come. Let’s gather Minerva and Mohinder and go wow the masses for the evening. I find I’m suddenly in the mood for champagne.”

After the initial howlers, they had decided that Severus and Hermione -- an equally controversial but “old-news” couple would accompany the more scandalous Headmistress and her younger husband. When they entered Minerva’s office to floo to the Ministry, Severus’ eyebrows nearly shot into his hairline.

“Going to set them on their heels tonight, are we Min?” he asked with his trademark smirk.

Minerva was clad in a deep burgundy, long-sleeved gown covered in intricate embroidery. It was sheer from the shoulders to the arms and hung in a straight sheath down her body. Rather than a cloak or robe, she’d donned a long, embroidered scarf that draped from shoulder to hip in a style nearly reminiscent of a sari. The elder witch had long retained her figure from her days as a Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and the simple dress compliment her so well that she looked nearly twenty years younger.

Mohinder, on the other hand, had opted to garb himself in a formal Dhoti and Kurta from his home country. The embroidered mandarin collar of the dark grey silk -- shantung again -- leant him an almost mysterious air. Or would have, if it hadn’t been for the thoroughly besotted look the man got on his face each time he looked at his bride.

“They’ll be out with the pitchforks tonight,” Minerva snorted. “I thought it best to give them a good target to aim at.”

“Minerva, you look absolutely stunning!” Hermione exclaimed with a little squeal. “And you’re very handsome, Mohinder. Honestly, you both look so happy that anyone who dares criticize you will simply look petty and jealous.”
“Thank you, my dear,” the Headmistress said, leaning in to peck her favorite former-student on the cheek. “You look lovely as well. Both of you. We’ll do Hogwarts proud tonight. Now, shall we?” She gestured toward the floo.

As the central governing office of Wizarding Britain, the Ministry of Magic’s opulent ballroom was frequently used for dinners and galas to host visiting dignitaries. Tonight, however, it was decorated for its citizens -- both the heroes and the political wonks.

Severus cast a critical eye around the room, wary of the self-jingling bells and ever-blooming mistletoe gracing every doorway. He grunted to himself before pasting a neutral expression on his face. At least the hall is decorated tastefully, unlike Hogwarts whenever a certain Charms professor is given his head.

As expected, the two couples were greeted by a nameless Ministry official and the Ministry press corps. They ignored the powder flashes and shouted questions as they were escorted to their tables to await dinner. While Severus was grateful to see it contained the Potters, the elder Weasleys, the Longbottoms, and Rolanda and Aurora, but annoyed to find that the twelve seat table also contained the youngest Mr. Weasley and his wife. He felt, rather than saw, Hermione stiffen beside him as he led her to a seat a third of the way ‘round its circular expanse. He held the chair for her as he seated himself between her and Molly Weasley who, thankfully, seemed to have recognized the potential for verbal conflict and placed herself directly between the two couples. Severus gave her a small smile and nod of greeting, taking care to compliment her gown and shake hands with her husband.

Ronald stared sullenly in at his silverware and ignored the angry looks coming from his wife as Hermione greeted the table at large, avoiding catching the redhead’s eye. Once they were both seated, she placed her hand on Severus’ knee before turning to address Harry and Ginevra -- who appeared one good scare away from going into labor -- on her left.

Dinner proceeded without incident, though Severus kept a weather eye on Ronald. The table largely ignored etiquette, talking across one another and asking after families or the latest news. Molly in particular was interested in hearing all about Mohinder and Minerva (of whom she stood in staunch support) in between sending quelling looks toward her son each time he reached for his wine glass. Prunella Weasley seemed to spend most of her meal alternating between sending angry and self-satisfied looks at Hermione while stroking her heavily pregnant belly. The rest of the table -- Ronald included -- handily ignored her.

Severus heard Hermione exhale a long sigh of relief when the master of ceremonies signalled the start of the dancing, and the couple quickly bid farewell to their dining companions to take their place on the dance floor. Severus leaned in as the opening strains of music heralded a waltz and whispered, “that had to be the oddest dinner I’ve ever sat through in my life.”

She giggled and drew closer as they began to sway and turn through the lilting steps of the dance. “I know. I think Prunella still thinks she got the better end of the deal in my breakup with Ron.”

“Some women are like that. I seem to recall Lavender Brown lording her ‘win’ over you in a similar fashion,” he snorted.

“I can’t believe you actually know that much about my love life during school.”
“You were the brightest witch in the school from the moment you set foot in the doors, Hermione. I didn’t have to like you to pay attention. And let us not forget that I had to deal with the fallout of that series of events,” he retorted with an eyeroll.

Hermione let out a peal of laughter, drawing eyes to their dancing forms. “For the last time, it’s not my fault that McLaggan can’t handle the combination of dragon tartare and diluted firewhiskey.”

Laughter rumbled in Severus’ chest as the dance drew to a close. “Perhaps he simply didn’t know how to handle a beautiful woman who was measures too clever for him.”

She smiled softly at him as the song ended. “Flatterer.”

He drew her close as another song began, taking the opportunity to press a kiss to her head. “With you? Always.”

Hermione was quickly whisked away after that and danced the next few sets with friends and politicians alike. It was comforting, however, that each time he sought her eyes across the room he met hers. He was quickly discovering -- or, perhaps, rediscovering? -- that the secret looks, the silent communication between lovers was as powerful an aphrodisiac as a kiss or a whispered phrase.

He glanced at his pocket watch. There were still ninety agonizing minutes until midnight.

He’d been conversing with an old acquaintance, a potions journeyman who owned an apothecary in Cardiff, for the past twenty minutes. As much as he generally loved to discuss the efficacy of lacewing flies ground with a marble pestle rather than ceramic, he found his attention wandering back to the woman who stood across the ballroom, immersed in her own conversation with a Draco Malfoy and his fiancée. He resisted the urge to check his watch again and scanned the room for an excuse to draw away from his colleague.

He shifted when he felt a light touch on his arm. “Severus, there you are. Draco indicated that he hasn’t spoken to you since the Malfoy ball last month and wanted to say hello. Oh, I’m sorry,” Hermione said, sending a charming smile at his companion. “I just didn’t want Severus to miss the chance to catch up with his godson.”

“Not at all, Madam. Hubert Attwater, at your service. I’ll leave you to your young friends, Severus. Perhaps we can continue our conversation via post after the new year.”

“I’d like that, Bertie,” Severus said, extending his hand to the older gentlemen before he toddled off. Severus turned back to Hermione. “Thank you.”

“Your eyes were glazing over. And Draco did want to say hello, didn’t you?” she said to the blond gentlemen.

“I did. Severus, I wanted to properly introduce you to my fiance, Astoria.”

Severus barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “You forget, Draco. I did teach Miss Greengrass for several years before leaving the country. But my congratulations to you both. You’ll have your hands full with this one,” he said with a smirk.
“I count on it,” Astoria replied with a shy smile. Severus watched the couple and was pleased to see that there was genuine affection there on both their parts. It was a good match for Astoria, though a surprising one for the younger Malfoy. Politically, it would have made more sense for him to ally himself to the younger Nott or Zabini daughters. He was pleased to see that Draco was following family tradition and marrying for love rather than influence. It’s nice to see that Lucius continues to support Draco in ways that Abraxas did not support him...lest Lucius would have ended up married to Bellatrix and we’d all be buggered.

Severus slipped an arm around Hermione’s waist as the two couples conversed, warming as Hermione turned her body slightly into his to lean her head on his shoulder for a moment. It felt as natural as breathing to stand with her, united as a couple, and to his credit Draco didn’t bat an eyelash at their behavior. “I see you parents are ensconced with the Minister this evening.”

Draco made a humming noise and glanced over to where Lucius and Narcissa sat with Shacklebolt. “Yes. Mother has been working to open a youth house for teenaged children orphaned by the war. A place for them to retreat to in the summers away from Hogwarts. There has been some pushback from quarters of the Wizengamot...worries that she’s recruiting youth to Dark Wizardry.”

Severus rolled his eyes. Narcissa Malfoy had never been charged with anything after the war and, in fact, was lauded for her actions in saving Potter. As was Draco, in the end. “I assume their problem is less with your mother and more with your father’s backing for the project?”

Draco winced. “Got it in one.”

“Would another name help?” Hermione asked. “I’d be happy to donate to promote her cause publicly if you think it would make a difference.”

The younger wizard looked at her in surprise. “It might help quite a bit. Thank you, Granger,” he said, sounding truly touched.

“Hermione,” she corrected with a smirk. “Come on, let’s go talk to your mum and Kingsley before Percy drags him off to talk to some politician.” Without further ado, she slid her arm through Draco’s and marched him toward the spot where the Minister stood with the Malfoys.

Severus shot a look at Astoria as she watched her fiancé disappear with his escort. “As our partners are otherwise occupied, would you care to dance Miss Greengrass?”

He was gratified to see her look of surprise widen into a pretty smile. “Thank you, Professor Snape. I’d be honored.”

More than an hour later, Hermione was still deep in conversation with Narcissa Malfoy and, now, Ginny Potter, and all appeared to be thick as thieves. Hermione had pulled a notebook and biro out of her reticule and was furiously scribbling notes as she laughed at something Ginny said. Narcissa smiled bemusedly as she tapped her finger on something Hermione had just written, sending the three women into gales of laughter once again.

“Your Miss Granger is quite something,” a smooth voice said at his shoulder. Severus turned just as Lucius handed him a short glass of firewhiskey.
“She really is,” Severus murmured in agreement. “I’m a fortunate man.”

“I won’t disagree. She waltzed right up to the Minister and Narcissa and inserted herself into the conversation, saying something about how Draco told her about our little project and she wanted to help. Typical Gryffindor.” He sipped his drink and considered the petite woman across the room. “Effective, though. Plans are going ahead with Grethen House. With the Minister and a member and wife of the Golden Trio on board, there won’t be any more objections from the Wizengamot.”

“Excellent. I look forward to seeing it,” Severus stated firmly. He could tell by Lucius’ tone that he was frustrated to be indebted to one of the heroes of the Final Battle. Again. Best not to rub it in that his position in the political realm was not once it what was.

“Hmm. So when are you going to make it official with her?” the older wizard asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m asking her to marry me next week,” Severus replied distractedly, checking his pocket watch. A quarter to midnight. He glanced up just in time to see the look of shock on Lucius’ face transform into one of pride.

“Well, it took you long enough.”

Severus bid Lucius good evening just before midnight and placed his empty tumbler on a tray before making his way toward the east ballroom door. He’d seen Hermine slip out a few minutes prior and was pleased that she’d remembered his half-jesting request for a midnight rendezvous. He was nearly to the door when he heard a familiar voice call his name.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” Minerva asked in amused tones.

He groaned inwardly before turning to face her with a smirk. “Would you believe me if I said I needed to find the toilets?” he asked teasingly.

She snorted. “They’re in the opposite direction, my boy. You’re a horrible liar for a former spy, you know.”

“Minerva, you know perfectly well where I’m going and why I’m going there. So if you don’t mind, I’d much rather get there than stand here chatting with you about it. Don’t you have a new husband to entertain?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Molly cornered him a half hour ago. When I left they’d only reached his teenage years in his life story, so I’m sure she’ll have him there another hour or more.”

“Well, you’d best be rescuing him then,” Severus said with a pointed smile. “If you’ll excuse me, Minerva.”

He swept out the door to the sound of her ringing laughter as she called, “I’d better see you both for lunch tomorrow, Severus!”

The hallway was dimly lit and silent but for the echoing of his shoes off the floor tiles. It was the work of a moment to make his way past the archivists offices, empty for the Yule holidays, and
toward the quiet reading room that he’d often frequented when researching a new spell or potion. He slipped inside and shut the door behind him, quickly moving past the rows of tables and chairs and toward the back of the room, where he knew a small sofa and nest of comfortable armchairs sat around a fireplace.

He crept down the carpeted walkway toward the area that he knew contained his love. Severus smiled ferally as he passed the towering bookshelf that he knew sectioned the cozy nook off from the rest of the room, expecting to find Hermione lounging on the soft sofa. Or perhaps pouring them each a drink in anticipation of his arrival.

What he found was his lover crumpled in a heap on the floor and a tall red-haired man directing his wand at her prone figure.

Chapter End Notes

Whoooww that was a long absence. Thank you all for your patience and please accept my apologies.

And then some more apologies.

Life is still nuts. We're still in the process of hiring a new person at work (the wheels of our bureaucracy grind slow and fine), but in the meantime I still have god awful tons of work on my plate.

Plus I attended an academic conference.
Then a gaming conference.
And there was an election. And that was a bloody disaster.

So yeah. I'm back now, writing again. TCA update coming soon, I hope. In the meantime, enjoy this lovely cliffhanger!
Red-Handed

Chapter Summary

Who dunnit? All is revealed! (Gets your whites brighter! Now with 2x the monologuing!)

Chapter Notes

Hey folks! I'm baaaaaack! I posted this on TCA, but I'll be "live writing" this weekend on Chatstep.

If you want to hang out with me while I write the next chapter of The Celebrity Apprentices or Sex and the Castle (I haven't decided which yet) just log on and say hi.

I'll be writing from: 1-4pm CST on Dec 3.
https://chatstep.com/#PersnicketyFics (delete the spaces!)
PW: PersnicketyAO3

Thanks to those who kept me company tonight! You kept my butt in the computer chair!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus flung his magic outward silently and wandlessly, hoping that it would be enough to stop the man before he cast anything else on Hermione. “Drop your wand Weasley!” He was gratified to the non-verbal disarming spell had worked. Weasley’s body flew one way and his wand flew straight into Severus’ hand.

He drew his own wand, running forward to restrain Hermione’s attacker and assess the damage done to her person. He cast a hasty *incarcerous* toward the heap on the sofa and quickly knelt next to Hermione to *reennervate* her. He breathed a sigh of relief when her eyes opened immediately.

“Severus?” she said shakily. “What happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I intend to find out. Can you sit up?” he asked, offering her his hand. At her nod he drew her into a less supine position and placed her gently in one of the armchairs. Her eyes widened as he drew back from her chair, giving her a clear view of her attacker.

“Percy?” she said in a whisper.

Severus whirled, surprised to find the middle Weasley neatly trussed and wedged into the corner of the long sofa on which Severus had imagined trysting with Hermione just minutes before.

“You?” He stared at Percy for a full minute, taking in the wan face, the frightened eyes. The guilty slouch. Baffled, Severus sat heavily on the arm of Hermione’s chair. “Why?”

The younger man sniffed miserably and closed his eyes against the two penetrating stares before him.
“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. I just wanted to fix things.” A tear leaked out of his eyes as he took in a ragged breath. “I’m so sorry.”

Severus’ hand tensed on his wand as a wave of fury crashed through him. He wanted to hex the poncy bastard within an inch of his life. He’d ruined everything. He’d accosted Hermione twice. Accosted him twice. And for what? Why on earth would Percy Weasley, of all people, erase his memory and banish him from Britain?

The elder man stood to make his way toward the wretched red-head before Hermione’s hand stayed his forward progress. “Sit down, Severus,” she said quietly. “Percy, I think you had better explain yourself.”

“It was stupid, looking back on it. I hadn’t really seen mum and dad for three years. I mean, there were...encounters, I guess. I hadn’t talked to Fred or George either. Or Ron. Charlie tried, but I never really replied to his letters. Too busy. Too important, I thought. Then it all just came falling down ‘round my ears, you know? And then I got word of the battle and they were all there and I fought -- well, we all fought -- and suddenly Fred was gone. And Mum was inconsolable. And it was. Well. The family broke. I’d left and they’d gone on, but then I’d come back and it was all gone. Nothing worked anymore.” Percy attempted to wipe his face on his shoulder, but his movements were hampered by the awkward positioning of his restraints.

“Everyone was heartbroken with Fred. George...Merlin, I don’t know how Georgie got through it all. Mum was sobbing all the time. And you and Ron,” he looked at Hermione. “He was gutted that you’d kissed and nothing had come of it. Moaned about you day and night, didn’t know what he’d done wrong.”

Hermione’s hand snuck into Severus’. “It wouldn’t have worked then, Percy. I don’t think it ever would’ve worked, actually, but certainly not then. He was too young, and Severus needed me to help.”

Percy sniffed again, a wet snuffling noise that was about as mismatched to his elegant attire as his presence in the entire situation seemed to be. “I know. I see that now, really. But at the time...well, I think we were all a little crazy. Maybe me especially. I was fired, you know, while they sorted out everything that had happened in the Ministry. They talked about putting me on trial with Thicknesse. Colluding.” He snorted mirthlessly. “Maybe they should have.”

“The point, Mr. Weasley,” Severus said in a strained voice. “More particularly, the point where you explain whey in the blazes you thought it a good idea to take my memories.”

“I didn’t take them. They’re still there. I was trying to fix them that night at the Malfoys’.”

Hermione leaned forward and spoke in a low tone. “Explain why, Percy. I think I know, but I want to hear it.”

“I wanted to fix what I’d helped break. My mother regained one son only to lose another, and I’m still not sure if was a fair trade. I couldn’t bring Fred back. I couldn’t work. I couldn’t do much of anything those first six months while they sorted things out in the capital, so mostly I stayed home and listened to Ron. After awhile I figured I could at least help him, so I planned.
“I knew you were seeing each other. Harry had been talking to Ron about it, preparing him for when you went public. Harry was ‘round our place a lot, then. Still is. First for Gin and Ron, but also for Mum and Dad. I think he felt Fred’s loss as much as any of us.”

“He did,” Hermione replied.

“Yeah, well.” He tossed his head back in an attempt to clear his messy hair from his eyes. “I thought to myself, ‘Hermione loves Ron. He just needs the chance to show her and she’ll fall in line.’ I actually thought that. Fall in line. I’m sorry.” He looked Hermione in the eyes then, still avoiding Severus’ gaze. “By the time I was cleared of wrong-doing, you’d been spotted in the papers. I knew you’d be going to the ball together, so I decided that I’d just send Sna -- the Professor on his way. Easy. I knew the spell. Well, I thought I knew it. It’s a tricker bit of magic than you’d think.”

“Obviously,” Severus growled.


“You have always been ambitious,” she said with a sour upward turn of her lips.

“I cast the spell and sent you off. You left that night. But then Hermione was heartbroken.”

She nodded slowly, transfixed by his tale of woe. “I was.” The hand in Severus’ squeezed tighter.

“You sat around Grimmauld for days. When you weren’t there, you were at our place. Mum was always trying to feed you up. You’d lost so much weight after he left and I saw that I’d just made everything worse than it was before.”

“I remember,” Hermione murmured.

“I thought I’d just gotten the Professor to leave for a bit. I used the wrong spell -- I know that now. It was too much for what I was trying to accomplish. Instead of sending you away for a few weeks so Ron could make his move, you disappeared without a trace. And Hermione was so lost,” he said, looking at the woman in front of him and beginning to weep in earnest. “So I did it again. I found you out in the garden. You were asleep under the apple tree and there were still tears on your face so I just...changed your motivations. And it took awhile, but you recovered and then eventually you let Ron in. I thought it would all be fixed then.”

“And I was what?” asked Severus quietly. “Collateral damage?”

“Yes.” Percy replied weakly. “It wasn’t fair. You’d received the accolades. You’d gotten the girl. You’d lost nothing and I had nothing to show for my years of hard work except a rubbish reputation and a father who wouldn’t look me in the eye.”

Hermione stood now, bristling. “Stop there. You have no idea what Severus lost. What he suffered and sacrificed for us. For all your studying, for all of your lofty intelligence and high position in the Ministry, Percy, you are the stupidest man I have ever met. Who gave you the right to play fucking matchmaker with my life? To run Severus off to the continent? Who died and made you a bloody God?”

“I know!” the man sobbed from his corner of the sofa, curling up into a tighter ball. “I know,” he whispered again. “I’m not trying to justify what I did. It was wrong. Criminal. And it was wretchedly stupid. I watched as you and Ron tried to make it work. I knew he wasn’t faithful. And I knew I should have told you, but I just couldn’t admit to what I’d done. I’m a bloody coward when it comes down to it,” he said, staring mournfully at his knees.
“And so it took you a few teary introspective monologues to admit to your bloody bad decisions, Mr. Weasley. Well, bully for you. How many people did you hurt? And when do I get the SEVEN fucking years of my life back?” Severus snarled, stepping toward the incapacitated man. “And what in the ever living fuck did you think you were doing attacking Hermione tonight? AGAIN?”

“No attacking. I’d never hurt Hermione,” he said, startled. “I just needed her to be unconscious so I could remove the remnants of the obliviate from her subconscious. I -- I think it’s mostly worn off, seeing as she tossed Ron and is back with you. But I had to be sure.”

“You mean you had to be sure you weren’t caught,” he replied scathingly. “You really are the worst sort of coward, aren’t you.”

Hermione squeezed his hand and looked at him beseechingly. “Severus, this isn’t helping,” she said lowly before turning back to Percy. “Did you finish what you came to do tonight?”

“No,” he said miserably.

“Then I’d like you to do so. And I’d like you to ensure you’ve done so to Severus as well.” She flipped her wand around and began to hand it to Percy.

“Hermione, don’t --” Severus started.

“It’s alright, Severus. I’m behind you,” a new voice said from the bookshelf to Snape’s right. Of course, Severus thought to himself. Harry fucking Potter to the rescue. “I believe I have a vested interest in seeing that you don’t kill my brother-in-law if he chooses to be a fool with Hermione’s wand.” Potter’s eyes didn’t stray from Percy’s wand hand. “Well, more of a fool than he’s already chosen to be to date.”

Percy winced at the look on Harry’s face, though whether it was from disappointment that yet another person knew of his perfidy or because he’d disappointed a family member and friend, Severus couldn’t tell.

“Harry! How did you know where to find us?” Hermione asked with relief in her voice.

Potter gave a mirthless smile. “I never broke the trace on Snape’s wand.” He glanced briefly at Severus before turning his attention back to Percy. “Sorry Severus.”

“It would be churlish of me to complain at this point, Harry,” he said grudgingly. “Get on with it Mr. Weasley. I would like to have both our minds back in one piece before I decide what to do about you.”

With a nod and a deep breath, Percy wiped the tears from his cheeks and pointed his wand at Hermione. He twisted the wand counter clockwise, then in a sweeping curve to the left intoning Reverse Peccatum Meum. Severus watched in fascination as Hermione winced, her right eye twitching closed.

“Are you alright?” he asked worriedly.

Hermione turned her head and smiled at him. “I’m fine. It’s fine, Severus. Just a twinge. Like a clothesline being snapped. Gone now.”

“Professor, if you don’t mind,” Percy said, gesturing awkwardly toward Hermione’s place on the sofa. “It would likely be best if I used my own wand for yours. It was a bit more of an event when I cursed you.” Percy officiously handed Hermione’s wand back to her, handle first.
Hermione looked as though she was about to thank Percy, but then thought better of it and retreated to Harry’s side before training her own wand on her almost-brother-in-law.

Severus sat warily in front of Percy before extending the man’s wand toward him and, as an afterthought, releasing his remaining bindings.

Percy saw the hesitation and gave him a sad half smile. “I’m not going to harm you, Professor. My word as a wizard.”

“You’ll pardon me if I don’t particularly feel that your word is worth more than the air it takes to say the words, Weasley. Get on with it then,” Severus said with a jerk of his head.

Percy pointed his wand between Severus’ brows and repeated the incantation for reversal. Severus felt as though a vice was slowly loosening over his head. A tension that he hadn’t even realized was there began to dissipate with a rapidity that left him reeling. Pain exploded behind his eyelids as memories and sensations flooded his consciousness, cramming their way into the already crowded corners of his mind. He groaned as his head fell forward and felt, rather than heard, Hermione rush forward and grab his hand before the world went black.

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He resurfaced to people shouting. Loudly. It did nothing for the garden gnomes digging around in his grey matter.

“What the *fuck* did you do Percy? You’ve bloody killed him?”

“I haven’t! I didn’t! Look look, he’s alive. And awake. Please don’t hex me,” Percy whimpered, though it was unclear whether he was speaking to Harry, Hermione, or Severus. Perhaps it was a more general plea.

“Severus, are you alright?” Hermione said, her hands patting ineffectually at his face, his chest, his hips.

“Stop shouting and beating me, witch!” Severus barked, sitting up. “Did anyone get the number of that bus?” he quipped weakly, resting his forehead in his hands.

Hermione stared a half second before bursting into laughing tears. To his credit, Harry’s laughter burbled along a split second later. “Welcome back to the land of the living, Severus,” the boy-who-improved-with-age choked out.

There was a moment of stillness between the three of them broken only by Hermione’s quiet tears, muffled by his (now quite damp) shoulder.

It was Percy who finally broke the silence. He looked at his brother-in-law and asked in a small voice, “Now what happens, Harry?”

Harry sighed. “Now Severus and Hermione make a decision as to whether or not they press charges. Either way, based off what I’ve heard tonight I’ll need to take you into the MLE for processing and to process your confession. I assume you’ll be confessing.”

“Not much point in doing anything else, is there?”
‘Fraid not, Perce,” Harry responded sadly. “You broke a whole shitload of laws and illegally adjusted the memories of two war heroes. That’s kind of a big deal.”

Severus watched as Percy seemed to shrink in on himself. “Yeah,” the man said, sounding resigned. They sat together in silence for a moment, each examining their own feelings. For his part, Severus felt somehow remorseful for the way the situation had unfolded. He’d expected relief when he finally caught his attacker; now he felt as though he’d received yet another dose of bitter disillusionment.

The room was suddenly illuminated by the silver-blue glow of a hopping, gamboling jack russell patronus. “Percy! For Merlin’s sake, where are you? Penelope’s water broke! We’ve gone to St. Mungo’s. Meet us there you great berk!” As quickly as it had come, the glow faded as the terrier disappeared.

Percy was on his feet in an instant. “Penelope!”

Severus merely rolled his eyes. “Sit down, Mr. Weasley. Your child’s birth is hardly imminent. I understand these things take time.”

“Professor, please,” the red-head shouted. “If I’m going to spend the next ten years in Azkaban, I’d like to at least be at my child’s birth.” The man’s eyes were leaking again, making him look not a little like a wet rodent.

“Harry?” Severus asked. “Do you have the authorization to put a trace on Mr. Weasley’s person as well as his wand?

“I don’t,” Harry stated firmly. Severus turned back to Percy. “Then I’m afraid you’ll just have to stay put for the next -- “

“Hold on, Severus. I said I don’t have the authority. I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. Come on Perce, let’s have your wand, yeah?”

Sending a longing glance at the door, Percy did as he was asked, submitting first his wand, then himself to Harry’s spell-casting.

“I’d like to go to my wife now, if I may,” Percy said formally, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Severus looked at Hermione, who nodded in agreement. “Go. We will meet with you tomorrow to discuss this further.”

Percy nodded once and then raced for the door. The man’s dress shoes hit the marble tiles of the hallway and a soft thud sounded as he slammed into a wall, then the footsteps faded away.

“That was really good of you, Severus,” Harry said.

“I know. Must be the head-injury. Are you alright, love?” he asked turning back to Hermione.

She blinked and nodded. “Right as rain. Just...done. I’m done for tonight. Can we go home?”

“Home never sounded better.” Severus got to his feet, feeling about three hundred and five rather than forty-five.

“That was really good of you, Severus,” Harry said.

“I know. Must be the head-injury. Are you alright, love?” he asked turning back to Hermione.

She blinked and nodded. “Right as rain. Just...done. I’m done for tonight. Can we go home?”

“Home never sounded better.” Severus got to his feet, feeling about three hundred and five rather than forty-five.

“Thank you for your help, Harry,” Hermione said, enfolding her best friend in a tight hug.

“You never have to thank me for doing my job, or for helping you and Severus. I figure I still owe you another nine-hundred or so favors before we’re caught up. How do you want to proceed with
Percy?"

“I’m playing with an idea in my head. Call it the Christmas spirit. Can you delay taking him into the Ministry for a day?”

Harry shrugged. “With the ball and Pen in labor, there’s plenty of leeway for the next couple of days. Why?”

“I have an idea, but I’d like to discuss it with Severus first,” she said, pressing a kiss to her lover’s cheek.

“That’s fine. I don’t think Percy is going anywhere in the meantime.”

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They’d made their excuses to their friends before tracking down Shacklebolt to thank him for their invitation to the ball. *Even in times of crisis, the niceties must be observed* Severus snarked inwardly.

The Minister cast a lewd glance at Hermione’s rumpled dress and Severus’ flyaway hair before wishing them both a happy Christmas and sending them on their way. The ball appeared to be winding down now that the Weasley contingent had absconded to St. Mungo’s. Even the Minister was looking at the door longingly, now that his trusty secretary was not there to remind him to schmooze a cabinet member or connect with the wife of this or that capitalist.

Severus and Hermione quickly made their way back to the castle through the Ministry floo, landing rather unceremoniously on the hearth of their shared apartments with nary a speck of ash on between them.

“How’s your head?” Hermione asked after she’d righted herself.

Severus sighed and toed off his shoes as he made his way toward the wardrobe. “It feels as though Hagrid’s beloved skrewts have been frolicking in it. Otherwise, I’m fine. It’ll be better once I can get out of these damned dress robes.”

Hermione give him a tiny smile before moving her hands toward his throat. “Let me help with that.” With practiced ease, she unclasped his robes from his shoulders, then began to slip his buttons from their moorings. “You looked so handsome tonight. I think I had to have been the envy of every woman in the room.”

Severus snorted. “Strike that and reverse it, maybe. You were the loveliest witch in the room, and all I could think is that I could wait to get home and crawl into bed with you.”

“Letch,” she smirked.

“Hardly. I didn’t say ‘fuck you through a wall,’ though that might sound appealing tomorrow. I literally meant crawling between those cold sheets, under the heavy blanket, laying my head on the pillow and having my witch -- this gorgeous, fiercely intelligent, mad-haired woman who is daft enough to live with me -- curl up next to me so we can sleep together.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her head again, gathering her tight to his chest. “You’re the best part of my day, Hermione.”
He looked down in shock when she let out a muffled wail. “Oh, now you’ve done it!” she shrieked, wailing again.

“Love?”

“Gods, you insufferable man. We finally find out who fucking hexed you tonight. We reverse the bloody memory curse SHIT that was done to us. And what do you do when we get home? You tell me you love me in the sweetest, most wonderfully romantic way possible. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?” she asked, swatting at his arm as she struggled to loosen his embrace.

Severus merely tightened his hold on her and slid one hand into her (now horribly deconstructed) hair. “I thought all women wanted romance.”

“We do! Or, I do at least. But I was prepared to be the calm one while you threw things around the room. Circe help me, Severus, I was so angry tonight. I can’t fucking believe the presumption of Percy Fuckwad Weasley.”

“I believe his middle name is Ignatius, not Fuckwad, dearest,” Severus said, chortling.

“Shut it.” But it was said lovingly.

They stood there, half-undressed and swaying in each other’s arms for a long moment before he spoke again. “So what was your grand idea about Percy?”

“I don’t think we should involve the authorities,” Hermione said decisively.

The swaying stopped and Severus held her at arm’s length to check if she was serious. “What?”

Hermione stepped out of his arms and touched his face. “Hear me out. I don’t think that Percy should go unpunished by any means. He hurt, attacked, and stole from us both. He stole time, Severus. We may be largely unscathed now, but I’ll never have those seven years back. Neither will you. Neither, really, will Ronald. Because all of this mess has hurt him in the end as well.”

“I’m listening,” Severus said cautiously.

“It’s clear that Percy has been abusing his position.”

“How so?” Severus asked.

“He has the ear of the Minister. He controls his schedule and who he meets. He has the ear of the Wizengamot. He is the primary mouthpiece from Kings to the Wizengamot and vice versa. Don’t you think the timing of the investigation suspension was just a trifle suspicious?”

Severus nodded. “Yes. I’m attacked at a ball and just because I wasn’t attacked at the next ball, the investigation is declared a cold case. Odd, that.”

“Right. And of course you weren’t attacked at the Hogwarts Yule Ball. Percy was in the room when we planned to put that damned trace on your wand.” She plopped down on the edge of the bed to unbuckle the strap of one slender heel.

“Go on,” he said, turning away to finish disrobing.

“If you think about it,” she said, slipping out of her dress, “Percy was present for almost all of the meetings about your condition. He knew exactly where the investigation was going, how to avoid detection, and how to manipulate the politics so that your case was never a priority.”
Severus slipped on a pair of pyjama pants and removed the tie from your hair. “You’re likely right. Not that we can prove that without the help of the Ministry.”

“Which is exactly why I don’t think we should involve the Ministry.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t follow.”

“Severus, think about it. What would happen if Percy were arrested? He’d be tried, convicted, and sent to Azkaban.”

“Yes. And that would be both just and correct, Hermione.”

“But that wouldn’t make it *right*, Severus. He wouldn’t see his son grow up. Aren’t there enough fatherless and motherless children after the war?”

Severus scrubbed his hand over his face. “Don’t play that card, please.”

“I think I need to. And you know it would kill Molly and Arthur to lose another son. I can’t be a part of doing that to them, Severus. They’re my family too.”

With a long sigh, Severus bowed his head. “Alright. Then what do you suggest? You’re the one who always came up with creative punishments?”

“I’ve had a few ideas…”

Chapter End Notes

Also, props to Coboss and allthingszuko for guessing who dunnit last week. Well done, both of you! (Also, thank you for verifying that I left enough breadcrumbs without making it super obvious.) You guys get bragging rights and 10 Persnickety points. Points may be redeemed at your local school of witchcraft and wizardry for one freshly sharpened quill OR a Butterbeer. Just one. To split between the two of you. We’re on a budget here.
Severus felt he was justified in hating Percy Weasley, and not for one reason alone. Yes, the boy had stolen his memories. He’d essentially banished him from the country. He’d attacked both Severus and Hermione on multiple occasions, rendering each more receptive to that bastardized version of an obliviate spell. He’d kept them apart for nearly seven years.

At this moment, however, Severus hated Percy for the onslaught of memories that he’d experienced in the past fourteen hours. An onslaught that made him want to liquify his grey matter and let it dribble out his ears. It had taken two industrial-strength headache potions just to get him out of bed and he was more than a bit worried that his temper might implode when faced with Percy himself.

Which he would be. In less than an hour.

“Severus, did you hear a word I just said?” Hermione asked from over his shoulder.

He looked up and caught her eye in the mirror, cold water still dripping from his face from his ill-advised attempt to freeze the headache away. Now he was wet and his head hurt.

“No. I wasn’t,” he said, shaking his wet hair out of his eyes. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Head still hurt?” she asked softly.

He closed his eyes and gave a slight nod.

“Mine too,” she breathed. “And he was only releasing a weakened compulsion spell in my case. I can’t imagine what your head feels like.”

“Like someone is attempting to dig a post hole through my skull with a tea spoon.”

“Ouch,” Hermione responded with a slight smile. “I’m sorry, love.” She pecked a little kiss on his cheek, brushing some of his wet hair back and off his face.

He smiled a little, tilting her head into her hand and enjoying the feeling of her fingers scraping through the wet locks of hair as she combed them back. “What were you saying earlier?”

“I was just asking if you think we should contact Kingsley before talk to Harry. You know, just in case.”

Severus snorted, shaking his head. “With you and the Boy Wonder --’’

“Harry,” Hermione reprimanded him.

“Fine, Harry, I doubt Kingsley will refuse you anything. And this gives him some deniability with
the Wizengamot...though why we’re working so hard to keep that little fuck out of Azkaban I do not know,” he finished.

“Because, in this case, it’s the right thing to do.”

With a long sigh, Severus stood up from his bent position at the bathroom counter. “You realize that the right thing is not a terribly persuasive argument anymore. I’ve spent the vast majority doing the right thing, and rarely have I not suffered for such choices.”

Hermione merely clucked and finished fussing with his hair. “Albus Dumbledore gave you a second chance after you’d made a series of errors in judgment. Pay it forward, Severus. Now, come along. Harry will be here soon and we need to fill him in before Percy gets here.”

Severus barely refrained from rolling his eyes, and only because he was positive such an action would result in pain. “Of course, dear. Whatever you say, dear,” he groused as he followed her down to the sitting room.

“Damn, Hermione. I thought your S.P.E.W. days were over.”

“Hah hah, very funny Harry. I’m serious. He’s just had a child...I don’t think -- wait, Penelope did have the baby, right?” Hermione asked.

“Yes. A girl. They’ve named her Thalia.”

“Hm. Pretty. Anyway, I don’t think either Severus or I want to be responsible for taking Percy away from Penelope or Thalia, especially so soon after her birth.”

“I wouldn’t feel responsible,” Severus muttered.

Hermione shot him a dark look. “What?”

Severus sighed. “I wouldn’t feel responsible. Percy earned his fate and, thus far, has done little to redeem himself. I know you’ll remind me, once again, that Albus gave me a second chance, but I came to him ready to change my ways. I at least have that claim to my name. Percy was caught because he was trying to cover his tracks by attacking us both. Again.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “We talked about -- “

“Yes, I know. And I agreed to give him a second chance. I’ll stand by that. But I’d like it made clear that if Potter and Kingsley don’t back us up on this, I will feel no remorse for Percy’s situation. He’s earned whatever punishment he receives.” Severus sat back and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Hermione,” Harry began hastily, seeing that his friend was very close to shouting at her lover, “Severus has a point. Percy’s remorse is almost entirely self-pity. I think he recognizes that he did something wrong, but he’s more worried about saving his own skin than actually correcting his mistakes.” The younger man swallowed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “That said, I know what it’s like to grow up without parents and, worse, to learn about a parent’s misdeeds in their absence. I think the deal you’re willing to offer Percy is generous, yes, but that it will do more good in the end than sending him to Azkaban would. I will say this, though: I won’t agree unless Kingsley
is brought into the fold. No leaving him to make assumptions about Percy’s involvement in your...situation. All or nothing.”

Hermione shot a look at Severus, then back at Harry. She narrowed her eyes and nodded her head. “Severus, if you agree?”

“That’s fine. I would actually prefer that Kingsley know the truth.”

Harry exhaled and stood. “If that’s settled, then, I’ll place the call to the Minister.”

“Percy,” Harry greeted his brother-in-law as he came through the floo of Hermione and Severus’ quarters. “Thank you for coming this morning.” Severus cast a careful eye over the man in front of him and noted that he looked equal parts sick and elated...and that he definitely hadn’t slept in the past 48 hours. The hollow-eyed, too-tired-to-be-terrified look on the middle Weasley’s face was all too familiar to Severus’ mind.

“You didn’t give me much choice,” the red-headed man muttered.

“Sit, please.” Hermione said. “There’s tea and coffee if you want it. We can at least discuss this like civilized people.”

“Thank you,” he replied stiffly, casting a wary eye toward Severus. He sipped his tea in the awkward silence.

“How’s Penelope?” Hermione finally said without catching Percy’s eye.

“She’s doing very well. Thalia too. It was a mercifully short labor.”

“I’m glad,” Hermione responded. “I’m sure you’re looking forward to getting home to her.”

Percy simply nodded.

“I’ll get to the point, then. Severus and I have have concocted a plan -- “

“You, dear. It’s your plan. I merely agreed to it,” Severus interjected, though his statement was without malice.

“Right. I have a plan and Severus and Harry have agreed to help me see it through. This is your option rather than either of us pressing charges.”

Percy said nothing. He sat, waiting for the hammer to fall.

“We expect you to resign your post as the Minister’s secretary,” Hermione began. “We both feel that you’ve abused what is, essentially, a position of great power in order to cover your own tail. It was cowardly and not particularly worth of the House of Gryffindor.”

“Nor of the Weasley name,” Severus stated firmly, sipping his own tea.

Percy’s eyes widened. “But...I have my family to support. Penelope is only going back for half days at the end of her leave, and that’s months off!” He looked both stricken and panicked.
“Cease your caterwauling, Mr. Weasley. You will remain gainfully employed at the same salary level as before.”

“I...see.” He sat back, returning to his wary regard of his friend-turned-victim and her lover.

“Despite the fact that you utterly fucked us over -- and you really did, Perce. You kept Severus and me apart for years. Years that we had plans for.” She shot a glance at Severus, a sad affection in her eyes. “You attacked us both. You did something to me that I’m **fairly** sure was a compulsion charm,” Percy nodded resignedly at that, “and effectively banished a war hero from the very country he fought to save. What you did was reprehensible on so many levels.”

“I know,” the man responded softly.

“I’m so bloody angry with you, Percy. Why would you ever think it was your place to decide my love life? To judge Severus? Just who the **hell** do you think you are?” she shrieked, thoroughly losing her temper.

Severus took the opportunity to clear his throat. “What Hermione was attempting to say, Mr. Weasley, is though we would be well within our rights to press charges, ensure there was an embarrassing trial, and see your sorry arse tossed in Azkaban, we both feel it would be a tragedy to do so.” He glanced at Hermione, who was still rather red in the face. “First, we love and respect your family. Well, most of them,” he said, rolling his eyes at the thought of respecting the philandering Ronald Weasley. “You have a daughter to protect and support as well as a wife who, beyond all reason, loves you and desires your presence. But most importantly, it would be a waste of a first rate brain. And frankly, we have more use for your brain than we do your incarceration.”

“I’m sorry...what?” Percy sputtered.

“We offering -- well, not offering really. We’re telling you that you are the newest researcher at the Ameliorative and Reconstructive Mediation And Debilitating Aftereffects Research Group.”


“The name needs work, but I only had an hour this morning to come up with it.” Hermione snapped. “Regardless, neither of us recognized the reversal charm you used yesterday night. I assume you created it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and thought. “Uh, yeah, I suppose I did. Honestly, I’d never tried it, but I’ve been doing a some reading -- a lot of reading, really -- about magic and intent. Call the spell a magical mea culpa, if you will.”

“Interesting,” Severus said, gazing into his teacup. “Yes, that could work.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually this slow on the uptake. **What** could work?”

“Mr. Weasley, you will be joining our newly formed team of researchers, which currently consists of Hermione and me as part-time consultants, to help find a cure for the incurably or partially obliviated. Because, whether I like it or not, your spell is the only one that we know of that has managed to reverse an **obliviate granum** with no detrimental effects on the subject.”

Percy leaned forward eagerly. “It worked then? Your memories have begun to come back?”

Severus nodded carefully, his head still pounding. “It began to work the **first** time you attacked me, actually. Now the memories are simply there, as though they never left.” He looked toward Hermione and slipped a hand in hers. “The good and the bad,” he said with a smirk.
“Oh, thank Merlin,” Percy breathed, slouching in his chair. “And the compulsion. That’s gone too?”

“Well, I rather wondered why I put up with brother before our public breakup, Percy, but now I don’t even know what I saw in him to begin with. He’s a far cry from the boy I had a crush on in school, these days.”

“I know,” Percy said with a humorless laugh. “He’s turned into a right sod. All that fame after the final battle went straight to his head.”

“I’d say the war messed with a number of people’s heads, Mr. Weasley,” Severus stated firmly.

“Right,” Harry interjected. “So you’ve heard some of the initial terms of the agreement that Hermione and Severus are offering. There’s more, though.”

Percy turned to look at his brother-in-law. “You’ve told Kingsley, haven’t you,” he said with resignation.

“Yes. Kingsley is aware of your involvement in this mess. I’m afraid you don’t have much choice but to take the job that you’ve been offered. Your position as the right hand of the Minister for Magic is no longer a path that is open to you. Really, he was hesitant to not force the issue and put you on trial this morning. You have Hermione to thank for talking Kings down.

So you’ll resign your position. You’ll take on the research position. The trace will remain on your wand and you’re not to leave the country without prior approval from the Minister himself, and even then only as a part of your new job’s duties. And you are on an unofficial parole for the next five years. As Kingsley stated, ‘One step out of line and he’s on trial for the entire mess.’ Oh, and if any patents come out of your research for -- um, ARMADA -- your proceeds will be donated to the Orphan’s Defense Fund in your daughter’s name.” He turned to Hermione at this point. “Did I miss anything, Hermione?”

“Leadership roles,” she said.

“Right. You’re not allowed to take on any leadership roles within the Ministry for a decade. No under secretary, secretary, or department head positions in that time.”

Percy seemed to shrink in on himself. “In other words, my career is dead in the water,” he said bitterly.

Severus tilted his head and regarded the man who’d very nearly ruined his life. “Would you rather Azkaban, Mr. Weasley? A public trial? Ruination for both you and your family?” He paused for dramatic effect, not even noticing that his voice had slipped into the familiar menacing tones of his past teaching career. “Or would you rather put aside your selfishness and cowardice and turn your attentions toward something that might just be worthwhile. That might bring solace to those other than yourself? You’re being given a second chance, Mr. Weasley. Try a little gratitude on for size.”

“‘Well, that went better than expected,’” Hermione said as Percy and Harry flood away to clear out the former’s desk. Kinglsey had asked to see Percy after his interview with Severus and Hermione. Severus rather wished he could be a fly on the wall in that meeting. Kingsley might present as
affable, but he was a holy terror when crossed.

“Hmm.” Severus pinched at the bridge of his nose in an attempt to alleviate some of the pressure there then glanced up when he felt Hermione’s hands began to stroke through his hair and massage his scalp. He let out a long sigh of relief. “Oh, that feels wonderful. Please don’t stop.”

“If you like,” Hermione responded. “So we didn’t really talk much this morning...all your memories have returned?”

“So it would seem. There are fuzzy areas, but they feel like normal memories. When parts of your recollections just go out of focus, if you follow.”

“I do. No one remembers everything with perfect clarity.”

“Exactly,” he said. “It’s a bit strange. Before, I didn’t even notice that there was anything missing. Now it’s as if I have extra packing in my head, all looking for room. The pressure is immense.”

She snorted. “I assumed -- hence the headache.” She paused, moving her hands to the base of his skull to knead at the muscles there. She massaged for awhile before speaking again. “Are we doing the right thing, Severus?”

“What happened to the harridan who was scolding me about Albus Dumbledore and second chances this morning?”

“Even a harridan has second thoughts,” she sighed. “I’m just -- He was so -- He just didn’t get it. How much of a favor we were doing him by not pressing charges. By seeking Kingsley out and convincing him that now was a good time to form a foundation around the arithmantic work I’ve been doing for the past three years. And all Percy could think was that he wouldn’t be able to follow the career path that he plotted for himself when he was six. That he’d never be Minister for Magic.” She sounded sad as she finished.

“It’s true that Mr. Weasley did seem unable to grasp the enormity of his luck in this situation. I suspect that Mr. Pot -- Harry will attempt to set him to rights. However, arrogance isn’t necessarily a re-trainable attribute.” He opened his eyes and turned his head to look up at his love. “Are you sure you’ll be alright working with him on this project?”

“I’ll have to be, I suppose,” she shrugged.

Decided, Severus stood. “Come on, love. We’ve been trapped in the castle entirely too long today. What do you say to a stroll around Pomona’s gardens?”

She laughed. “Severus, it’s freezing outside!”

“That’s what warming charms are for. Go on and bundle up. The exercise will do us both good.”

A few minutes later, a thoroughly cloaked Hermione and Severus emerged through the door of their tower to find Minerva bearing down on them.

“So!” the Scottish witch said. “Are the two of you going to explain where you disappeared to last night, why it’s three in the afternoon and you just now showing your faces, and why the hell Harry Potter and Percy Weasley flooed into your rooms two hours ago?”

Severus shot a look at Hermione. “Perhaps our walk should be somewhat delayed, pet?”
Bah. Short chapter is short. Mostly because it's ALL DIALOGUE.

In other news, Mr. Snick gave me my Christmas present early (so that we wouldn't haul it 1000 miles to my parents' place and back again). It's a new keyboard! It's a lovely mechanical keyboard suited for both writing and gaming. And it makes a lovely clackity clack as I type.

However, my old keyboard was ergonomic and this one isn't. It'll take some getting used to. I'm hoping there are no egregious errors in this chapter, but if they are please call me on them!
A Particular Favorite

Chapter Summary

Christmas Day in the Granger-Snape household.

“You, sit,” the Headmistress said, directing Hermione toward a chair. Then she thrust her finger toward Severus. “You, talk. What, exactly, were Percy Weasley and Harry Potter doing in the Castle? And it better have something to do with why you disappeared from the ball last night.”

Severus raised a sardonic eyebrow and shot a glance toward a shrugging Hermione. He’d known that the wards would have notified Minerva of the unscheduled visitors’ presence, but he had no idea she’d be quiet this curious. “It would seem that you’ve already worked that out for yourself, Min,” he said, sinking into the chair next to Hermione’s.

“Did Percy convince Kingsley to reopen the investigation into your attack?” she pressed, her voice sounding hopeful.

Severus sighed. So much for adding two and two, I suppose. “No, Min,” he replied softly. “The investigation will remain closed because my attacker -- and, for that matter, Hermione’s attacker -- confessed last night. After attacking Hermione. Again.”

“In an attempt to repair the compulsion spell that drove me toward Ronald,” Hermione chimed in.

Minerva sat in her desk chair with a thump. “Percy.”

Hermione and Severus nodded.

“I assume he’d left because of his wife -- “

“He did. It was a girl. They’ve named her Thalia,” Hermione responded. “Harry placed a trace on Percy’s wand -- illegally, so please don’t mention it to Kingsley just yet -- so that he could attend the birth. Then we met with them both this morning. Kingsley knows now and Percy will be leaving the Minister’s staff to work with us researching the reversal and repair of memory charms.”

Minerva sat up at this. “Don’t tell me you’re leaving Hogwarts!” she exclaimed.

“Calm yourself, Min,” Severus said. “Neither of us has any intention of leaving. Hermione’s Arithmantic consultancy will be redirected into the research group. I will become a Potions consultant for the purpose. Others will be hired and our work will take place outside of our duties to Hogwarts.”

Hermione reached forward and placed her hand over her friend and mentor’s. “I wouldn’t do that to you, Minerva. If I leave, I will give you ample notice, help you find my replacement, and stay to help train them. I won’t leave you in a lurch. You have my promise on that.”

The Headmistress flipped her hand over to give Hermione’s a soft squeeze, silently nodding her thanks. “I’ll have to floo Molly and congratulate on her new grandchild. This is the fifth?”

“Sixth,” Hermione corrected. “And hardly the last. Ginny is due any day, Ronald’s wife is due soon,
and I have a sneaking suspicion that Fleur is pregnant with her third.” She slanted a glance toward Severus. “She was avoiding champagne last night.”

Severus snorted. The Weasleys were nothing if not prolific. It would seem that he would have a new passel of Weasleys to teach in a few years time.

Minerva waved a hand as if to clear the air. “That’s of no matter at the moment. Tell me about Percy. And your memories. Did he reverse the spell?” she asked Severus.

“He did. The memories return if I attempt to recall them. I suspect that several extended meditation sessions will be necessary to clear the cobwebs, as it were,” he intoned. “As for Mr. Weasley, Hermione has convinced me that seeking retribution through legal channels would serve as nothing more than revenge. A highly public revenge, at that. The method Percival used to restore my memories was...unusual. It seems a better idea to use his skills and combine them with our own to help others.” He glanced at his lover as she took his hand. “Namely, such research may help to completely restore the Grangers’ memories.”

Hermione smiled at him before returning her attention to Minerva. “And Lockhart’s. If we’re lucky, the Longbottoms’ too, assuming we can sort past the noise from the cruciatus.”

“Goodness. That is ambitious. But how will you manage it? You’re already dealing with full course loads, your animagus class, the upcoming survival exercise, the dueling club --”

“The dueling club?” they responded in tandem.

“Oh, yes. Didn’t Filius mention that there will be another demonstration this spring? Several war alumni will be traveling to the castle to participate, including Misters Potter and Weasley. Ronald, I mean,” she said. “Filius thought it would tie in well with the upcoming survival exercise.”

Severus considered this. “It would, actually. I’ll speak to Filius about it further after the holiday break.” He glanced at the carriage clock on the table behind Minerva and rose. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Min, it’s Christmas Eve. Hermione and I were going to stretch our legs before celebrating.”

Minerva smiled at her old friend as he offered his hand to Hermione. “Go on with you then. Have a Happy Christmas, both of you.”

They’d retired early after Severus had spent the majority of the afternoon meditating in an attempt to force his memories to resurface. It was a frustrating process, remembering what he didn’t know was in his head. He found the most effective technique was to build on one of the pensieve memories that Hermione had shown him; the ‘restored’ memories added layers and nuance that hadn’t been there before and allowed him to build out either end of the recollection. However, the technique was limiting. For all that Hermione had been a near-constant presence in his life before Percival had hexed him, she was not there for every moment of every day.

Perhaps most frustrating was his partial success in recalling his own thoughts and emotions in association with each event. Sometimes he succeeded -- he grinned to himself when recalling how utterly besotted he’d been when he and Hermione had first become intimate -- but often times the emotion hovered, just out of reach.
It was hard not to want the return of all his memories, all his feelings at once. He could only hope that time would help to heal the gaping mental wound that the middle-Weasley had left in his consciousness.

He awoke early on Christmas morning when Hermione warm, round bottom pressed against his erection in the most enticing fashion. He moved his hips slightly in response and was rewarded with a purring sigh from his bedmate.

“G’morning,” she mumbled into the pillow.

“Good morning, love,” he said in her ear, please at the little shiver his voice elicited. Languidly, he ran a hand over her hip and the slight roundness of her stomach before skimming up, over her ribs, and toward her breast. “Happy Christmas, Hermione,” he said with a smile in his voice as he gently tweaked a nipple.

She wriggled her bum against his cock as her body began to respond to his increasingly enticing ministrations. “Father Christmas never left this in my stocking before,” she said with a little chuckle. “Mmm, I should hope not.” He pressed his lips to her neck and slid his hand back down her body and toward her core, which was already wet and waiting for him. “And have you been a good girl this year, Hermione?”

“Yeeeeess,” she breathed, parting her legs and rolling onto her back to allow his fingers better access. “Oh, so very good.”

“You’re on my list, Miss Granger.”

“Which one?” she moaned.

Severus shot her a wicked grin as his face slid beneath the covers. “All of them.”

Much, much later that morning, they turned their attentions toward the pile of gifts at the foot of the bed. Severus was surprised to see that the pile was fairly sizeable. “Your friends have been generous this year,” he commented.

“I suspect many of those are for you, love,” Hermione responded with a smirk. “You’re Britain’s Dark Hero Returned. I’m sure people are showing their love now you’re back.”

“Hm.” He swung his legs out of the bed and pulled on his sleep pants before padding toward the gifts and distributing them. Hermione had been right -- a number of them were for him.

When they each had their pile next to them on the bed, they took turns opening and commenting on their gifts. Harry had sent both of them beautiful journals of leather-bound fine parchment for use in their research endeavors. Severus received a bottle of Tullibardine Sherry Cask from Minerva and beautifully wrought arm sheath for his wand from Filius. Slughorn had sent a box of crystallized ginger, and Sybill, bless her, had sent him a pair of wooly socks with crystal balls knitted into them. The Longbottoms had sent a planter with bulbs under stasis with instructions to remove the spell and watch them bloom. He vowed to do so after breakfast and coffee. Molly Weasley had even sent a bumper box of fudge and mince pies -- a personal favorite.
Hermione received little gifts from a number of her friends, including a planter identical to his. “We should put them on either side of the balcony in the summer,” she commented. “I think these might be iris bulbs.” Molly had sent her the annual Weasley sweater in a beautiful shade of teal. Severus was surprised when Hermione opened a package from her former fiancé and a slip of parchment fell out. The box contained what appeared to be a hand-held foe glass. The note, however, was somewhat revelatory. Hermione read it with a little frown on her face before handing it to Severus.

*P & P came to stay for Christmas with baby T. Caught Per. trying to remove a compuls. spl. from me. Tied him down and made him tell all. We need to talk. Will floo at two. Pls. answer.*

Severus furrowed his brow and stared at the short missive. “Mr. Weasley is a succinct as always. I do believe his writing has degenerated still further since his days at Hogwarts. If that was possible.”

“What do you think I should do?” Hermione asked, biting her lower lip.

Severus shrugged. “That’s entirely up to you.”

She took the strip of paper back from him and stared at it another moment. “I’ll answer the floo. I want to hear about things from his end. Will you stay with me?”

“Of course. I’d be rather interested to hear the tale myself. If I recall, your former fiancé throws a mean hex and has a short fuse. I rather suspect Percival did not come out on the better end of that encounter.”

“Hm. Perhaps.” Hermione shook her hair back and reached under her side of the bed. “Before the mood is completely spoilt,” she said, handing him a box wrapped in silver paper with a bright green ribbon tied ‘round it.

Severus made quick work of the wrapping and pulled out a brilliantly embroidered set of black teaching robes. The embroidery appeared to be interlocked and overlapping branches in shades of dark green with ravens peeking out from between some of the branches. It was a work of art. “This is stunning. Wherever did you find this?”

“I had it made for you. Narcissa helped me find someone to do the embroidery, and she worked from my descriptions. I know you don’t wear as much black these days, but...I rather miss seeing you billow through the hallways,” she admitted with a slight blush.

“These are very fine, Hermione. I love them.” He leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to her cheek before reaching into his nightstand drawer and withdrawing her gift -- a small box wrapped in burgundy paper and affixed with a bright gold bow. “This is for you. Happy Christmas, love.”

Hermione took the box from his hand and shot him a bashful little look before ripping the paper off as eagerly as a twelve year old. When she opened it she let out a soft sigh. “Oh, they’re lovely, Severus.” She reached in and pulled out a pair of earring set in the same green-toned electrum. The cloudy citrine and black opal had made for a beautiful pair of drop earrings to match her torq. Severus was pleased to see that she immediately put them in her ears, then dashed to the mirror to see how they looked.

“Severus, you have the most exquisite taste.”

“I’m pleased you like them,” he said with a crooked little smile. “I don’t believe I ever gave you jewelry. Before, I mean.”

“No. Do you remember what you Christmas gift to me was that year? I can tell you I still have it,”
she said, testing his memories to see if that one had returned.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. “Can you tell me -- did we celebrate at my home?”

“We opened presents there, then went to the Burrow for dinner.”

“Alright. Let me try.” Severus concentrated on the image of his couch, then where he assumed a Christmas tree would have to go. The corner by the stairs was really the only place that would accommodate a tree. Without thinking, he began to narrate the recollections forming in his mind. “You insisted on a tree, even knowing that I detest them. Your cat tried to climb the bloody thing, so we had to charm it to repel the beast. There was an argument over tinsel, which I won. We exchanged books that year. You gave me the collected works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I gave you...hm. Potions in Motion. An apprentice-level text. My own copy, I believe? Complete with all the scribbles of an over-active mind,” he finished, opening his eyes.

Hermione’s smile was brilliant. “Yes. You have it.”

His own smile was somewhat more subdued. “It’s all there. It’s just retrieving it that’s a bit of a problem. Perhaps in our research with the Weasley-waste we can explore a method to stimulate recall more effectively.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “It’s not a bad idea. There are several paths our research can take, I think.” She gave Severus a quick peck on the tip of his nose (ignoring the roll of his eyes that followed) and scampered off to the bathroom. “I’m going to have a shower,” she called. “Why don’t you sort breakfast, then join me?”

The smile broadened. That sounded like a fine idea indeed.

“Hello Ronald.” Hermione kept her tone crisp and business-like as she addressed the head in the fire.

“’Mione. Thanks for taking my floo. Uh, hello there Snape.” The redhead gave an awkward bob of his head in greeting. “Do you, uh, mind if I come through?”

Hermione shot a quick look to Severus, who merely shrugged in reply. “That’s fine.”

Ron quickly stepped through the floo and Severus could clearly see the results of a sleepless night spelled across the younger man’s face. Hermione seated herself and Severus sank down next to her, placing his arm on the back of the sofa behind her. The casually possessive act did not go unnoticed, but no one remarked on it. “What did you wish to speak about, Ronald? Surely your wife and the rest of your family will be missing you today?” Hermione asked politely, though there was no hint of warmth in her voice.

Ron plopped down in the armchair without invitation. “I told them I was going for a walk, then apparated home to floo you. It’s important. Percy. I -- well, my note explained it. He compelled me. And you, apparently.”

“Yes.” Hermione waited for Ron to continue, but seemed unsurprised at his loss for words. “He placed a compulsion spell on both of us in order to bring us together. He also attacked, then obliviated Severus and banished him from Britain for nearly seven years.”
Severus watched as Weasley paled. “He what?” the man gasped. “I just -- he only told me -- Oh Gods.” He turned wide and wretched eyes on his former Potions professor. “He attacked you?”

Severus nodded. “He did. Quite successfully. On multiple occasions.”

“I came because I wanted to apologize for the compulsion. For...for how I treated you, Hermione. All of it. But this…” he trailed off, at a loss.

“Perhaps it would be best if we explained the situation in its entirety, Mr. Weasley,” Severus interjected.

“Yes. Please.”

A half hour later, Severus was somewhat gratified to see the Weasley temper was still in fine form as Ronald stomped back and forth in front of the fireplace. “I cannot fucking believe he did this! The compulsion was bad enough -- you and I knew we didn’t belong together, ‘Mione, from that first kiss -- but this! Attacking Severus fucking Snape! The obliviating him? Just to break you up? It makes no sense! Is he insane?” He’d raked his fingers through his hair multiple times throughout Severus and Hermione’s story and now looked as though he’d walked through one of the Hogwarts ghosts. The carrot-colored hair stood on end, clashing horribly with the nearly puce shade of the boy’s face. “I’ll fucking kill him!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’ll do no such thing, Ronald. We’re going to be working with him. Because as horrible and as stupid as his actions were, your idiot brother seems to have stumbled upon the only known method to reversing obliviation in its entirety. We need his help to develop a permanent cure.”

Ron stopped in his tracks, slanting a look at Hermione. “Your parents.”

She nodded shortly. “Yes.”

“Well it’s the least he can fucking do. I still think you’re letting him off too lightly, though,” he growled, throwing himself back into the armchair.

“As much as it pains me to do so, Mr. Weasley, I am inclined to agree. But what would you have us do? Press charges? Your brother would end up in Azkaban and, as much as he might deserve it, I respect your parents too much to take another son from them.”

“Big of you,” Ron stated. “I’ve never liked you Snape, but even I can admit that what you’re doing is more generous than Perce deserves. So I’ll thank you for it.”

Severus inclined his head. “Well, that’s certainly more than your brother did.”

Ron nodded again, sadly this time, then turned his head back to Hermione. “ ‘Mione...I owe you so many apologies that I don’t even know where to begin. I’m so sorry. For lots of things, but most especially for cheating on you. We may not have belonged together, but there’s no excuse for how I behaved, compulsion or no compulsion. And I lost one of the best friends I’ll ever had. Can you ever forgive me?”

Hermione regarded her former lover for a long time before speaking. “I don’t know if I can, Ron,” she finally said softly. “Are you happy with your Prunella?” she bit the name off.

“I am. I know what she seems like to you lot, but I do love her. She’s...we fit, you know?” he replied.
Hermione gave him a small smile. “Yes,” she said, glancing at Severus. “I know what that’s like. I don’t know if I can forgive you, Ron. You hurt me horribly, but worse you damaged my self-confidence. We’ve been through so much together over the years. For you to do that was simply shattering.”

“I know,” he said in a near whisper.

“But I’m going to try. Because before we dated, before we were engaged, before Severus, you and I were friends. So I’m going to try. But I need something from you, too.”

“Anything,” he said. “I’ll do anything in my power to make it up to you.”

“You can’t make it up to me, Ronald. I’m going to try to forgive, but don’t think for a moment that I’m going to forget. All I want is for you to get your wife to stop crowing every time I see her at a Ministry function. It’s damned annoying and, honestly? She’s bloody welcome to you.” Hermione crossed her arms and leaned back against the sofa, staring Ron straight in the face.

Ron stood decisively. “I’ll take care of it. Thank you. For trying.”

“You’re welcome. I do want you to be happy, Ron. But I wouldn’t expect me to become bosom buddies with your wife any time soon.”

He laughed a little at that. “Right. Okay, I need to head back to the Burrow before they send out a search party. And possibly find my brother and strangle him.”

“Give my love to your family, Ron,” Hermione said, rising to give him an awkward hug. “Except Percy. You can tell him to fuck himself sideways while you’re strangling him.”

Ron gripped her a little tighter before releasing her from the hug, then glanced at Severus over her head. “Watch yourself with this one, Snape. She’s brilliant, but scary.”

Severus met the younger man’s gaze impassively. “I am well aware. Please give my regards to your family, Mr. Weasley, as well as my own wishes for your brother to bugger himself on a splintered tree trunk in the near future. Oh, and thank your mother for the pies. They’re a particular favorite.”

Ron grinned and grabbed a handful of floo powder before stepping into the hearth. “You know,” he said thoughtfully, “the more I see you two together, the more I think you were meant for each other all along.” Without waiting for a response, he threw the powder into the grate and shouted “The Burrow” before spinning out of sight.

Hermione turned to face Severus, a little smirk on her face. “My thoughts exactly. Come on love. Let’s find Minerva and open that bottle of scotch she gave you. She’d never forgive us if we didn’t share some of that Christmas cheer with her.”

Severus grinned in return. “I wonder if Mohinder likes mince pies?”
**Boxing Day**

Chapter Summary

Christmas passes and Boxing Day arrives...with an emergency Order meeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hermione! Severus! Happy Christmas!” Mohinder flung open the door to the Headmistress’ quarters and beckoned them inside with a broad grin. “Min is opening a bottle of wine.”

“Happy Christmas, Mohinder,” Hermione replied with a smile and a kiss on his cheek. “Did you have a good morning?”

“We did! My first Christmas with Minerva. My first Christmas full stop, actually.” He shot a fond glance over his shoulder at his wife as she levitated a tray and glasses onto the coffee table. “Can you stay for dinner?”

“Oh, thank you, but we can’t,” Severus replied. “We’ll be visiting Hermione’s parents this afternoon and will be staying through Boxing Day. After that, we are traveling to my estate until after the New Year. Though you should try some of these mince pies. They’re Molly Weasley’s, and they’re very good.” He set the plate on the table to share his bounty with his longtime friend and her new husband.

Minerva smiled as she poured wine for the younger couple and herself. “I’m glad that you’re getting away for a bit, Severus. You’ve barely left the castle this semester, except to attend galas and events for the Ministry or the Malfoys. You both need a break.” She paused to take an appreciative sip from her glass. “Though I’ll admit, I’m terribly curious about your house, Severus. I’ve only ever seen Spinner’s End.”

“There’s not much to report about the house at the moment, Min. It’s mostly dust and Holland cloths. I do hope to open it up this summer, though. Perhaps you and Mohinder will pay me -- us --” he corrected, glancing at Hermione, “a visit then.”

“We’d be delighted,” Mohinder said, sipping his sparkling water and placing his hand on his wife’s knee.

Severus didn’t miss the questioning look that Hermione sent him as she sipped her own drink. This was certainly the first time he’d mentioned spending time at Prince House over the summer hols. He hoped that Hermione didn’t think him too high handed. He had plans for them and, if his luck held, they would be spending the summer together as an engaged pair and planning for their future together.

His ruminations were interrupted by the floo flaring to life and Arthur Weasley’s voice coming through. “Minerva, are you there?” he shouted over the din -- good God, was that Molly screeching in the background? -- as his head and shoulders appeared in the fire.

Minerva scurried over to the hearth with a speed that belied her age. “Yes, Arthur. What is it? What
is that racket?”

“Sorry. We’re having a bit of a ruckus here today. Bad news from --” a crash and shouting sounded in the background “--from Ronald. He and Percy have gotten into and Molly has just waded in. Is it true? About Percy and Severus?”

Severus rose and moved toward the floo to kneel next to Minerva. “You’ll need to be more specific than that, if you please Arthur.”

“Oh, Severus. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were there,” The older wizard glanced over his shoulder as more voices joined the fray and another crash echoed through the room. “Severus, did Percy attack you?”

He glanced at Minerva before nodding his head. “He did.”

“Blimey. Right then. As deputy head of the Order, I’d like to request a meeting Minerva.”

The Headmistress sighed. “I’m not sure this is really Order business, Arthur.”

“I’m going to contradict you there, Min. This is one member attacking another.” He glanced at Severus. “I realize you’ve sorted this on your own, but I think the rest of the Order should really have a voice as well.”

Minerva signed again. “Very well, Arthur. Severus, can you and Hermione delay your trip for a day? I’m sorry to ask, but --”

“It’s fine, Minerva,” Hermione said from behind the kneeling duo. She tilted her head in acknowledgement of her almost father-in-law in greeting. “Hi Arthur. Sorry about all that,” she said, gesturing toward the floo as more shouts came through.

Arthur winced. “I need to go help Molly sort this before they get to the tree. Tomorrow at headquarters? Noon?”

“Yes, that’s fine Arthur. I’ll let the rest of the group know. Er...Happy Christmas.”

“Thanks!” the man shouted before the floo went quiet.

Severus stood and offered a hand to help Minerva to her feet. “I think it’s safe to say that your former fiancé lost his temper.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Color me surprised.”

Minerva returned to her seat on the couch and reclaimed her wine glass. “I’m awfully sorry, Moh, but I’ll need to leave for a bit tomorrow morning. And I’m afraid I can’t ask you to come with me as you’re not an inducted member.” She turned to face their guests with a tired look on her face. “I am sorry you’ll have to delay your trip. Arthur is within his rights as deputy to request the meeting, though.”

“As I well recall,” Severus replied, rememberin the myriad meetings that took place not at the behest of Dumbledore, but because Moody requested the meeting as his deputy. At least a third of those meetings were to accuse Severus of some sort of wrongdoing. In silent understanding, Hermione reached over to squeeze his hand.

“Yes, well. Things have changed a bit, but not so much that you won’t recognize how we proceed.” Minerva shot a glance at her husband. “Love, we need to induct you soon, if only so I can speak
freely in front of you.”

“Ready and willing, love.”

The finished their drinks quickly after that, the holiday mood somewhat broken by the news that they would need to attend an Order meeting the next day in order to continue dealing with the mess that Percy Fuckwit Weasley had created. Severus was seething throughout the evening, dreading the fact that he would have to go and openly acknowledge his condition (and his weakness) to the rest of the Order the next day. “Your ex needs to learn when to speak and when to shut his trap,” he grumbled at Hermione as they prepared to go to her parents’ house that evening.

Hermione shrugged philosophically. “Ronald has never been able to keep his mouth shut unless it was a matter of life or death. I think, in this case, he was too angry at how his life had been tampered with to consider the consequences of outing you to the entire Weasley clan at once.” She paused, her eyes widening. “Oh, I hope that they didn’t involve Penelope. That’s the last thing she needs while recovering from childbirth!”

“If I remember the youngest Mr. Weasley as I think I do, we’ll be lucky if half of wizarding Britain doesn’t know by tomorrow.”

“Hermione, love! Welcome home!” A small woman with wavy, mahogany hair opened the door to allow her daughter inside. “And you must be Severus. We’ve heard a lot about you. Come into the warm and let me take your coats.”

“Mrs. Granger, a pleasure,” Severus said, extending his hand.

“Oh, none of that!” she replied. “I’m Helen, and this is Norm,” she said as Norm took the proffered hand. Helen, he noted, batted it aside in favor of a hug and kiss on the cheek in welcome.

Severus shot Hermione a glance, somewhat confused. She’d described her relationship with her parents as complicated, due to their own partially recovered memories. She shook her head at him slightly as if to say “I’ll explain later.”

“Hermione said you’ll be staying until Boxing Day,” Norm said with a nervous smile. “I can’t tell you how happy we are to have you both.”

“I’m happy we’re staying too, Dad,” Hermione replied, hugging her father tightly. The man looked slightly uncomfortable, but pleased with the affection.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’ll just take your bags up to the guest room, shall I? Sit yourselves down and we’ll have a drink before dinner.”

He picked Hermione’s purse and Severus’ messenger bag with a perplexed look on his face, then trooped up the stairs with them in hand.

Helen kissed Hermione on the cheek before scuttling off into the kitchen. “I’m just going to check the goose, love. I’ll be back in a tick.”
“What was --” Severus began.

“They don’t remember a lot. Dad’s still working on adjusting to it and Mum makes up for it by pretending nothing is wrong. Just...go with it, please,” she said, a pleading look in her eyes.

“Of course.” He pressed a light kiss to her curls and rubbed his hand up and down her back. If there was one thing he understood, it was the frustration of gaps in his brain.

“They see a healer every week, but there’s not much that can be done without forcibly unlocking the memories. They’re worried about brain damage, so no one has tried,” she replied in an undertone. “It’s all uncharted waters with Muggles. Usually if someone is obliviated to the extent that I charmed Mum and Dad, it’s with good reason...and with no intention of reversal.”

She paused and wiped at her nose surreptitiously. “It’s just strange that I seem to be fated to be surrounded by people who don’t really remember me.” She glanced up at him from beneath wet lashes.

“And who love you despite it all,” Severus said in a whisper, pressing another kiss to her brow. “I think I could forget ever knowing you and I’d still fall in love with you, Hermione. Don’t cry love.”

“Well, what’s all this then?” Norm said as he came back downstairs. “Why so blue, poppet?”

Hermione laughed at the endearment. “Oh, just tired, Dad. It’s been a hard semester. I’m really glad to be home for a couple of days.”

“I’m glad you’ve come. Your mother has been cleaning and rearranging for days. Driving me ’round the twist. I’m hoping she’ll stop, now you’re here. Whiskey Severus?” he asked, smiling when he saw Severus’ nod of approval. “Good man.”

Once they were settled with their drinks and Helen had rejoined them, they spent a pleasant evening around a delightful Christmas goose with all the trimmings, catching up. Helen seemed to want to know everything about what Hermione had been up to since August, but Norm seemed more interest in getting to know Severus.

“So you live and teach in that great drafty castle too, hm?” he said.

“Actually, Dad, we live together.” Hermione replied. “We moved in together a few weeks ago.”

“Well that’s moving a bit fast, isn’t it?” asked Helen, a look of concern on her face.

Severus tried a reassuring smile. “Yes and no. Hermione and I were involved briefly some years ago. Before your return from Australia, I believe. Unfortunately I was attacked a few months into our relationship and lost my memory of our time together. We’ve spent this fall reconnecting and trying to recover my memories,” he said cautiously.

“You too, then?” Helen said sadly. “Just like us. Not that we were attacked, of course,” Helen said quickly with a glance at her daughter. “But there are still gaps.”

“I understand that very well,” he replied, reaching for Hermione’s hand and finding it chilled. “I know how painful it can be.”

“Still, it’s a small sacrifice,” Norm said bracingly. “A few memories in exchange for our safety. And Hermione’s.”

“Thanks Dad,” Hermione said with a watery smile.
“Enough of that. It’s Christmas and we’re to be happy today.” Norm stood and raised his glass to Severus and Hermione. “Happy Christmas to my lovely wife, my wonderful daughter, and to our new friend,” he said, toasting each in turn. “I hope this is the first of many celebrations.”

They’d enjoyed a rousing game of Scrabble after dinner, which Hermione had won handily. Helen and Norm had expressed their joy at receiving Severus and Hermione’s gift -- a certificate for a weekend getaway at a spa -- and had expressed only slight disappointment at the fact that the duo would have to take off for a few hours the next day. Severus and Hermione had promised to extend their visit another day to make up for it. Finally after hours of good food and music and camaraderie, they all retired to their respective rooms. Severus watched his lover as she prepared for bed in the small guest room they’d share for the next two nights. She’d been biting her lip since dessert had been served, worrying it raw while talking with her parents.

“Are you alright?” he asked, reaching out a hand to brush hers as she adjusted her night dress.

“Yeah. It’s just...hard. Being around them, watching them age and not feeling like I really know them anymore. I feel so helpless around them,” she sniffed.

“Come here,” he said, tugging her down next to him on the bed. “You did the right thing. You know that. More importantly, they know that. In time, our work may help them recover the memories, but even that may not return your relationship to its former state. Time has passed and you’ve all changed...but you love them, and they love you. Take solace in that.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. It’s just hard to watch. It’s why I don’t visit as often as I should.”

“Well, there I’ll tell you you’re wrong. You have two living parents who, despite their own scars from the war, love the blazes out of you. Don’t deny them your company out of guilt. You have nothing to feel guilty for.” He kissed her on the head again, pulled back the covers. “Now get into bed. Your father had one thing very right tonight; it’s Christmas and we’re meant to be happy. So no sad thoughts, alright love?”

“You’re awfully bossy all of a sudden,” she said with a little smile.

“Because in this case I happen to know what’s best for you. Go to sleep, love. Otherwise you’ll be too exhausted to spar with Ronald at tomorrow’s meeting.”

Hermione giggled and ran her hand over Severus’ chest, her smile broadening. “You know, suddenly I’m not feeling sleepy at all, Severus.”

“Insatiable Minx. We’re in your parents' house. Don’t you want to hold off for a couple of days?”

“Where’s the adventure in that? Silence the room and come to bed, love. I think we could both use a little comfort tonight.”

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After a full English and a rousing discussion of world events with Hermione’s parents, Severus and Hermione set off for the Order meeting. They left with promises to return with tea tidbits from the local bakery -- a trip Severus was particularly looking forward to.

“How is it you don’t weigh twenty stone?” Hermione asked him as they walked to the little park that
would serve as their apparition point. “You love your baked goods!”

“The Prince line has always been thin,” he replied, “and I work out enough to stave off the worst of a paunch. Or I did. I’m afraid I’ve become lazy since returning to Hogwarts.”

“Well we can’t have a paunchy D.A.D.A. instructor. How about I start working out with you in the new year? That way we can eat all the pastries we want together.”

He smiled and tightened his grip on her hand. “I don’t think that’s quite how it works, love.”

“It should,” she muttered. “Here we are.”

“Shall I take us to number twelve?” he asked.

She laughed. “Not unless you want to miss the meeting,” Hermione replied. “Harry and Ginny live at number 12 full time now. We use another location as headquarters now. Ready?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his torso.

Within moments they were standing in an empty field somewhere on the coast. Hermione rustled in her pocket and handed him a slip of paper. “Here.”

*The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is at Briarbank Cottage, Woolacombe.*

“Woolacombe? We’re in a bloody tourist spot!” Severus hissed, ignoring the cottage that came into view not ten yards away. “How is that good practice?”

“Look around you, love. What do you see?”

He glanced around. They were situated on a short cliff with a view of a beach, which was mercifully empty. The cottage was situated on the highest point for some miles. It would be impossible to see the comings and goings of anyone associated with the cottage, even if one could see the cottage.

“I still say the area is too high-traffic for headquarters,” he grumbled.

“I’ll be sure to let Kinglsey that you disapprove the location of his summer home,” Hermione responded with a grin. “Come on. I’ll bet you anything that Molly brought coffee cake, despite all the uproar yesterday.”

“Miss One-track-mind. You’ve spent too much time around the Weasleys. All you think of is food these days!” he joked.

“Clearly you’ve never had Molly’s coffee cake. Come on, before the hoard eats it all.”

Hermione was right. The coffee cake was excellent. He even managed to snag a second slice as Ronald was too busy hissing in Percy’s ear to bother scrabbling for half the cake as he normally would.

“Hermione, love, I’m so sorry,” Molly said as she returned with Arthur from a brief chat outside. “And Severus. I don’t even know where to begin.” Severus quickly found himself trying to swallow
his bite of cake without choking as Molly wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders. “It’s not your fault, Molly. You have nothing -- no, I mean that -- nothing to apologize for.”

The older woman fluttered her hands helplessly. “He’s our son.”

“He’s a man grown,” Severus said quietly. Rising to wrap Molly in an awkward embrace. “Come on, sit down. You look like you haven’t slept a wink.” He pulled back the seat next to him and ushered Molly into the chair, summoning the teapot and a cup for her.

“Thank you, Severus.” Arthur said quietly, clapping a hand on the younger wizard’s shoulder. “Of course, Arthur,” he replied with a nod before taking his seat again.

He watched as the rest of the inner circle members arrived in ones and twos. Severus was unsurprised to see that the inner circle had changed considerably in his absence. Many members had died as a result of that final year of war, and it seemed that their places had been taken by the young heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts. Neville and Luna Longbottom took their places at the far end of the table with a little wave in his direction with the Potters next to them. Most of the Weasleys were also at the table, with the notable absence of Angelina, Prunella, and Penelope Weasley. Minerva, Arthur, and Kingsley sat at the head of the table and Filius and Pomona seemed to have taken up official membership as well. All in all, it was a surprisingly large group, considering that it was the day after Christmas.

Finally, Minerva stood and raised her hands in greeting. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. A few of the inner circle couldn’t be here today, but we have enough for quorum. Our discussion today will focus on the event of one Order member attacking another. I would like to begin by clarifying that this is not a trial, but rather a recounting of events for all inner circle members, at which time a decision will be made as to whether additional recompense should be made to the injured parties.

Severus, Hermione, and Ronald -- will you please explain the events surrounding the compulsion and obliviate spells placed on you?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovely readers! As I explained in my TCA update earlier this week, I have been sickity sick sick the past few weeks, hence the lack of updates. But I'm feeling MUCH better now and am back in the saddle! So here is a chappie. More to come soon!

For those of you who have asked, yes we are getting close to an engagement. I promise it will be here by Ch 40.
Chapter Summary

The Order meeting continues before Hermione and Severus take a trip to Prince House. Lemons ensue.

He thought he understood what had happened to him over the past seven years, but as he listened to the story that Hermione, Ronald, and he wove about their individual experiences over the past seven years, the more he realized that he didn’t have the whole story.

“Hermione, how long was it after Severus’ abrupt departure that you began seeing Ronald?” Minerva asked, scribbling some notes on a piece of foolscrap so that she could keep a timeline of events.

“Two years,” she responded. “A little more, I think. He asked me out for the first time maybe six months after Severus left?” She shot a look at her ex-fiancé for confirmation.

“That sounds about right,” he said. “You refused the first, oh, dozen times or so.”

She gave him a little smile. “Yes. We had decided we were better off friends not long after the Battle of Hogwarts. I was surprised the first time you asked me out; it kind of came out of nowhere.”

“It did. I remember going home after the first time I asked and thinking that I didn’t know why it seemed so important that you say yes. Eighteen months later, you finally did. And wasn’t that a disaster?”

“Completely,” Hermione agreed. “You and I never should have dated.”

Ron nodded, then sent a brief glare at his brother.

“And Percival, when did you first apply a coercion charm to Ronald?”

Percy snorted, turning his head to expose a yellowing bruise under his eye. “I see no reason why I should further incriminate myself.”

“Mr. Weasley,” Kingsley stated firmly, “I suggest you answer the questions posed to you. Otherwise we will take this to a proper Ministry court and try you with the full force of the law. This Order hearing is a courtesy for your actions on its behalf in recent years, so I suggest you show the proper gratitude and answer the questions honestly.”

Percy goggled at his former employer. “After all the work I did for you, Kingsley -- “

The Minister cut him off. “Don’t go there Percy. You don’t get to demand that I express my gratitude for the job I payed you for and then refuse to acknowledge the privilege I have shown you in not taking this to the proper authorities.”

“Percy,” Molly breathed. “Just answer their questions. Please.”

“I don’t know the exact date,” the red-head snapped in the general direction of the head of the table. I
waited a few months for Ron to make his move and he didn’t, so I helped him along. About six months after Severus left sounds right.”

“You mean about six months after you forced me to leave,” the man in question corrected with a terse sneer.

“Yes,” Percy hissed.

There was silence in the room but for the scratch of Minerva’s pen on foolscrap. “Then what happened, Ronald?”

Ron scratched at his nose before replying. “Then? Nothing. For a year and a half, I kept asking Hermione out until one day she said yes. We dated for four years. Were engaged for about a year of that. It seemed like, I dunno. Going through the motions maybe? And I met Prunella a few months before it all went south with Hermione. That seemed more right. More emotionally there, you know?”

Severus saw that Hermione was nodding, tears in her eyes. “That’s what it felt like to me too, Ron. Like...we were just expected to marry. In a way, I’m glad you met your wife. It gave me an excuse to end it.”

“Why did you ever say yes then?” Ron asked quietly, genuine pain evident in his voice.

Hermione turned her eyes toward Percy, tilting her head just so in an attempt to make him talk. The bastard sat there, silent and sulking.

“Because your brother, likely impatient with your lack of progress, compelled Hermione. Correct, Mr. Weasley?” Severus replied, turning toward the offending man-child.

“Yes,” he bit off, refusing to speak more.

Ron nodded sadly. “So that’s it then. There wasn’t actually anything there, that whole four years?”

“I loved you like a brother. Dating just messed all of that up. I hope, someday, you’ll be like my brother again.” She paused to wipe a rogue tear off her cheek. “It might take me a little while, though.”

The quiet conversation was interrupted by a loud sniffle from Molly Weasley, who had silently been crying into her handkerchief all the while. “Oh, Percy,” she murmured. “What on earth were you thinking?”

“What was I thinking?” he repeated in a menacing tone. “What was I thinking? It was broken. All of it was broken and I was fixing it! You wouldn’t get out of bed. George moved through the house like a wraith. Ginny had fucked off to Grimmauld Place, Charlie was in Romania, Bill was dealing with a morning-sick Fleur, and dad was off at the bedamned Ministry! Snape was off receiving fucking accolades after overseeing the torture of my sister, then he stole the woman who should have been your daughter out from under your nose! None of you fixed anything! I did. I did.” He stopped speaking then, nearly purple in the face and panting as he wiped spittle from his lips.

No one spoke, choosing instead to stare at the meekest, most mild-mannered member of the Weasley clan as he completely unspooled.

Finally, Severus spoke. “There is a danger, Mr. Weasley, in playing God. It rarely works out well for the one who wishes to be the deity, and he often forgets that the lives he manipulates are attached to people who have their own desires, their own goals.
You disrupted my life for seven years. You may feel I deserved it, and you may even be right --” he heard Hermione make a mewl of disagreement next to him “but was not your place to play judge and jury. You may have felt that Hermione and Ronald belonged together, but all you did was force them to betray their trust in one another and sever a friendship, though not irrevocably. You may feel that your actions were just, but they were not. They were misguided. They smack of megalomania. And I will not thank you for them.” He rose then, nodding his head to Molly and Arthur as he left the room, unable to stare at the unrepentant young man any longer.

He heard someone else rise, then Hermione speak. “I once counted you as a friend, Percy, and looked forward to calling you my brother. As it is, I’m not sure I can stomach being in the same room as you. Sort yourself out.” Her footsteps followed his into the hall.

“Are you alright?” she asked quietly.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m not.” He reached out and gathered Hermione into a tight embrace, resting his cheek against her hair. “I will be, but right now I’m not.” He paused as her arms slid around his waist. “Seven years lost,” he whispered.

“I know,” Hermione replied. There was nothing more to say.

In the end, it had been straightforward. Minerva and Kingsley had heard enough; Percy was declared unfit to continue to serve the Order in any capacity and his membership revoked. He would be blacklisted at the Ministry for the next three years, at which point Kingley would reevaluate the man to see if he was fit to serve again.

He would never be able to run for office. If he tried, the details of his actions would be released to the public with Ron, Hermione, and Severus’ consent.

Percy had raged at the decision. Then he had wept for his shattered dreams; his goals would be forever out of his reach.

Severus found he felt nothing. The man was a thief and had yet to repay the time he stole. Percival Weasley, he knew, wept for his own lost opportunities, not in remorse for anything he had done.

The idea of working with the unrepentant flobberworm left a sour taste in Severus’ mouth.

The departed soon after, though not before Ronald came forward -- acting more a man than his older brother seemed capable of -- and shook hands with Severus. “I’m sorry for any part I had in preventing you from returning to Britain, Snape,” he’d said. “And Hermione, I’m sorry for the rift between us.”

“Thank you, Ron,” Hermione replied. “That means a lot. Good luck with Prunella. Please wish her happy with the baby coming. I’ll -- well, maybe we’ll have a long talk sometime soon, okay?”

“I’d like that. Have a good night, both of you.” He’d given them an awkward wave as they stepped into the back garden to apparate back to her parents’ house.
Helen and Norm seemed to sense that something was off with Hermione and Severus when they returned from the meeting at mid-afternoon. Severus was grateful that they’d gone out of their way to cheer them up with a good meal and a movie that evening. Little talking was required of any party.

All the same, Severus felt nothing but relief when they departed to Prince House the next evening. He would have Hermione to himself for the next week without interruption, which meant no pretences needed to be maintained between them. Here, in this place and with this woman, Severus could be himself -- whether that meant sulking over the crimes committed against him or celebrating his love for the curly-haired witch by his side.

He chose the latter.

He delighted in Hermione’s enthrallment with Prince House which had, per his instructions to the elves, been cleared of its Holland cloths and polished to a high gleam. The first morning in the house, they’d broken their fast in the attached greenhouse-cum-breakfast room. His grandfather’s portrait had intimated that it had been his grandmother’s favorite place to start the day, and Severus agreed that it was a lovely spot. There wasn’t much growing there at present -- a few ferns and some ivy, low maintenance species -- but even that small amount of green made for a cozy contrast against the falling snow outside.

By mutual consent, they’d tabled the topic of Pesky Percy and agreed to enjoy their vacation from Hogwarts. And so it was that he sat watching Hermione slice into a perfectly toasted muffin and spread a thin layer of butter across the top before taking a dainty bite. Her eyes closed in enjoyment of the simple fare and she started when she opened them to find Severus staring at her.

“What?” she asked, swiping her napkin at invisible crumbs.

“Nothing. I simply enjoy watching you. You look lovely this morning.”

She gave him a wry smile as she glanced down at her dressing gown. “Thank you, I think,” she replied. “So what are we doing today?”

“I had no specific plans. Is there anything you would like to do?”

“I’d love to explore the house some more. Especially the --”

“-- library,” he finished with a grin. “Of course. I had thought to explore the possibility of installing a potions lab in the second parlor. I would value your input.”

“Sounds lovely. Why on the ground floor?” she asked. “I would think you’d use the basements or the servants quarters for your lab.”

“I spent nearly twenty years working in the dungeons, Hermione. I have no desire to spend many hours in a windowless, airless space while I brew.”

She laughed a little at her own ignorance. “I always assumed the dungeons were chosen because of their structural integrity.”

He shrugged. “They were, I suppose, in the middle ages before reinforcement and shield charms had reached the level of sophistication they’re at today. As it is, I can enchant the room to withstand even a Neville Longbottom level blast.” He shot her a cocky grin.
“That’s a low blow. Neville hasn’t melted a cauldron in years.”

Severus shot her a narrow look. “I suspect Neville hasn’t *brewed* in years.”

“You’d be correct!” she said with a cheeky grin before polishing off her tea. “Come on, let’s look at your potential lab first. If we go to the library I won’t emerge until dinner.”

They set off toward the East end of the ground floor to explore the blue parlor, which mostly consisted of a faded settee and card table with chairs in desperate need of caning. Hermione rushed forward to run her fingers over the glossy table top. “Oh, and just look at this table. The marquetry is stunning.”

“Hm. We’ll have to find some other use for it. I wouldn’t brew on furniture as fine as this. Perhaps I’ll donate it to the staff room at Hogwarts. Heaven knows that room could use an upgrade.”

“Severus, this table is a work of art and likely worth a small fortune. You don’t want to put it someplace where Hagrid is going to sling his mug of tea around on it.”

He grimaced. “You have a point. We’ll find another use for it.” Severus walked around the space, inspecting the movement of the windows and repair of the floors. “This would do very well. I can charm a sink to bring in water and drain it away into the kitchens below without destroying the parquet. And there’s more than ample room for an ingredients cabinet on the far wall. There’s enough shadow in that corner that even the most light-sensitive ingredients could be stored, so long as the cabinet was shut tight between brewing sessions.”

“Hm. You could put a desk in the far corner for your notes. Maybe a shelf next to it to store your journals.”

He could see it in his mind’s eye. “Yes, that would work very well. Come,” he said, gesturing toward the pocket doors on the far end of the room. “I want to show you something.”

He slid the doors open to walk her into the ballroom. The tall ceiling rose up two extended stories, and a gallery railing ran around the perimeter of the room. “What do you think of this space?” Severus asked.

“I think it’s a lovely, but a bit of a waste. I don’t see you hosting any balls in the near future.”

He snorted at the thought. “No. But it’s a large space. I thought it might make a good laboratory for your transfiguration work. And as it’s adjacent to my own lab, it would mean we were within calling distance of one another as we work. Not so lonely, you see,” he said with a little smile.

“It would be perfect,” she murmured almost reverently. She turned to face Severus full on. “Does this mean you want to live here during the holidays?” she queried.

“I thought we could use some more room than is currently available at Spinner’s end. I know you usually summer with the Potters, but I had hoped since we’re living together now…”

“Of course,” she said, reaching out to touch his arm. “Of course I want to spend my summers with you Severus. Don’t ever think otherwise. It’s just that we’d never really discussed *where*.”

“I rather thought that was what we were doing now,” he smirked.

Her smile grew into a genuine grin. “I’d love this space as my lab, Severus. It’s perfect. Thank you.” She stood on her tiptoes to press a kiss to a cheek.
Severus exhaled a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding and took Hermione’s hand in his. “Let me show you the rest of the ground floor. Then we can lunch in the library and you can drool on my books to your heart’s content.”

“Sounds lovely, but for the drool part.”

Unsurprisingly, it was the library that held the most interest for his bookworm lover. In another life she might have been declared a bluestocking and deemed ineligible, but to Severus her intellectual curiosity and rampant thirst for knowledge was her most attractive attribute.

Hermione had buried herself in the stacks for nearly two days straight until Severus thought to levitate the card table from his soon-to-be laboratory into the library. After that, he found her in much the position she’d assumed in the Hogwarts library each night, bent over the table with her nose in a book.

Severus watched her from the doorway and reflected that he wanted to bend her over the table for entirely different reasons. He’d always done his best work around books, after all.

Three quick strides positioned him behind his thoroughly oblivious partner as he bent forward to press a kiss to her sensitive neck. “My my, Miss Granger. Nose in a book, as always.” He was pleased when a visible shiver ran down her spine and followed it with his finger, eliciting a little sigh from his lover.

“Mmm,” she said, tilting her head to give him better access. “Professor Snape, you should know better than to sneak up on a studying student. I might have screamed and then Madame Pince would have kicked me out. Then where would I be?”

He pitched his voice low and rumbled in her ear as he stroked his finger down her neck. “Well, excessive noise in the library is grounds for the loss of house points. What shall it be, Miss Granger? Twenty points from Gryffindor?” He pressed upward on her elbow to encourage her to stand, still facing away from him.

“Twenty? That’s outrageous, Professor Snape!”

He grinned. “Arguing with your professor now, are we?” he said, leaning in to trap her body between the table and his own. “That’s a detention. I highly suggest that you cease your arguing before you land yourself in more trouble, Miss Granger.” His hands were moving downward as he spoke, making quick work of the buttons that ran down the front of her shirtwaist dress.

“Oooh, not detention!” she said, shivering as her dress slithered to the floor and cool air swirled around her. “Will I be scrubbing cauldrons?”

“No, Miss Granger,” he purred. “Today we’ll be testing equipment.” He pressed a hand between her shoulder blades to bend her over the table, waving his other hand to banish her bra and knickers to the laundry. He rather fancied the idea of her wandering his house naked when they were done. He slid a warm hand down her backside and between her legs, parting them as he slid two fingers between her folds. “It’s important to make sure that all equipment is kept in working order. Safety comes first, after all,” he whispered as he began to thrust his fingers into her core. She moaned and arched her back, inviting him to delve deeper and he was more than happy to oblige.
He smirked at her enjoyment of his spur-of-the-moment roleplay. He’d have to remember that his Hermione liked to play the naughty student in the future.

“You don’t seem to have dried your cauldron properly, Miss Granger,” he growled over the sounds of his fingers entering and leaving her sopping entrance. “That’s sloppy work, don’t you think?”

Her only response was an inarticulate groan.

“Nothing to say for yourself, then?” He curled his fingers downward and placed his thumb against the engorged numb at the apex of her sex, pulsing his hand in a steady rhythm that had her hips gyrating in time. He could feel her walls clenching and releasing around his fingers and knew that she was getting closing on her peak.

A whispered incantation unfastened his belt and banished his shorts as he withdrew his hand and smoothed his wet fingers over the puckered hole winking at him. Quickly, he lined himself up with her pussy and pushed home just as he pressed the first digit of his finger into her from behind. The answering shout was more than enough encouragement for him. “Just testing the depth of your cauldron, Miss Granger. Nothing to panic over.”

“Harder, Severus. Oh Gods, I’m so close,” she whispered to the tabletop.

He grinned at her response and snapped his hips forward, wiggling his fingertip in her behind as he ‘tested’ her equipment. For long minutes, the only thing heard in the library were happy groans and the sounds of sex. Severus felt himself straining to hold on as Hermione’s climax continued to build, more turned on by his role as ‘Professor Snape’ than he thought possible. Finally, they crested the hill together before collapsing in a sweaty heap on the antique table.

He began to laugh as he looked down and saw his cheek was pressed to the artisan marquetry, which prompted a questioning look from his thoroughly shagged out lover. “What?” she asked.

“I told you we’d find another use for the table, love.”

Their joint laughter rang through the room as they slumped to the ground.
Happy New Year!

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus ring in the New Year in style.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus woke on New Year’s Eve morning to find the bed next to him rather cold and smirked sleepily. He couldn’t hear the shower running, so that meant that Hermione had likely procured a bacon butty from the elves and closeted herself in the library again. She was definitely a woman after his own heart.

It was just as well. He had preparations to make.

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Hours later and chores done, Severus finally entered the library levitating a lunch tray in front of him. As he suspected, Hermione was sitting on the divan with her nose buried in a three hundred year old treatise on the use of transfigured ingredients in potions. She glanced up when he set the tray down on the repurposed card table (and occasional erotic surface).

“Hey there, sleepyhead,” she said with a smile. “You’re up late today.”

Severus shrugged nonchalantly. “I assumed you’d be hip deep in books in here and used the opportunity to do explore some of the unused bedrooms off the upper gallery. I think I’m going to expand my bedroom into a proper master suite, now that you’ll be living here too. Put in a real closet, expand the bath. I was just exploring some of the possibilities.”

“That sounds lovely,” she responded. “Perhaps I might convince you to put in a soaker tub?”

“Already on the list.”

The smile grew. “I knew I loved you for a reason.”

“For my attentiveness to the important question of household plumbing?” he asked with a raised brow.

She appeared to think for a moment before nodding her head decisively. “Yes.”

“Love you too, darling,” he drawled sarcastically before offering his hand to pull her up from her seat. “Leave the book for a bit. You need to eat.”

“Mmm, yes. Smells divine.”

Severus slid a bowl of soup in front of her as she slid into her chair. “Primmy made cream of
asparagus soup.”

Hermione sipped from her spoon. “Primmy is wasted here on her own nine months of the year,” she said, closing her eyes after a mouthful of soup. “This is amazing.”

“I am well aware,” Severus smirked, dipping into his own bowl.

They ate in companionable silence for some time before Hermione leaned back in her chair. “So it’s New Year’s Eve,” she began.

“Yes.”

“Have we any plans?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, taking another spoonful of soup.

She waited. “...and those plans are?”

He glanced up at her again. “Those plans are for me to know and you to find out,” he said imperiously. “Though I would suggest meeting me in the dining room for a late dinner at half nine. Primmy is making a heavy tea to hold us over until then.”

“The dining room? We never eat in the dining room!” She was right. They’d generally eaten in the library or the kitchen throughout her entire stay.

“Correct. Tonight we shall. We are, after all, celebrating the passage of a year together. A rather good year.” He paused. “I thought a full dinner would be more appropriate than soup and sandwiches to mark the occasion. I’ve asked that champagne be served with dinner, so a more formal setting seemed just the thing.”

“Formal? So I should wear a dress, then.”

He shrugged. “Wear what you like, Hermione. It will only be us. I will not object to anything you wear.”

“I’m not going to wear my pajamas in the dining room, Severus,” she huffed. “And I think I’d like to dress up for you tonight, even if it’s just us.”

“Thank you. I’ll admit, I do enjoy seeing you dressed up. It means I get to muss you later.”

“You animal, you.”

“Indeed.”

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Severus inspected himself in the cheval mirror before exiting the spare bedroom to which he had been banished whilst Hermione dressed for dinner. He’d opted to follow suit -- hah -- and dress up so that Hermione would not be alone in her finery. In a way, he felt as though he was dressing for dinner as his grandparents surely had more than a hundred years ago, though he’d opted for a well-cut Muggle suit rather than dinner jacket, waistcoat, and stiff collared shirt. Not that he didn’t have
those things, but they were deucedly uncomfortable comparatively.

A quick look at his hair (he needed to get it cut again) and pockets had him nodding at himself in something approximating approval before he dashed down to the stairs to assess the dining room.

*Candles? Check.*

*Gourmet dinner (thank you, Primmy) under covers? Check.*

*Flowers, linens, and what remained of the good silver? Check.*

*Champagne in ice bucket? Check.*

*Lover? He turned at the sound of heels on hardwood. Oh, yes, definitely a check.*

He turned to find Hermione wearing a simple, knee length cocktail dress in deep burgundy. She’d kept those maddening curls down around her shoulders, where they skimmed against the exposed skin of her back and shoulders.

“You look beautiful,” he said, walking toward her to take her hand.

“Thank you, Severus. You look very handsome as well.” Hermione stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, reaching up to brush his hair off his brow. “I do love the look of you in a Muggle suit.”

“Hm. It seemed appropriate.” He gestured toward the table and moved to pull out a chair. “M’lady? Dinner has already been served.”

Severus watched with some pride as her eyes widened when she caught sight of the gleaming silver covers and polished crystal flutes on the table. “Goodness. You certainly pulled out all the stops.”

“Thank Primmy. I simply told her I wanted to have an elegant meal with you tonight, then left it in her capable hands.” He turned to the ice bucket and reached for the champagne bottle (thankfully already opened) to pour her a glass. “We haven’t gone out much, just you and I. There have been galas and balls, but really we’ve only had a handful of dates if you think about it.”

She smiled up at him. “I suppose you’re right. But...I don’t really need you to take me places. I just love being with you. You know that, don’t you?”

He nodded. “I do. I know you love me Hermione. More importantly I know you trust me enough to simply tell me when you need something from me. If you feel cooped up and in need of a night on the town, I suspect you will suggest it yourself.”

“You know me so well,” she said with a laugh before.

“And aside from that,” he continued, “I felt the need to do this for myself as well. I enjoy your company as well, Hermione, but sometimes a bit of overt romanticism is a welcome change.”

He poured his own wine before taking his own seat and flicking his napkin into his lap. Catching his lover’s eye, he raised the flute toward her. “To the end of the year and the beginning of the next. Thank you, Hermione, for four of the best months of my life.”

He smile was distinctly watery when she clinked her glass against his. “And to you, my love. This year was about re-connection. I hope the next is about healing.”

*As long as I have this woman, I will be happy.* He sipped his wine in acceptance of her toast and savored the explosion of bubbles and dry taste on his tongue. A wave of his hand banished the
covers on their meals and sent them to the kitchen, revealing caviar crusted sturgeon on a bed of baby fennel and parsnips beneath. Severus picked up his fish fork as he sent another silent thanks in the direction of his house elf.

They ate companionably, enjoying one another and letting the conversation drift from topic to topic without any particular rhyme or direction. Hermione’s hair glowed in the candlelight with deep auburn strands glinting beneath the darker curls. He thought she’d never looked more relaxed or more lovely.

The meal was light -- just the entree and a salad -- followed by fruit and more champagne. By the time they were finished with their dinner, both Severus and Hermione were feeling just the slightest bit tipsy. A glance at the clock showed that it was nearing eleven. Perfect.

“Shall we adjourn to the drawing room, Hermione?” Severus asked, rising and offering his arm to his dining partner.

“Gladly,” she said, placing her arm in his and allowing him to draw her from the table. “You’ll have to remind me where it is though,” she said in a stage whisper.

His low chuckle sounded as he led her from the room.

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It had been a simple matter to set up a portable stereo with a CD mix in it. Severus led Hermione to the center of the room, which he’d cleared of furniture earlier in the day.

“What’s all this then?”

“I thought you might enjoy dancing. Normal dancing. Not one for the press the photograph or Ministry flunkies to comment on.” He turned her to face him, drawing her toward his body in a stance closer than any waltz would allow and placing his warm hand on her waist.

With a contented sigh, Hermione stepped into his embrace and laid her head on his shoulder as he began to sway to the music. Rather than the formal, classically orchestrated music of the balls they’d danced at before, Severus had selected a series of songs from his own music collection and placed them on a single CD. As a result, they swayed in place to Al Green’s “How Can You Mend a Broken Heart” in the middle of the drawing room. The effect was as he’d hoped -- the smaller drawing room was just intimate enough for the two of them. Severus allowed his eyes to drift closed as he rested his cheek on Hermione’s head.

The swayed together through half the mix before either felt the need to raise their head. Al Green gave way to Roberta Flack, then The Moody Blues, Norah Jones, and Styx. It wasn’t until the Bee Gees came on that Hermione shifted and began to giggle. Severus drew back and regarded his love with a raised eyebrow as if to ask if she had something to say.

“Sorry. The Bee Gees don’t really seem your style, love.”

Severus sighed in mock displeasure. “I was going for romantic,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “Little of my music collection lends itself to slow dancing. Now hush and sway to the music, if you please.”
Throwing her head back with a laugh, Hermione did just that. At least, she tried, but she lost it completely when The Bee Gees gave way to Elton John then, inexplicably, Journey. ‘Open Arms’ had her shaking so hard that she couldn’t quite keep it together. A quick glance at the time revealed that it was nearing midnight. A quick flick of his wrist had the CD advancing to its last track and Hermione calmed as Semisonic’s cover of The Hollies’ “Air that I Breathe” began to float out of the speakers. The carriage clock on the mantle began to chime the hour as the last notes of the song sounded.

“Happy New Year, Hermione,” Severus said, placing a gentle kiss on her lips.

She slid her finger from his chest up into his hair, pulling his head closer to hers. Severus leaned in and allowed her to draw him deeper into the kiss, choosing to wind his arms around her waist and pull her in tightly. They stood like that as the chimes marking the midnight hour struck home and faded away.

Breaking the kiss, Severus stepped back and led Hermione toward the low divan under the window. His heart felt as though it was in his chest as he sat on the stiff-backed seat next to her and took her hand in his own.

“Hermione, I’m not always the most adept at expressing my sentiments. But I would be remiss if I didn’t take the chance to do so now.” He paused and cleared his throat. “I love you. I believe I have loved you for years, but these past few months have shown me more than anything that I want to be with you, and only you for the rest of my life. You’re everything I never thought to dream of in my youth, and I want to live with you, teach with you, fly with you, make love with you, and raise a family with you. Will you marry me?”

Hermione watched him with wide eyes as he completed his speech, already nodding her head as he uttered those four, frightening, life-changing words.

“Of course I will, Severus. Oh, I love you too. So much.” She threw her arms around his neck and sniffed (somewhat inelegantly) into his collar.

“Oh, thank Merlin!” Severus gasped in relief. He struggled to get his hand in his trouser pocket with Hermione half-seated in his lap. “I suppose I can give you this, then.”

Hermione pulled back and looked at the small velvet box in his hand and reached out to open it. Inside nestled a simple band with five stones – an ascher cut diamond flanked by two opalescent citrines and two obsidian baguettes.

She let out a gasping laugh and pressed her hand to her lips. “It matches the others,” she finally said, looking at him with slightly teary eyes.

He nodded. “I bought it for you seven years ago, intending to propose shortly after the Ministry ball. It originally had emeralds and rubies, but I had Mome replace them with our stones. I thought, perhaps, that these represented us better than house colors now.” He removed the ring from the box and slid it on the ring finger of her left hand.

“I love it,” Hermione said softly, admiring the way the light seemed to pool in the center stone and warm the baguettes.

“I rather hoped you would,” Severus replied with a crooked smile before leaning in to kiss her again.

Hermione’s lips were warm and soft as they parted beneath his, and he could feel the cold press of metal, still warming to her body temperature, as she slid her hand up his neck and into his hair.
a groan, he slid his tongue past her lips to flick against hers in a dance that was exciting in its sheer familiarity. This was his witch. His fiancée. His lover. And she felt the same for him. The same need, the same desire to be with him for the rest of her days. The same love.

It was humbling beyond belief.

Severus was so caught up in the sheer wonder of knowing that this woman would be his -- and he hers -- forever that he barely felt her hand as the trailed down his chest. It wasn’t until she began fumbling at his belt buckle that the sickle dropped.

“Hermione,” he gasped as her warm hand slid inside his trousers to caress the obvious evidence of his arousal.

“Yes?” she said coquettishly.

He hissed as she grunted in frustration and simply banished his clothes; trousers, pants, shirt -- the lot. She set to work on the zipper of her own dress as he stared at her in fascination while she struggled with her layers.

“Hermione, what are -- we’re in the drawing room.” The zipper appeared to be caught on a piece of fabric.

“Well spotted,” she panted with a smirk before giving a little cry of triumph as the zipper teeth caught and separated. “I’m testing a theory,” she said as she shimmied out of her dress, then her knickers. She left the bra, which he noted was a lovely lacy thing in dark purple that cupped her breasts just so and seemed to offer them up for his delectation.

With a mental apology to his long-dead ancestors, Severus threw caution to the wind and decided to enjoy the moment. He skimmed his hands up his witch’s waist and toward her lace-covered bosoms, running gentle fingers along the edges of the garment and watching her shiver. “And what theory might that be?”

“Mmmm. Don’t stop,” Hermione responded. “Um. Theory that -- well, we’re engaged now.”

“Just, but yes.” He leaned forward to nip at the flesh that rose just above the bra cups, catching his own breath as she began to grind her hips against his rather insistent erection.

“Well -- oh, yes! Um. I was testing the theory that engaged sex is better than dating sex.

He tugged down he cup of one breast and nuzzled at her softness, wrapping his tongue around her nipple. “And your conclusions, Professor?” The silkiness of his voice was somewhat muffled by his position.

“Incomplete. I’ll need to do some testing to formulate anything --” she slid the tip of his cock toward her opening “-- conclusive. Now, Severus.”

He needed no further prompting. Placing his hands beneath the globes of her arse, Severus slid forward and thrust up, bringing Hermione closer so that her legs wrapped around his hips. They moaned in unison as gravity brought her pelvis down to meet his.

It was not, Severus reflected later, his finest hour, but it was one of the most passionate couplings of their relationship. Hermione pawed at his shoulders as he thrust into her like a man possessed, bracing his feet so that he could use the floor and the back of the divan as leverage. The shriek that elicited seemed to be one of approval.
IT was over almost as soon as it had begun. Severus felt the tell-tale tingling at the bottom of the spine that signalled his impending release. “Hermione, I’m going to come.”

“Don’t stop,” she panted. “Whatever you do, don’t stop.”

Gritting his teeth against the need to indulge his own orgasm, Severus concentrated his efforts on helping Hermione reach hers. He slid one hand between their bodies and placed one work-roughened thumb against her clit. He was rewarded almost immediately as Hermione threw her head back and began to shake. Allowing his own restraint to slip, he felt his release rushing forth embarrassingly quickly. He came with a shout as Hermione was still coming down from her own orgasm.

She slumped against him and he, in turn slumped against the back of the seat. “Well, fuck.”

“You can say that again,” Hermione said into his shoulder.

“Have we proved your hypothesis?” Severus panted, cracking one eye open and receiving only an eyeful of hair for his trouble.

She slapped at his chest, the low light glinting off her ring again. “I thought you were a Potions Master, Professor Snape. You of all people know that proving a theory takes more than one test.”

A slow grin spread across his face. “Might I suggest we continue our explorations upstairs, then? Because if we stay down here I’m going to fall asleep on this dreadfully uncomfortable sofa-thing.”

A weak giggle was his answer as Hermione nuzzled into his chest. “Perhaps in a few minutes. I’m perfectly comfortable.”

Severus smirked inwardly as his head dropped onto the chair back. Oh, yes. 2006 is going to be a very good year indeed.

Chapter End Notes

So Severus’ music selection is not necessarily my taste. I mean, I like a few of the songs -- particularly the Norah Jones and the Semisonic. Be grateful. I almost had him put some Meatloaf on there.

Severus’ Playlist:
Al Green ‘How Can You Mend a Broken Heart’
Roberta Flack ‘In his Song’
Norah Jones ‘Don’t Know Why’
Styx ‘Babe’
Eagles ‘The Best of my Love’
Billy Joel ‘Just the Way You Are’
The Rolling Stones ‘Angie’
The Bee Gees ‘How Deep is Your Love’
Elton John ‘Your Song’
Journey ‘Open Arms’
Semisonic ‘Air that Breathe’
Start Spreading the News

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione return from the holidays and discuss some of the nitty gritty details of becoming a married couple.

The squeal that Minerva emitted when they returned to the castle at the end of the holidays was surely inhuman. It certainly wasn’t feline. If anything, it seemed to be a cross between the call of a bird of prey and the sound a gerbil might make if you accidentally stepped on it.

Severus had been happily unaware that Minerva was capable of making just such a noise. In fact, he might just obliviate knowledge of this very moment from his head upon his return to their rooms.

“Oh, Severus!” his employer cried once she’s ceased shrieking to draw air. “You wonderful boy! You absolutely brilliant man. I’m so proud of you!” Without further ado, Severus found himself with an armful of rather wiry, tartan clad den-mother as she proceeded to hug the ever-living shite out of him.

“Yes, Minerva. Thank you, Minerva. Air, Minerva, remains a necessity of life!” he wheezed.

She broke off the hug to swat him on the arm before grinning broadly at two of her favorite people. “Wait until I tell Mohinder that I’ve won our bet. I had you down for the holiday, he was banking on Valentine’s Day.”

Severus and Hermione snorted in tandem. “He really doesn’t know Severus well at all, does he?”

“Give him time, girly,” Minerva responded tartly before hugging both Severus and Hermione again. “Come. This calls for a celebratory drink. Champagne in my office, I think.”

Once they’d had been congratulated by half the portraits in the rogue’s gallery -- and after a rather loquacious speech from one former Headmaster Dumbledore -- Minerva cracked open a bottle of champagne and called her husband in to sit with the newly engaged couple. Mohinder was quick to express his genuine pleasure at their news and it wasn’t long until the talk between the two couples turned toward the wedding itself.

“You must be married here at Hogwarts,” Minerva said firmly. “I’m going to try very hard not to be a mothering harridan, but you met here. You live and work here together. And there is no place more beautiful any time of year.”

“Well, that takes the wind out of my sails, Minerva,” Hermione said cheekily. “We were hoping to be married in the knot garden come June. That way a few of our students could attend.” She shot a quick glance at Severus who nodded his confirmation of their previous decision.

“Perfect,” the headmistress said, clapping her hands. “That’s a lovely choice. I’d imagine you’d like to keep it small?”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s an option, once we invite the Weasley clan,” Severus muttered. “We would like to limit it to family and close friends, the Order, and a few select students,” he said, sliding a warning glance toward Hermione. “But even with those four groups we expect at least
seventy people.” He sighed and gave a tired smile. “Hermione has lists.”

“I can’t help it if I’m organized,” she protested.

“Anal.”

“Not in front of our friends, dear,” she admonished, grinning when Mohinder spluttered into his drink.

“Hermione, I do think you’ve spent entirely too much time with Severus,” Minerva reprimanded.

The man in question snorted. “I sincerely doubt that will improve with time, Min.”

The elder woman shot him a look of mock reproof. “I was rather hoping it would work the other way ‘round, actually.”

When Severus and Hermione returned to their rooms, it was a bit later -- and they were slightly more tipsy -- than previously anticipated. They opted to save their limited unpacking for the morning and retired upstairs directly.

It wasn’t until they were both beneath the duvet that Hermione turned toward Severus and deftly slid her leg atop his to snuggle by his side. “Severus?”

“Mm?”

“I’ve been thinking…”

“You never stop thinking.”

She huffed. “Hush. I’ve been thinking about something specific.”

“By all means, enlighten me,” he said rolling slightly to face her.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about children. Specifically...how soon do you want to have them?”

“No! No. Sorry. I didn’t mean to give you the impression that...just, no. I’m on the potion. You know that.”

“The potion isn’t infallible, Hermione. But I’ll take the no, for now,” he said soothingly. “As for how soon...well, I’d like to do things in the proper order at least.”

“What?”

“I’m a bit of a traditionalist in some areas, love. I’d like to be married before we start contemplating children.”

He felt her nod against his shoulder. “So would I. And maybe just have a chance to be married for a bit too. But I’d like to have children sooner, rather than later I think.”
“How soon is soon?” he asked warily. Really, they’d only been engaged for 72 hours!

“It’d be nice if our child could go to school with some of our friend’s children, that’s all.”

“I’ll agree, that it would be nice for said hypothetical sprog to have friends in school.”

She swatted him -- it seemed to be going ‘round -- and hissed “Don’t call it a sprog!”

He was grateful that the dark hid his eyeroll. He didn’t really want to be swatted again. “Ow! It isn’t even an it yet!”

“Still.”

“Fine. So...perhaps we can revisit the children issue in a year or two. Give ourselves some time to be married, as you say, but not so much time that our friends’ children are seventh years.”

“That sounds reasonable,” she said, settling down against him again.

“I’m always reasonable.”

She guffawed. There was really no other word for it. “That’s not true at all, but if it gives you comfort dear.”

“That’s it!” he declared. “I’ll show you unreasonable!” Without further ado he flipped her over and proceeded to show her how very unreasonable he could be when tested.

Hermione didn’t seem to mind a bit.

The next few days were filled with herding the students about the castle in an attempt to restore order after the long holiday. The third years, in particular, seemed particularly feisty. Severus had cancelled his plans for the Gryffindor/Slytherin class after the disaster of the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff cohort earlier in the day and made them run laps around the Room of Requirement. His official story was that physical fitness improved the strength of a caster’s hexes and shields. While technically true, the actual fact of the matter was that the students had excess energy to expel and it was far safer to have them run around the room like headless chickens than it was to have them cast anything at one another.

Or at him, for that matter.

The weekend came faster than it likely should have, and with it came the Saturday breakfast announcement that Professors Snape and Granger would be married come summer. Minerva made the announcement with cheerfully enough, but Severus was more than a bit surprised to find that the students themselves were, dare he say, happy for their two instructors. The only sour face in the room appeared to be Trelawney’s, and that surprised absolutely no one.

When the advanced transfiguration classes reconvened after the morning meal, Hermione was besieged with seventh year girls asking for details of the proposal, the ‘whirlwind romance,’ and the ring. Hermione was more than happy to display her engagement ring for the girls to see, but on details of the proposal and romance, her only comment was, “Girls, that’s very private. You don’t
see me asking you for details of your snogging sessions with your boyfriends, do you?” To which the girls shook their heads vehemently with saucer-shaped eyes and retreated into the classroom to prepare for the lesson.

Severus merely sidled up to his fiancée and smirked. “No details shared? That seems rather stingy.”

She quirked a flirtatious eyebrow in his direction. “I wouldn’t want to destroy their hopes, dear. I doubt many proposals could compare with yours. As for being stingy...do you really want half the school knowing the size of your --”

“Right!” He interjected.

“...library?” she finished with a wide grin.

“Tease,” he muttered low enough so that the students couldn’t hear him.

“Absolutely.” Without further ado, she began to wander the classroom and distribute a single mandrake leaf to each of the students, lecturing as she went.

“In your hands you each have a single mandrake leaf. No, Mr. Simmons, don’t place it in your mouth yet,” she said, catching the prefect before he did just that. “I need to explain a few things to you all first.”

“The Mandrake plant, as Professor Longbottom will have informed you in your second year, is a Level Three restricted magical foliage. That means that the distribution of Mandrake plant bits or potions containing those bits may only be undertaken by a trained professional. Who can tell me why?”

Rebecca Smythe was the first to raise her hand. The Head Girl gave Hermione at her most inquisitive a run for her money. “There are two primary reasons for the restriction. The first is because Mandrake root is the primary ingredient of three high level potions, one of which is the only known cure for petrification.” The girl blushed slightly, knowing that she was speaking to a recipient of said potion. “Mandrake is rare and difficult to cultivate and the root can only be used when fresh and harvested from a fully mature plant, so the Ministry restricts its distribution so that they can ensure a ready supply of the plant whenever needed.”

“Excellent, Miss Smythe. I know you know the second reason for the restriction, but let’s give someone else a go, shall we?” Hermione responded with a wink. “Mr. Plethlowe?”

“Mandrake leaf causes weird dreams and cloudy headedness when you smoke it or eat it. The Ministry regulates it just like every other magical substance that could get you high.”

Severus chuckled. “Inelegantly put, but in essence correct Mr. Plethlowe. The Mandrake leaf is a hallucinogenic when consumed in large enough quantity or smoked. Though it is also a primary ingredient in several common products including Wheezes’ ‘Patented Daydream’ consumable line. It is also an additive that many nefarious individuals slip into tea in an attempt to coerce the unwilling into less than savory pursuits. We will cover this in Defense next month.”

Surprised looks were exchanged around the room as Hermione finished distributing the leaves to each student.

“So, you now know that each of you are holding a regulated item. I have Ministry approval to give each of you a leaf. There are also a few extras should one of you swallow a leaf -- though I highly recommend you avoid doing so. After the hallucinations, you will experience severe digestive upset the likes of which can only be described as truly epic. Trust me on this,” she said with a pained
grimace for comedic effect.

Severus took this as his queue to pick up the ball. “You all know that you will need to keep the leaf in your mouth for a full month. You will not experience hallucinations, but the toxins -- and yes, those effects are because Mandrake is a toxin -- will cause you to dream and daydream. In these moments of altered focus, you should find and settle on your animagus form.”

“It won’t happen quickly,” Hermione chimed in. “In fact, you may have two or three possible forms emerge as a part of this process. Don’t worry as this is perfectly normal. You have all seen my animagus form now, but I can tell you that I saw not only my owl, but a fox kit and a squirrel as well. This is only the first step in the transformation process; you’ll be able to narrow it down later.”

“We recommend that you place the leaf between your lower jaw and your cheek, well away from your back molars so that you don’t accidentally chew the leaf. You will need to be exceptionally careful whilst eating or drinking. You cannot remove the leaf under any circumstances -- even whilst undertaking your evening dental hygiene routine,” Severus stated firmly. “You will need the leaf in place the full 30 days. Any removal -- even for a short time -- will reset the clock, so to speak.”

“Not that this is an excuse to neglect your teeth!” Hermione warned. “Now then, each of you will proceed through this process a different pace. We will continue to meet throughout the next sixty days to continue your meditations and visualization exercises. We will also begin basic wildlife classes for those who identify their animagus form quickly, so that you can prepare an environment for your transfiguration attempts. If, by chance, you lose or swallow your leaf, you may apply to me for a second chance. You will not get a third. Does everyone understand?”

The students nodded enthusiastically, eager to get to the next stage of the process.

“Very well. You may place your leaf in your mouth. Good luck to you all. And remember, we are here if you have any questions. Class dismissed.”

Later that evening, Severus turned toward Hermione as they sat on the sofa that evening, she grading papers and he perusing a new tome on defensive shields. “How many times did you swallow your Mandrake leaf?”

“Just the once. The resultant digestive fracas was more than enough to have me minding it more closely the next time. You?”

He muttered his answer under his breath.

“What was that, dear?” Hermione asked, shedding her abstraction to regard her lover more closely.

“Four times,” Severus bit off. He should have known better to start this conversation.

“Good lord. You must have been sick as a dog.”

“I was treated for dehydration twice as a result. It was highly embarrassing.”

“How did you manage to get more leaves? The Ministry only approves two attempts.”
Severus smirked slightly before seemingly returning his attention to his book. “Hermione, love. I was a Death Eater and Potions Master. Do you really think I didn’t have my sources?”

“Naughty boy. Or persistent boy. I’m not sure whether I’m impressed or appalled.”

The smirk broadened. “Turned on, maybe? Some women like a bad boy.”

She laughed outright. “It’s true. I’m only marrying you because your arse looks so wonderful in dark jeans. Top it with that leather jacket of yours and I’m gone.”

“I’ll just store that away for future reference, if you don’t mind.”

“Do.”

They both returned to their tasks for a bit before Severus spoke again. “Love?”

“Mm?”

“When we spoke about children last night...how many were you thinking? We haven’t really ever talked about it.”

She put her quill and papers down on the coffee table and turned toward him more fully. “I suppose we haven’t. How many were you thinking?”

“I asked you first,” he hedged.

“Fine,” she said crossing her arms. “I was thinking one with an option for a second.”

“Oh.” He was momentarily stymied.

“Were you thinking more?”

He scratched at his brow to buy a moment before replying. “I was. I was a lonely, child, Hermione. I’d rather hoped for a larger family.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How large?”

“Four or five?”

Hermione stared at Severus for a full minute before she could formulate a response. “Four or five? Who were you imagining would birth these myriad children, Severus?”

“Obviously as I am not carrying or birthing the children I am open to negotiation,” he replied uncomfortably. “I didn’t mention this to upset you, Hermione. I just thought we should both know our expectations.”

She calmed a bit at his logic. “Severus, can we afford that many children? Because I know what my salary is and, unless you finagled a much larger sum from Minerva when you signed your contract, I suspect that you are not paid that much more than me.”

“I suspect you are correct. But I do have my patent residuals, love. How do you think I could afford to purchase Prince House?”

She shrugged. “I assumed you inherited it.”

“I did not. I purchased it after Quintus Prince passed nearly a decade ago. I used my potions residuals
-- and the promise of further potions research -- to secure the downpayment and mortgage.”

“Goodness. So you’re telling me that you make enough money to support a large family.”

He chuckled at that. “Hermione, we could likely support twenty children if we chose.”

“I do NOT choose!” she said forcefully.

“Right. What about four or five?”

“I -- Severus, I don’t think you understand. There are trade-offs with each child. I’ll lose research time. Career advancement opportunities. Not to mention that two is more than twice the work of one. The effort each takes goes up exponentially. With five I wouldn’t be able to work at all! The burden on me will be greater than it is on you and, much as I admire Molly Weasley I don’t want to emulate her. I don’t want to lose my identity to motherhood,” she stated firmly.

“Alright, that I can understand. We would have help, though. We can hire help.”

“I’m not paying someone else to raise my children, Severus.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting!” he argued. “I said help. And it’s not as though you’d be in this alone. I would also help you as much as I’m able. There are some biological limitations, of course, but I want -- I need to be an equal partner in parenting. I want your success in all things, Hermione. Career, motherhood, social life. All of it. I’m marrying the whole of you, not a broodmare.”


He frowned a little before meeting her eyes. “That seems a reasonable compromise.”

“Okay then. We’ll start with one and see how it goes. There’s a chance that our child will terrorize us both so much that we’re too traumatized to ever have sex again.”

“Given your innate curiosity and my generally misanthropic character, this seems likely.”

She sighed and settled more firmly into the corner of the couch. “Something to look forward to then.” She paused again before tilting her head and scrunching her nose. “You’ve really earned that much from your potions residuals?”

“I’ve earned a fair bit. There’s also the war stipend. And Lucius has helped me invest some of it and I’ve received some returns.” He shrugged. It had never seemed terribly important to broadcast his financial situation, but his wife would need to know these things.

“I’ve a bit sit aside -- mostly from my war stipend -- but nothing to sneeze at really. I’d always intended it as a downpayment on a cottage.”

“I haven’t made great plans for most of it. Fixing up Prince House is a priority.”

She blinked at him. “You don’t have any dreams you want to pursue? No crazy items to check off your bucket list?”

Severus shook his head. “Not really, except --”

“Except?”

He fidgeted with his bookmark. “I’ve always wanted a boat.”
“A boat?” She stared at him, bewildered. “You don’t exactly strike me as the fun-in-the-sun sort, love.”

“Nevertheless, I’ve always wanted a boat. Not a large vessel -- just a small enough craft to jaunt to Ireland or France during the summer breaks.” He shrugged, embarrassed.

“There’s so much I still don’t know about you, isn’t there?” She smiled at him gently, then scooted across the sofa to press her lips to the tip of his nose. “Perhaps, after the wedding, you should get a boat.”

He blinked at her. Yes, he wanted a boat. But boats were impractical. Expensive to maintain. Thoroughly un Snape-like.

But he could see her, in his mind’s eye, emerging from the galley to embrace him as he steered them toward land for a picnic.

He could see a family in his mind’s eye, enjoying outings and exploring ruins along an unfamiliar coastline.

“Perhaps, after the wedding, we should,” he said softly before wrapping his arms around his soon-to-be wife. His lovely, supportive, dreamer of a soon-to-be-wife.
Happy Birthday, Severus

Chapter Summary

Severus has a birthday.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Between the mandrake leaf trials and Minerva and Hermione’s headlong dive into wedding planning, Severus didn’t notice that the ninth of January had arrived until Hermione wumphed down on his prone form first thing in the morning.

The pained grunt he emitted could only be described as undignified.

“Happy Birthday, Sleepyhead!” Hermione said with a soft laugh.

“Are you trying to kill me, woman?” he groaned, rolling so that her knee was no longer dangerously near his groin. He paused when he scented the delightful aroma of freshly brewed tea and peeked open an eye. “What time is it?”

“It’s ten, love. You’ve had your lie in, and now it’s time for birthday wizards to have their breakfast.” She made a little come hither motion with her wand and had a tray laden with thick card, a full English and, bless her, a hot pot of tea floating toward the bed. “Sit up now so I can get this settled.”

Severus did as he was told -- with, perhaps, a bit more alacrity than he was normally comfortable displaying -- and watched as she maneuvered the tray to hover over his lap and murmured a steadying charm. “This looks wonderful.” He peered at the tray more closely. “How did you get the elves to provide elderflower jam? It’s impossible to find this time of year!”

She sniffed in mock disdain. “The elves didn’t provide the jam. Actually, they didn’t provide anything. Do me a favor and don’t go in the kitchen for an hour or two.” She gave him a blushing smile as she watched him tuck in.

“I could get used to this.”

“A full English is a bit much for me to manage on a regular basis, but on special occasions, I think breakfast in bed can be arranged.” She stroked a hand down his sleep-fluffed hair. “You look like a cockatiel.”

He merely rolled his eyes and stuffed his mouth full of muffin to prevent a less-than-appreciative remark about her own wild curls. “Well this is a wonderful day to celebrate my birthday. Thank you, Hermione.” He wiped his butter smeared hand on his serviette and looked toward the card. “May I?”

He reached for the card with ill-concealed impatience, running a fingernail under the flap to pop the glue free. He pulled out a brightly colored card with a cartoon of a large cruise ship on the front, then flipped it open. He started with the blast of a ship’s horn sounded, not noticing the slip of paper that
fell into his lap. “What on earth?”

Hermione laughed. “Joke card, Severus. Close it and open it again.” He did as she bade and grinned at the repeated horn blast.

“Boats aren’t in the -- hah -- cards just yet, but I thought you might enjoy this one for now.”

“Muggles are fucking geniuses, they are,” he said, laughing like a schoolboy as he opened the card again. And again. Hermione giggled at his obvious glee, causing him to look up at her. “If you tell anyone about this, I’ll put a langlock on you in your sleep.”

“Understood!” she said, swallowing another chuckle as she sat next to him on the bed. “You’ll get the rest of your gift in a bit, but I was hoping you’d start your day with a smile. This one is from Minerva,” she said, placing another card on his breakfast tray.

He slid his thumb under the envelope flat and drew out a lovely wizarding card with -- heaven help him -- dancing potions vials on the front. Severus snorted before he could stop himself. “Minerva has the oddest sense of whimsy.”

“I think it’s all that time she’s spent in the Headmistress’ office. Dumbledore was quirky enough to leave his weirdness in that tower’s stones.”

He grunted in amusement as he flipped the card open to reveal a lovely note from Minerva and Mohinder that read, simply, “Happy Birthday, Severus, with many happy returns. You’re released from evening rounds for the next week and I hope you and Hermione enjoy this.” A slip of paper fell out of the envelope that revealed itself to be a certificate for two at Jaadoo, a new Indian restaurant that had opened in Hogsmeade.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. “That sneaky witch,” she said with a smile. “That’s where I was planning to take you tonight!”

“Well, I see no reason to change our plans. Perhaps we could invite Minerva and Mohinder to come with us? I’ve rather enjoyed their company lately.”

Her brows rose in surprise. “Great idea. I’ll send Minerva my patronus while you finish your breakfast.” Without waiting for a response, she rushed off to do just that.

He was just polishing off the last of his tomato when she returned and banished his tray to the kitchen. Without further ado she crawled back into bed with him. “So what are your plans for your birthday?”

He lay back and snuggled his arm beneath Hermione to draw her close. “I think I’ll stay right here for a bit. Though I do have some setup for tomorrow to take care of in my classroom --”

“Nope. That’s done.”

He quirked an eyebrow in surprise. “Really? How did you know what I needed?”

“You have very detailed lesson plans, love.”

“Oh, well then...I have no plans. I’m all yours for the day.”

She sighed and snuggled closer to him. “Mine for the day, hmm? Then perhaps you might join me in the shower, and then you can have the rest of your birthday gifts.”
His eyebrows rose higher in anticipation. “By all means, I’m happy to be surprised.”

Without further ado, Hermione flung back his covers and prodded him out of bed and toward the shower. “Go ahead and get started. I’ll join you in two ticks.” A quick flick of the wrist had the shower running and her flying out the door before he could say a thing.

Severus gave a mental shrug and stepped out of his sleep pants and into the jpt shower. Thank goodness for magical plumbing. In a matter of moments, the room began filling with steam.

He was just about to rinse his hair when he heard Hermione step into the room and close the door. “What took you so long?” he asked, pitching his voice to be heard over the splatter of water against the tiles.

“Just setting up the next part of your birthday gift,” she said, stepping into the shower behind him. “Oh, here, let me do that.” She took the bottle of shampoo from his hands and poured a dollop into her palm. “Sit down.”

He gave her a puzzled look, but sat when she raised a brow and gestured toward the shower bench that they’d conjured when they’d redone their rooms. Kneeling behind him, Hermione began to slowly and methodically wash his hair.

Merlin. He’d had no idea that having someone else’s fingers massaging his scalp could feel so wonderfully good. Hermione used the later from his shampoo to run her fingers through his wet locks, first washing the strands themselves but then concentrating on the skin of his scalp. The pads of her fingers probed and pulled against the over-tight muscles surrounding his skull, forcing them to release one by one. He hissed between his teeth a bit, surprised at how tender his scalp could be.

“I was not aware it was possible to carry tension in one’s scalp,” he muttered as her soapy fingers glided over the tiny muscles behind his ears and down to massage his jaw.

“You can carry tension anywhere, Severus, and the face and head muscles are some of the most neglected.” She moved on to his neck muscles. “Circe. You have rocks in here, love.”

“I’m aware,” he muttered, concentrating on not tensing against the pleasure-pain her fingers seemed to cause. “Why does it feel so good when it hurts so damned much?”

“Because your body knows it needs to release those muscles.” He could hear the frown in her voice. “We’ll need to do this a little more often, I think.”

After several more long minutes, she directed his head beneath the spray to rinse the soap from his hair, then applied a rather floral smelling concoction to the ends. “What is that?” he sneered.

“Conditioner. Don’t worry, I’m not putting any on your roots. But you need to replenish some of the oil we just washed out, love, otherwise your hair will overproduce it to compensate.”

Hmm...I feel as though I’ve had this conversation before. “You’ve tried to convert me to this before, haven’t you?”

“I have. Seven years ago,” she said softly.

“I remember,” he said quietly. “Had your attempts accompanied a scalp massage, I might have paid more attention to the lesson.”

“Duly noted,” Hermione responded, a slight laugh in her voice. “All done. Let me under the spray so I can do mine.”
He dutifully switched places with her and took full advantage of the new position to admire her rather fine backside as she began wash her own hair. He quickly scrubbed himself with his regular woodsy bath soap as he watched her attend to her mane of curls. “Are you even using shampoo?” he asked when he noted that her curls had no suds in them, despite rigorous lathering.

“Mmm, it’s called a low-poo. Stupid name, I know. But it’s better for curly hair, which tends to be drier anyway. It’s a very light cleanser with a whole lot of moisturizers in it. It’d be awful for your hair,” she said with a little chuckle before ducking her head into the stream of water. She reached for her little sponge and frowned when she noted that her lover held it firmly in his hands, already full of the lemon balm body wash she preferred.

“Allow me,” he rumbled, swirling the soapy sponge over her breasts. “I’m not terribly good with hair, but I know how to wash skin.”

Hermione smiled and flicked a wet curl out of her face, leaning back to enjoy his ministrations. Severus smirked a bit as he heard the hitch in her breathing as he gently cleaned her arms and hands, then moved the sponge over her stomach, then her mons. Turning her gently with his hand, he spread the citrusy suds over her shoulders and back, paying special attention to her buttocks before seating himself on the bench once more and gently rubbing soap over her legs. Hermione merely sighed and braced her hands on his shoulders to steady herself as her eyelids drifted toward half mast.

Severus dropped the sponge onto the bench with a soft plop, squishing the suds on his hands a bit before pulling her closer still. “Missed a spot.” Without further ado, he slid a soapy digit between the her folds and nestled the pad of his finger against the bundle of nerves nestled there. “I want to make sure you’re very clean, Miss Granger,” he said rumbled even as his erection pressed itself against her thigh.

“Hmm. No fair,” she said breathily.

“What’s not fair?”

“You’re using your Professor Snape voice. Leaves me powerless to resist you, wicked man.”

Said wicked man merely smirked up at here. “I know.” He felt her legs beginning to tremble a bit and quickly moved to rinse his witch clean. “We have this lovely long bench that you insisted on, love. Won’t you join me?” he asked, leaning back as far as the seat would allow and bringing Hermione toward him. He braced one foot against the shower wall and the other against the floor as she straddled his hips and sank down on him. They both sighed in pleasure as her heat surrounded him in the already warm shower.

“This was not the plan, Severus,” she said as she began to rock her hips against his.

He groaned at the feel of her warm, wet skin sliding against his. “What was the plan then?”

“Shower fellatio.” She grinned at his groan. “But your loss is my gain, I suppose.” Her breathing was coming more erratically as she attempted to banter with him, and he slid his hand between their bodies to help speed her over the edge.

“I’m here to serve, Miss Granger,” he said, reverting to the deep professorial voice that he knew spurred her on like no other. Until Christmas, he’d been worried that his love was almost entirely without kinks or fetishes... but apparently, she really got off on sleeping with her mean old Potions Professor.
What a hard life he led.

“Are you going to come for me Miss Granger?” he rumbled into her ear. He slid one slick hand up her torso to tweak her nipple as the other hand continued to play her like a precious instrument below. It took only seconds to send her over the edge with a keening wail that echoed off the bathroom walls. Severus felt his own abdominal muscles clench as he followed her into the abyss.

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Their hair was still damp as they dressed for the day. “So what grand plans am I to expect today?” he asked with an arched brow.

“Just dinner with friends tonight. I thought it might be nice to just have a quiet day at home together. We’ve been so busy with classes and memories and the holidays. I thought the best gift I could give you was an entire day of doing whatever you pleased.”

He wrapped his arms around her in a full-body embrace, resting his chin on his head briefly before replacing it with his lips. “You’re a wonderful fiancée, Hermione Granger. A queen among witches.”

She snorted. “I’ll take queen over being a bloody princess any day of the week. I didn’t want to presume, but…”

He laughed at that. “Presume away, darling. You’ve made my morning fantastic already.”

“I’ve prepared a small pile of books, a pot of tea and some scones, and a comfortable reading area for you. Shall we?”

“Have I told you I love you today?”

“You haven’t, but I’m always happy to hear it.”

“I love you, you wonderful witch.”

Her tinkling laugh warmed his insides better than the finest Italian espresso could have. “Come on then,” she said pulling him toward the balcony door.


“Oh ye of little faith,” she said with an eyeroll. “Are you a wizard or aren’t you?”

Bracing himself for the cold, Severus stepped out on the balcony and blinked. He was staring at what could only be described as a balcony greenhouse. “You did this?”

“With a little help from our friends, yes. We have a lovely room with a view, but we can only use the balcony for three months during the school year. It’s a shame. So Minerva asked the castle to transfigure the balcony into the greenhouse. I laid the warming charms and transfigured the furniture. Neville and Luna helped with the plants. Minerva’s gift was the ever-warm Brown Betty with several tins of tea from Mohinder. You’ll find a stack of books just waiting for your brilliant brain courtesy of the Potters and Weasleys -- minus the ungrateful putz, of course.”

Severus was astonished. The balcony had been enclosed with pristine sheets of glass that allowed a
270 degree view of the Hogwarts grounds, blanketed in snow. He pressed a hand against the glass and found it chilly to the touch, but inside the little ‘room’ it was cozy. He wouldn’t even need a lap blanket to feel comfortable. Against the exterior of the castle sat what appeared to be a very comfortable sofa, more than large enough for two to stretch out on, and two end tables stacked high with books. Mage lights hovered over the sofa to allow for reading even when the sun disappeared over the horizon (at four in the afternoon, this time of year), and a coffee table held a shining teapot with steam piping out of the spout.

“Hermione, this is beyond what I could have hoped for as a gift. Thank you. It’s precisely how I’d like to spend my day, so long as you’re occupying the other end of that sofa.” He smiled as her cheeks pinked a bit at his remarks.

“Severus, I’d be delighted.”

His birthday gift had made for a near-perfect morning and afternoon. He and Hermione had each cuddled into an end of the sofa, their feet and legs entwining where they met in the middle and covered in a tartan couch quilt (also courtesy of Minerva). When their stomachs grumbled, they summoned sandwiches from the elves, but otherwise the read undisturbed for several hours.

Severus found himself glancing up every little while just to look at Hermione, at the view, or at the tangible declarations of love and friendship that now surrounded him. The balcony was a cozy, plant filled haven, and he knew that he would spend many hours out here in the winter months, basking in the magical warmth it provided. A glance at Hermione showed her drowsing over her book, and he took the opportunity to look at her undisturbed. His witch was lovely, to be sure, but he found himself smiling not at her looks but at the love that she showed him -- not just today, but every day. *I don’t know how on earth it has transpired, but somewhere, someone has seen fit to give me a third -- fourth? -- chance at life. And I have no intention of allowing anyone or anything to muck this one up for me.*

He watched Hermione’s eyelids fluttered and returned to his book, looking up again only when she ran her foot over his instep and gave him a flirtatious smile. *I am a lucky man, indeed.*

Finally the mage lights above their heads pulsed and then turned a rosy shade of pink.

“That’s our half-hour warning. We need to dress and meet the others for dinner.”

“You turned the mage lights into an alarm clock?” Severus asked, surprised.

Hermione flushed a bit and nodded. “I tend to lose myself in my reading. I modified the charm a bit a few years back to remind me when I had to be somewhere. I thought it would be a good idea to do so here as well.”

“I’m going to be marrying the most clever witch in Britain.”

“Flatterer.”

He smirked. “Absolutely. Well come on, then. Let’s not keep our friends waiting.”

They dressed quickly in fairly casual clothes -- both in slacks and fitted jumpers -- and made their
way to the fifth floor. Severus shot her a querying look. “I thought we were going to dinner?” he asked.

“We are,” Hermione responded with a sunny smile. “We just have to make a stop.” She began pacing up and down the hallway as Severus watched in bewilderment.

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

“Absolutely. Now hush -- I’m concentrating.”

Moments later a door emerged -- came into being? -- in the wall directly in front of him. Without further explanation, Hermione took his elbow in one hand and the door handle in the other, ushering him into a small room draped in jade green fabric. There was a large, round table at its center filled with their friends.

“Happy Birthday, Severus!” The cry rose from every person at the table, and Severus quickly saw that the Longbottoms, the Potters, the Malfoys and Astoria Greengrass, and Minerva and Mohinder were gathered. A flute of champagne was pressed into his hand and a festive crown placed upon his head with some trepidation.

Severus stared for a full ten seconds before tossing his head back and laughing. He turned toward Hermione and gathered pressed a kiss on her lips. “Did you arrange all this?”

“Again, with some help. Welcome to the Room of Requirement, or, as it shall be known this evening, The Festive Serpent,” she said, gesturing toward the room.

“The Festive Serpent?”

“The name probably needs work. Dinner this evening has been provided by the Malfoys, who have graciously asked their elves to create your favorite foods for tonight. Draco and Astoria provided the champagne and the after-dinner brandy. Today has truly been a team effort, darling.”

Severus simply stared at the group gathered around the table and felt his own breath hitching. He was...humbled, for lack of a better word. This group of people had put aside their differences -- with him and with each other -- to make today the best birthday he’d ever had. He’d truly never felt so valued. Or so lucky to have such a wonderful witch by his side.

“Thank you, everyone,” he said shakily before raising his champagne flute. “To friendship.”

“To friendship,” they chorused.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still alive! I promise! A few of you have sent me private messages through FFN or Tumblr, asking if I'll post soon. I know I've been very, very behind. There has been life stuff happening. Big life stuff. Life stuff that might result in huge life changes in the next couple months. I'll keep you all posted, of course, so watch this space.

I'll try to get more updates done this week. Work has been surprisingly busy, so I haven't been writing as much. Blergh. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is exhausted and falls asleep after dinner most nights.
Deserving or Not

Chapter Summary

Another transitiony chapter, but I promise we'll return to plottage soon!

Dinner had been glorious. Severus was well used to the Malfoy’s elf, Parsnip, and her cooking -- and she was well aware of his favorites. They’d had arugula and apple salad, gorgeous hazelnut-crusted scallops (Ginny partook of those sparingly), and an English pea soup with balsamic reduction to start. For a main, Parsnip had served garlic and rosemary rubbed leg of lamb with roasted sprouts and creamy risotto with morels. Each course was served with an accompanying wine and dessert -- oh, dessert -- was a chocolate, pistachio, and hazelnut baklava that came with beautiful little cups of Greek coffee.

Conversation flowed around the table, but Severus was content to watch Hermione interact with her friends -- and his -- for most of the meal. She was almost effervescent, and upon reflection Severus realized that they’d largely kept to themselves or to Hogwarts in recent weeks. What time they’d spent out of the castle had been at balls or cloistered in his house. He wondered if she longed for broader society. It was a thought for later.

They’d just finished their coffee and dessert when he noticed Genevra gasp and twitch in her seat. Potter’s attention focused on her immediately. “Ginny? What is it?”

“Just a twinge,” she breathed. “Been having them off and on for a couple of hours.”

“Is it --”

“Yeah. Um, I think we’d better head to St. Mungo’s.”

Harry looked up at Severus in a panic. “Snape -- I’m sorry we need to --”

Severus chuckled under a bit a waved his hand. “Go, Potter! Take your wife to St. Mungo’s. We will follow shortly.” He nodded his head toward Ginny. “Good luck tonight, Ginevra.”

“Thank you, Pr -- Severus!” she said, a little short of breath. She batted at her husband’s hands as he ushered her into the floo. “I’m in labor, Harry, not incapacitated. St Mungo’s!”

“Oh, shite. The Weasleys.” Harry spun to look at Hermione helplessly. “‘Mione? Could you?”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” she replied soothingly, giving the younger man a tight hug. “I’ll floo them right after you go. I’m sure they’ll be there in a flash. No go to your wife. Shoo!” A moment later, Potter’s body whirled in a flash of green flames and he was gone.

“I suppose this puts rather a cap on the evening, Severus,” Lucius said with a smirk. He patted his old friend on his arm. “I realize you’ll be rushing off to sit with the Potter girl momentarily, but I wondered if I could have a word before you go?”

“Of course, Lucius,” Severus said with a raised brow. He was curious what his old friend had to say and guided him over to a corner accordingly. A raised eyebrow indicated that Lucius should proceed.
“I wanted to congratulate you, Severus. You and Miss Granger, really, but she is otherwise occupied.” He smirked a bit as Severus glanced over his shoulder to see Hermione’s behind sticking out of the floo as she spoke to the Weasleys. “I’m glad you found your way back to each other. At Narcissa’s suggestion, I wanted to offer you our chateau for your honeymoon whenever you’d like.”

Severus’s eyes widened slightly. He’d only been to the chateau once before, just before joining the Death Eaters. It was the only Western European Malfoy residence that had not been tainted by the presence of Voldemort in either the first or second wars.

“That’s very generous, Lucius,” he said, placing his palm on the older man’s shoulder. “If I my, I’d like to discuss it with Hermione.”

“Of course,” he replied, bowing his head slightly. “There was another matter.” He paused, paying close attention to Severus’s face as he spoke again. “Percival Weasley.”

Severus stilled. “Ah. I had wondered when you would hear about that.”

Lucius snorted. “Please. My sources are varied and efficient. What do you intend to do?”

“Not efficient enough, it would seem. We have settled on a consequence, though it does not go far enough nor is it much of a punishment, in my opinion. It is, however, the result that Hermione thought most suitable considering that the boy has just become a father.”

“Your witch is as soft-hearted as ever.” Lucius’s tone was dry.

“Indeed.”

“Would you permit me to look into matters of...consequences on your behalf?”

Severus inclined his head. “There would be limitations. You cannot touch his family -- wife, daughter, or the other Weasleys.”

“You underestimate me. I am more than capable of working around such a complication.”

“Then I -- we -- would be most grateful for your help.”

Lucius’s grin was slow and broad. “Oh, Severus. Believe me when I say this is entirely my pleasure.”

----------------------------------------------

They returned to their rooms at four in the afternoon the following day. Hermione flopped face-down onto their bed, arms flung out to either side, with an exhausted groan. Severus toed off his shoes before sinking down next to her and stretching his tired feet. Potter had spent most of his wife’s labor pacing the floor of the crowded waiting room (apparently the savior of the wizarding world rated a private waiting area) between being called into the room periodically so that Ginny could throw some very inventive hexes at his head. The crown of tentacles had really been the high point of the night.

Sixteen hours later, however, Lily Luna Potter came into the world. A quick floo call to Grimmauld
Place summoned Fleur (who had been kind enough to baby sit) with four children in tow like little stairsteps -- Victoire and Dominique at six and five years, then James and Albus at four and three years. The entire extended family had crammed into the tiny receiving room to greet the auburn-haired little girl who made her displeasure with birth and the presence of so many red-haired giants known to all by screaming her head off.

Severus turned to his side as Hermione started to snore into the mattress and maneuvered her limp body into his arms before resting his head on the pillow. She didn’t stir, done in by the physical exhaustion of an all-nighter and the emotional turmoil of knowing one of her best friends was in pain -- even if it was somewhat voluntary. So Severus took the opportunity to wallow in his fiancée, burrowing his nose into her curls and inhaling her warm scent (grapefruit and verbena today). With a contented sigh, he allowed himself to drift into sleep with her.

He felt as though he’d only just shut his eyes when a voice sounded from the floo. “Severus? Where are you? Answer your floo, you great pillock!”

Severus swung his legs out of bed and peered over the railing into the sitting room and spotted Minerva’s head in the fire. “Minerva, we’ve had next to no sleep. What on earth could you possibly want?”

“A name! What did they name the child, Severus.” Minerva looked positively gleeful at the prospect of another Potter in the world. She’d stood as honorary grandmother to all the Potter’s children as Harry had no parents of his own and was nearly as rabid as Molly when it came to spoiling the little tykes.

Severus merely rolled his eyes. “Lily Luna. Now kindly allow us our rest, Minerva. We’re both exhausted. I’ll see you at breakfast in the morning.” He turned away from the railing and made his way back toward the bed.

“Severus! What did she look like? Did she have red hair?” Minerva called from the floo.

“I suggest you visit your honorary grandchild yourself, Min, and leave a poor soul to rest in piece. I will volunteer us to monitor dinner tonight if that will allow you to attend the Potters.”

“Thank you Severus! That would be --” The rest of Minerva’s comment was cut off as Severus shut down and warded the floo against further disruption. He padded wearily back toward the bed and spooned against Hermione once more.

A sharp poke in his side alerted him to the presence of a foreign body in the bed. With a grimace, Severus shifted and reached under his torso to extract a crumpled piece of paper from beneath him. He recognized it as the slip that had fallen from his card yesterday and been forgotten. He unfolded it and read it curiously, sitting up as his eyebrows rose up to his hairline.

“Hermione?” he inquired in a low voice, waiting for her to stir. “What is this?”

A bleary eye peered at him from beneath a mound of curls. “From m’parents. ‘Gagement present.’

“Did you happen to speak to your parents about my little...boat thing?”

“Mmmhmm,” she said with a sleepy smile, snuggling into his side. “Yer warm,” she said into his abdomen as her arm snaked around his hips to draw him closer.

“And you know what this is?” he said, shaking the paper in her ear.

“Told you. Present. Less talk, more sleep.”
“Hermione, you parents bought us a cruise. Why the hell would they do that?”

She made a snuffling noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “Boat.”

“A cruise is not on a boat, Hermione. It’s on a ship.”

“Oh, ferfuck’s --” she sat up at last, scraping her hair out of her face. “Yes, Severus. They bought us a cruise. They thought it might make a nice honeymoon. If you don’t like it, we can return it. Hell, they’ll probably just go themselves.”

Severus drew in a calming breath and backpedaled. “I didn’t say that. Don’t put words in my mouth. It’s just...a very large gift.” He faltered, looking at the paper again with a tilt of his head. “A very nice gift as well. Did you help them choose this?”

She shrugged, the movement causing the strap of her top to slide down her arm. She really did look deliciously disheveled, still in her dress from the previous night, her hair askew and mascara smeared beneath her eye. If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought Hermione had been on a bender.

“I suggested the location. I thought you might want to go someplace new. You haven’t been to Alaska, right?”

“I have not. I’ll admit, I’ve long wanted to go.”

“Well, there we are then. They know we’re planning for a wedding mid-summer, so they reserved a cabin for us in late June. We can apparate into Edinburgh tonight, find a cell tower, and thank them.”

“Ah...not tonight. I promised Minerva that we’d monitor the evening meal so that she could visit the newest Potter.”

Hermione merely groaned and sank back into the pillows. “Of course you did. Fine, we’ll owl...but next weekend we have free we’re going into Edinburgh.”

He chuckled and slid back down in the bed himself. “Understood.”

Later that evening, he found himself reading the letter and examining the attached voucher once again.

Dear Severus,

Happy Birthday, and many happy returns! Hermione tells us that you’re 46 today, which both Norm and I remember with some fondness from many years past. We were 46 the year we discovered that our daughter had a foot in both your world and ours, and despite everything we’re grateful for all that it’s afforded her -- particularly as it has afforded her a partner that she clearly loves very much.

We wanted to congratulate you in person after Hermione told us of your engagement, but we know that the school keeps you very busy. We hope that you’ll find some time to come visit in the upcoming weeks so that we can officially welcome you to the family. We’re so proud of our Hermione -- proud and happy that she has become such a fine
woman, given so much back to her world, and found such a lovely person to spend her life with.

Severus snorted. Lovely? Him?

_Our daughter has spoken some about your role in the war -- your bravery and your sacrifices -- and we cannot tell you how proud we are to have such a fearless individual as our son-to-be. We can see how much you love Hermione and know you’ll be her staunchest defender and biggest support._

_We both hope that you’ll enjoy this small gift for your engagement. Don’t be cross with Hermione for telling us of your fascination with things nautical; Norm and I thought it like pulling teeth (sorry, dentist joke) to gather enough information to find something that would suit you both._

_Again, welcome to the family, Severus and Happy Birthday._

_All our love to you and Hermione,_

_Helen and Norm_

Severus set the letter down in front of him and pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d been sitting in the semi-darkness in his private office for more than an hour, reading and re-reading the letter before him.

Norm and Helen were happy -- thrilled, even -- that he and Hermione were to wed. Helen’s words communicated the kind of enthusiasm that he saw in his fiancée on occasion, though her joy seemed to be of a quieter sort. He couldn’t help but reflect that Hermione would not have received such a welcome from his own parents, had they lived. That thought saddened him.

The gift was one thing. A tangible reminder of her parents’ joy and their pride in their only child. But the letter was something else entirely. Severus knew what was being offered here.

Acceptance. Love. A family.

He wanted those things with Hermione, but he hadn’t anticipated having them with her parents. He could already envision family Christmasses with the Grangers doting on children filled with sweets and overexcited by the holiday. Family trips to Diagon Alley to gather the children’s school supplies. Perhaps fishing with Norm as Hermione and Helen sat in the garden with cold drinks. It was a picturesque image of domesticity that he’d never entertained before now.

And he wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab it with both hands.

The thought scared the every-flavor beans out of him.

In six months flat he’d gone from a resigned, if comfortable bachelorhood to suddenly having everything he’d never dared to dream for handed to him on a plate. And Severus Snape was all to aware the good things had a habit of being yanked away without warning or ceremony.

He started as warm hands settled on his shoulders.

“It’s late. Aren’t you coming to bed?”

He grunted, annoyed that he’d been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn’t heard Hermione open the door. “In a bit. I was just...thinking.”
“Knut for them?”

“Just that I’m...happy. I haven’t felt so in a very long time.”

Hermione slid around to plunk herself in his lap, smiling up into Severus’s eyes. “Perhaps,” she said slowly, “you should take it as your due. You spent years suffering; surely all that good karma had to go somewhere.”

He huffed a short laugh. “That has not generally been my experience.”

She gave him a knowing look. “Well, get used to it. Because if I have anything to say about it, this will be the new status quo.”

His arms moved to embrace her as he rested his forehead against hers. “I’m still not sure that I deserve you.”

“It’s not about deserving, Severus. It never was.” She pressed a quick kiss to the tip of his nose and stood. “That’s enough brooding for one night. Come to bed.”

With a nod he followed her out, leaving the letter -- the first written proof of his move into a newer, better life -- open on his desk as a reminder of his good fortune for when he next began to doubt.

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“Good morning, everyone,” Minerva stated as she started their Monday morning faculty meeting. “I hope you all had a restful weekend.” Severus barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

He listened as Minerva outlined the week’s academic activities before asking individual instructors to discuss their personal initiatives. Hermione took this as an opportunity to remind the faculty that a dozen students were wandering around campus with mandrake leaves in their mouths and that they might witness some uncharacteristically squirrelly behavior as a result. Severus simply stated that he would be scheduling training for those chaperoning the survival camping trip starting in early February. The other announcements -- Quidditch practices, the next match, meetings of the astronomy, astrology, and spellmaking clubs, and the inter house Gobstones tourney, were of little interest to him. Then Filius stood and cleared his throat.

“The dueling club is interested in hosting another exhibition day. A number of guests have already confirmed their attendance, but the club’s members have requested a rematch between our victor,” he nodded to Hermione, “and runner up,” he nodded to Severus. I have also reached out to several notable alumni to ask that they participate in exhibition duels. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley have agreed to attend, but asked me to contact you, Severus, as they said that you’d invited them to speak to your sixth and seventh years.”

Severus nodded at this last. “Yes, Filius. Schedule them as you will; I can work the curriculum around their visit, so long as Hermione can do the same.” He shot a questioning look at his fiancée.

“Hermione?” Filius asked.

“The Monday before Valentine’s day should suit. I’m setting my classes on transfiguring decorations for the castle that day -- stop it Severus,” she said when he gave a theatrical groan, “and will have most of those two days free both to play hostess to Harry and Ron and to join them in Severus’s
“Excellent! We’ll arrange the exhibition duels for the evening of the 13th after dinner. Um...will you both be willing to participate?”

Hermione glanced at Severus who merely shrugged in acquiescence. “Of course, Filius. Will it just be the four of us?”

“Oh! No, there are others who have agreed to be a part of the exhibition. Draco Malfoy, both Neville and Luna, and Mohinder have all agreed to participate!” the little man said, clapping his hands. “It should make for a delightful evening.”

“Delightful indeed,” Severus said in a tone that barely concealed his habitual sneer.

“Well I believe that is an excellent plan to allow some war heroes to make an impression on our students. I thoroughly approve,” Minerva said with a nod. “With that settled, I would also like to announce that we will host a short Valentine’s day dance for the fifth through seventh years and that the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term will be the following weekend. Hermione, Neville, Severus, and Luna will have Hogsmeade duties that weekend, so they are exempted from chaperoning the dance. Do I have volunteers?”

Filius, Septima, and Mohinder readily volunteered -- Mohinder shooting a look to Minerva that clearly indicated that they’d discussed his participation previously. Severus assumed they’d be spending the weekend after the holiday in celebration. Really, it was good of Min to assure that the younger couples got the evening off. As a result, Severus spent the rest of the meeting setting out his own plans for Hermione.

He turned to her as they left the staff room and offered an arm to escort her to breakfast. “Your parents have requested that we make some time to visit with them in the near future. I thought it might be nice if we arranged dinner with them this coming weekend or next. Neither of us have weekend duties until February.”

“That would be lovely,” she replied with a nod. “I’ve been doing some thinking about the wedding, and I’d like to talk to Mum about it some anyway.” She glanced up when Severus’s arm tightened slightly beneath hers. “You need be only as involved as you wish to be, love. I still don’t want a large wedding, but I would like a pretty dress for the occasion.” Her smile was soft as she said it.

“A muggle dress, I assume?”

“Mmmhmmm. Not white, I think. It’s not a color that suits me.”

“And have you decided what I should wear?” he asked with some trepidation.

“Oh, Severus,” she said, his laugh ringing through the hallway. “I’m not about to turn into bridezilla on you. Wear what you like; so long as we end up married at the end of the day, I’ll be content.”

Severus gave a little smile as he escorted her into the Great Hall. Deserving or not, he found himself very grateful for the witch in his life.
“Hermione, Severus! Come in, come in.” Helen Granger opened the front door wide to allow the couple in. They’d managed to snag an entire weekend off from Minerva -- in return for Severus and Hermione following the dueling club demonstration with an hour of practical lessons for attendees -- and were staying the entire weekend with Hermione’s parents. Severus gave his soon-to-be mother-in-law a small smile before allowing her to wrap him in a tight hug. It was, he discovered, not an unwelcome sensation. Helen felt motherly. Like a cross between being hugged by Hermione and Molly Weasley simultaneously. A moment later he found himself reaching out grasp Norm’s hand in a friendly shake before being pulled into a tight hug -- with a hearty whump on his back to accompany it.

“We’re so glad you could both get away for the weekend. Here, let me take your bags up, then we’ll have a quick nip before dinner, eh?” Without further ado, Norm grabbed Hermione’s purse and Severus’ small leather duffel and shuttled them up the stairs.

“He’s been looking forward to this since you called two weeks ago,” Helen stage-whispered conspiratorially. “He’s been telling all and sundry that our daughter is engaged and what a fine, upstanding man she’s chosen.”

Hermione snorted inelegantly. “You’d think I’d just won the Nobel Peace Prize or something.” She caught the faux-hurt look on her fiancé’s face and stuck her tongue out. “Don’t look at me like that, love. I’m thrilled to pieces that you proposed, but you have to admit it’s not quite on the same level as saving the wizarding world. Which -- oh wait! You’ve done that too!”

“As have you, dear,” Severus said with a slight chuckle. “I am, however, pleased that your parents approve,” he said, settling into a corner of the couch and allowing Hermione to nestle into his side. “I didn’t exactly go about it in the traditional manner. Your father could have chosen to be upset that I didn’t visit and ask for his approval first.”

“Oh, pish,” Helen said, handing Hermione a small sherry and Severus a rather larger whisky. “We don’t do that sort of thing anymore, dear. Non-magical peoples, I mean. Feminist revolution and all that.”

“Ah. Then I should stop worrying that my father-in-law is going to impale me with a rusty object during my stay?” Severus joked in return.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Norm said, coming down the stairs and pouring his own drink. “I kept a rusty melon ball scoop around for the red-headed twerp. I’m sure I can dig up some dental scalers or something equally menacing to threaten you with if you hurt my daughter,” he said with mock severity from beneath beetled brows.
“Dad,” Hermione exclaimed! “Please tell me you never threatened Ronald with a melon ball scooper!”

There was a pregnant pause. “And if I did?”

Severus cut Hermione off before she could work herself into a full bluster. “Then I’ll thank you for your foresight. He may have apologized,” he said with a glance at Hermione, “but that doesn’t mean he didn’t play the arse.”

“Great. I suppose now I’ll have to deal with three overprotective men in my life now.”

“Three?” Severus asked, brows raised.

“You, Dad, and Harry,” Hermione shrugged.

He sneered. “Well, I suppose I’ve been in worse company.”

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The weekend turned out to be a lovely, relaxing trip for both Hermione and Severus. They spent more than a bit of it ensconced on the Granger’s couch, watching old movies with her parents. They’d worked their way through “Becket” and “The Lion in Winter” before Severus noted that both Hermione and Helen sighed periodically, but it wasn’t until Hermione selected “How to Steal a Million” that the galleon dropped.

When Helen wandered off to find some more tooth healthy snacks -- popcorn was definitely verboten in the Granger household -- Severus leaned in and whispered in Hermione’s ear. “So what, exactly is so wonderfully attractive about that actor that both you and your mother sigh each time he comes on screen? He’s no more handsome than half the Hollywood idols of the era.”

Hermione shot him an incredulous look. “Honestly, Severus, sometimes I think you’re deliberately obtuse. He has the most glorious voice!”

“Does he now?” he said with raised eyebrow.

“Mmm. Absolutely.”

“I never knew that was a particular...obsession of yours.”

Hermione snorted. “Severus, his voice is a replica of yours, just at a slightly higher timbre,” she said, snuggling closer.

This shocked Severus into silence, which itself elicited a burble of laughter from his fiancée. “Oh dear, have you gone shy on me now?”

Severus grunted as Helen returned to the room. “You’ll pay for that later,” he growled in her ear.

“I look forward to it,” she whispered back with a smile.

Neither noticed Helen rolling her eyes with a smirk on her face.
The rest of their stay with the Grangers had been very pleasant. They seemed to focus their attentions on allowing Hermione and Severus to relax together. There was good food, drinks each evening, some basic wedding planning now that the date was settled (July 7), and a Sunday brunch with some of the neighbors who’d known Hermione since she was a child (and who thought she and Severus were Math and Chemistry instructors at a private school in Scotland). All in all, it was an enjoyable weekend.

What followed the weekend, however, was somewhat more enjoyable. The couple had returned to Hogwarts to find Lucius Malfoy’s eagle owl perched on a candelabra, impatiently waiting for Severus to retrieve the note tied to his leg.

Severus fed Iapetus an owl treat and broke the wax seal that bound the parchment together.

Severus,

Narcissa reminded me that your birthday celebration ended prematurely due to imminent childbirth. She wants to have drinks with you and your Hermione sometime after Valentine’s Day, if you’re free.

Speaking of your birthday celebration...I’ve put some things in motion that will have a rather direct effect on your least favorite red-headed menace. No need to thank me.

Send your reply with Iapetus.

--Lucius

PS: No it’s not illegal. And it won’t be traced to you.

“What on earth is he plotting now?” Hermione asked, reading over his shoulder.

“No idea. He promised some sort of retribution on Percy Weasley, but didn’t say what, exactly, he was planning. It’s likely best if we don’t know the details.”

“Hmph. As long as he doesn’t hurt him. Badly.” She paused. “No, I take that back. As long as he doesn’t hurt Penelope or the baby.”

“I think that goes without saying, my dear.”

“Does it? It’s not as if Lucius had any particularly compunction about hurting children during the war.”

Severus looked at her with a raised brow. “I thought you were friendly now?”

Her response was quiet. “We are. But it doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten what he’s capable of. What any of us are capable of, really.”
Later that night, as Hermione slept silently beside him in the Granger’s guest room, Severus found himself pondering his lover’s statement. They really hadn’t spoken much of the war since they’d reconnected. He pulled at the still disconnected threads of memory to their time together Before -- as he thought of their first affair now -- and he didn’t think they’d spent much time discussing it then. They’d likely both been too absorbed in recovering from their own traumas to deal with their respective roles in the war.

He adjusted his arm under Hermione as she shifted toward him, cuddling closer even in her sleep. He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead as she slumbered on and contemplated her peaceful face and thought about everything that had brought them here. A part of him desperately wanted to leave their past -- the wizarding world’s past -- buried wherever it was...but he couldn’t help returning to what she’d said.

What all of us are capable of.

Did she mean him?

Did she mean herself?

Severus closed his eyes in an attempt to get some sleep, anticipating a long conversation when they returned to Hogwarts.

“Severus, Hermione, you’re back! Good, you’ve students waiting for you in the Transfiguration classroom.” Minerva was practically shouting as she bore down on the couple.

Hermione waved her wand, banishing her bag to their rooms. “What is it, Minerva?”

“Come, come!” the woman said, scurrying away on surprisingly light feet. “You must see for yourselves.”

The younger couple shot each other a quick glance as they dashed after the Headmistress, following her up three flights of stairs and into the east wing of the castle. The arrived at her classroom door out of breath and, in Hermione’s case, verging on panic as the Headmistress flung open the door with a Cheshire cat grin.

Inside the room sat a sleek brown polecat and a chittering marmoset.

“Oh my goodness!” Hermione exclaimed. “Our first two animagi! Congratulations, both of you.” She hesitated a moment before glancing at her employer. “Who are they, Minerva?”

“If I may, Professor Granger?” Severus said moving into the classroom. “Allow me to add my congratulations, Mr. Schiffly and Ms. Minnotwood,” to the marmoset and the polecat, respectively. “This is quite the achievement indeed. Very well done and ten points each to both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.”
The two students shimmered for a moment before returning to their human forms. “Thank you Professor Snape!” Xandria Minnotwood exclaimed before turning to hug Geoffrey Schiffly. “We’ve been meditating every single night and we managed to not swallow our leaves. Then it just...happened. We both woke up in our forms. Um. Speaking of which…”

“Yes, Xandria. You can spit those out now.”

“Thank Merlin!” Schiffly exclaimed, removing the leaf and vanishing it with his wand. “It was like sucking on a piece of licorice flavored grass for the last month.”

“It wasn’t that bad, Geoff,” Xandria said.

The young Ravenclaw turned toward his friend and quirked a single eyebrow. “I hate licorice.”

“Sucks to be you then,” the Hufflepuff girl said, vanishing her own leaf.

Severus smirked a bit as he heard Minerva swallow a snort. “I’ll add my congratulations to the mix,” she said in a voice that was only slightly strained by repressed laughter, “and with your permission I’d like to announce your accomplishment to the student body at breakfast tomorrow. Perhaps it will encourage more of your peers to apply for advanced transfiguration next year.”

Both students nodded their agreement with enthusiasm.

“Now Geoffrey, Xandria, I expect you to serve as a resource for your peers in the class as they attempt their own transformations in the coming weeks. I’d hoped that no one would transform outside of our class sessions, but you two were clearly ahead of the curve. I’ll schedule another lesson for next weekend. Both of you will need to continue to transform to become at ease with your animal selves, but I will ask that you not do so outside of your dorms or this classroom if you can help it. Understood?”

“Yes, Professor Granger,” the two students chorused.

“Good. Now scat. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

Severus watched the two students scamper off before turning back to his longtime friend. “Well, Minerva?”

“Our first two animagi since the two of you. I couldn’t be happier.” She turned toward the door and allowed the professors to proceed her. “How was your weekend away?”

“Lovely,” Hermione said with a little sigh. “Very relaxing, and we’ve got our honeymoon all mapped out now. Mum and Dad gifted us a two week vacation in Alaska -- a week trooping around on land and another week on a cruise ship. I can’t wait,” she gushed.

Minerva made some humming sounds or agreement while shooting sidelong glances at the silent Defense professor. “Severus, I’d like to see you in my office before the evening meal. There are some details about the survival trip in April that I’d like to go over.”

“Certainly, Minerva. Hermione, I’ll meet you back in our rooms in a bit, shall I?”

With a nod and a quick peck on the cheek, Hermione drifted off toward the rooms with a proud little smile on her face for her students’ accomplishments.

Minerva wasted no time pouring two tumblers of whisky for Severus and herself, then sat on the burgundy velvet-covered divan near the fire, draping a tartan afghan over her knees. She waited
patiently for Severus to join her.

“Were there details that were lacking in my description of events for April, Minerva?” Severus asked.

“No, no, dear boy. Your plans were as complete as ever. I noticed that you seemed a bit pensive, and you’ve rarely seemed pensive of late. What’s wrong?”

Severus regarded his old friend for a long moment while he took a sip of his drink. “It isn’t anything earth-shattering, Min,” he said quietly. “At least, not by recent standards. Hermione simply said something that had me thinking last night, that’s all.”

“Oh?” She sipped and regarded him solemnly, waiting for him to continue.

“Something about knowing what we’re all capable of. I...was not sure whether she was referring to my past actions or her own. Or both.”

“She was likely referring to everyone she knows, dear,” Minerva said, reaching out to pat Severus’s knee. “I’ve spent a bit more time with Hermione in the past few years than you have -- no, I’m not blaming you, dear, I’m just stating a fact -- and we’ve had countless long conversations about the war. She was forced to grow up so quickly, Severus. More so than the others in some ways. What seventeen year old has to obliviate her parents, prepare to help two teenage boys survive in a tent for a year, break into a bank, and fight dark witches and wizards?”

Severus merely nodded, having thought many of the same things himself.

Minerva sipped again before continuing. “She felt incredible guilt when the war was done. You may remember a bit of that yourself, you were there for some of it. But it took years, really, before she came to terms with the deaths of her friends and the ruthlessness that she, her friends, and her professors demonstrated themselves capable of. I think her statement was referring more the fact that she no longer underestimates anyone anymore. That’s all, Severus.”

He nodded again. “I was worried that she thought of me...rather differently than I thought she did. I’m glad that this will not involve a long, drawn out conversation or jeopardizing our relationship,” he said firmly.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, Severus. Her statement clearly took you by surprise. I think it might be a conversation worth having, particularly as you’ll be married in just a few short months.”

Severus hissed through his teeth. “Damn. I was rather hoping to avoid it.”

“Have the two of you spoken about anything of consequence concerning the war recently?”

He frowned. “We have not.”

“I thought not. I’m pleased as punch that the two of you are engaged now, but I rather suspect that it has put your memory work behind. As a friend and, well, as a newlywed myself, might I recommend that you talk to each other about your concerns? No good comes from holding your feelings back.”

“I will take your advice under consideration Minerva. And...thank you.”

Minerva smiled and patted Severus’s knee again. “Any time, old friend. Now go back to your rooms and cuddle your fiance. Don’t forget -- next week Potter and Weasley will be in the castle for the dueling demonstration in the great hall. You may both want to ensure you’re in top form for your rematch.”
Severus chuckled before finishing off his drink. “Oh, I have a few surprises in store there, Min.”

“Of course you do,” she murmured as he left the room. “I’d expect nothing less.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: Lordy. I've been getting lots of concerned questions and comments from readers both here and on FFN.net. I'm so glad y'all care about me and about this story. Needless to say, things are busy. I'm working two jobs. It's summer at work, which is our busiest cycle. Mostly I'm just...bloody tired. Always. I'm hoping things will lighten up a bit starting next week because GAWD I miss writing. Just be patient with me, loves. Nothing (nothing nothing nothing) is abandoned. I'm just working my butt off to bring home the bacon atm.
“Good morning everyone. I hope you are all appropriately rested for today’s events. In case you have forgotten, today we are joined by Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Ronald Weasley, who along with Professors Flitwick, Snape, Granger, Longbottom, Longbottom and...well, myself, will be putting on an exhibition for the dueling club after dinner tonight. I expect a high turnout and excellent behavior from everyone,” the headmistress stated, slanting her eyes toward a clump of snickering Hufflepuffs near the back of the Great Hall.

“For those of you in the sixth and seventh year Defense classes, you will recall that Professor Snape has arranged for three guest lecturers to visit your class this week. Auror Potter, Auror Weasley, and Professor Granger will all be there to speak of magical wilderness survival, battle preparedness, and passive defense.

I hope that the first through fifth years are not too disappointed to be missing out on this wonderful opportunity, though I understand that if this year’s lectures are a success, they will be repeated next year. Regardless, the entire school is invited to a second dueling demonstration after dinner this evening in the Great Hall. The Dueling Club, under Professor Flitwick’s leadership, will be hosting with tea and cakes for dessert in celebration of the matches and tomorrow’s holiday. Even better, I believe Professors Snape and Granger have agreed to a rematch of their previous duel from last term. Now off to classes with you all! I want to hear of good behavior in all quarters today; it would be a shame for anyone to miss the demonstration due to a last-minute detention.” At this, Minerva glowered at the Hufflepuffs again, eliciting nervous snickers from the cadre of fourth years.

As the children stood to rush off to class, the Headmistress waylaid Severus. “Be a dear and have a word with the Baron about Peeves. I somehow doubt he’ll be able to keep himself away from a gathering that includes the majority of the school.”

Severus quirked a brow in response. “Indeed, I can well recall Peeves penchant for mischief. But it is already done. The Baron has promised to keep our local poltergeist in check for the evening. No guarantees on Valentine’s Day, though.”

Minerva sighed and cast her eyes heavenward. “Of course not. That would be too much to hope for.”

With a small smirk, Severus turned away from Minerva and offered his fiancée his arm, which she took with alacrity. “I assume your classes are prepared for their professor to go missing for half the day?”

She snorted. “I’ve sent them to the library under Pince’s watchful eye for today. They’re in groups researching the theoretical differences between transforming organic and inorganic, living and non-living, previously transfigured and fresh, and small and large objects. That should keep them well occupied. We’ll do a jigsaw when we reconvene later in the week.”

“A jigsaw?” Severus queried. The only jigsaws he could think of had rather sharp teeth.

“Um...it’s an active learning exercise that’s popular in Muggle schools. They’ve all found different information, then they’ll have to come back to class and present that information to the other groups. This way everyone has to synthesize at least a fifth of the information in order to teach it, but everyone has all the information available.”
“Intriguing,” Severus said. “I wonder if I could somehow make this work for my classes…” he trailed off, suddenly lost in thought. *Perhaps if I had them work in groups on deflecting hexes, curses, and jinxes. They could compare notes on the different methods of recognition and deflection. I’d have to put a good caster in with each group, make sure they had something to work with. It might work for the fourth years if I make sure to --*

“Hello? Earth to Severus?” Hermione said, poking him in the ribs a moment later.

“Hmm?” he glanced down at Hermione’s smiling face. “Sorry love. Now then, are you sure you’ll be alright with Weasley’s presence today?”

“We’ve already spoken about this. I’ll be fine. He and I have mostly settled our differences now and we can agree that I’m better off with you than I ever was with him.” Severus noted that she did not imply that Weasley was better off without her, but that was neither here nor there.

Severus nodded his understanding as they approached his classroom door. He opened it and allowed his lover to precede him into what appeared to be utter bedlam.

A quick glance around the room showed him what was amiss. Both Potter and Weasley were at the front of the room, seated on two of the three chairs he’d brought out for the guests. One could barely tell, however, as their presence was almost completely masked by his seventh years clamoring for autographs. It would appear that each and every student had brought their copy of the “Golden Trio” -- the photograph that had launched Dennis Creevey’s career. It depicted the three then-teenagers, smudged with dirt and blood, wands in hand and with their backs to the ruins of the castle’s main entryway.

It was a dramatic photo, to be sure -- and it would appear that some students were waving *multiple* copies at the two aurors -- but this was hardly the time or the place.

“Ahem,” Severus cleared his throat from the back of the classroom and was satisfied that, despite his more relaxed demeanor in the classroom, the entire class froze and turned as one. “Take your seats. You may request *autographs* --” he sneered the word “-- after class or before tonight’s dueling exhibition. Now, however, is the time for us to learn, not to behave like mindless sycophants.” He waited for the class to return to their seats and settle in. Meanwhile Hermione strode toward her two friends, giving Harry a tight hug, then bestowing a somewhat more cautious embrace on her ex-fiancé.

“Now that we’ve all found our sanity, please allow me to make some introductions. Our guest speakers today, as Headmistress McGonagall stated this morning, are Aurors Potter and Weasley and our own Professor Granger. The reason I have asked them to come and speak today is because they, unlike most wizards, survived in the wilderness for over six months without detection during the height of the second Wizarding War. They’re here to discuss their strategy in preparing for this experience as well as their choices for coping *during* what was, essentially, a prolonged camping trip on starvation rations. They’re here to answer your questions about survival, concealment, and useful spells. I suggest you pay attention as you will all be in a similar, if more controlled, situation in two months time. I’ll say no more now and let them speak for themselves.” He gestured toward the three child-heroes at the center of the room to the enthusiastic applause of his students.

“Well,” Weasley started with a goofy grin, “as I’m clearly the most famous here, I’ll start by saying that if you’re going to survive, you’d better pack a Hermione. Because without her, we would have been starved, naked, frozen, captured, dead, reanimated, and deaded again within that first month.”

The class laughed at this, but Potter chimed in almost directly. “Yeah, it’s funny when Ron here says it, but the fact is...he’s right. Hermione here planned for nearly every eventuality, and even someone
as smart as she is didn’t get it all right. So the first rule of magical wilderness survival: Don’t do it unless you have no choice. It’s not a camping trip. It’s not fun. And it can seriously strain even the strongest of friendships.

“We don’t talk about it much because it had to have been the hardest thing we’ve ever done as a group. And the group didn’t always survive it.” Harry glanced toward Ron here, who gave him a subtle nod to proceed. “Now, I’m not saying that you’ll have to hunt down then wear bits of an evil overlord’s soul in your own trip -- at least, I hope you won’t have to. But even without that, we nearly fractured.”

“I up and left just before Christmas that year,” Ron confessed. “We ran out of tinned food after the first month -- a gap in Hermione’s planning.” Hermione nodded at this with a resigned look. “I was hungry, tired, and frustrated. We didn’t know what we were doing. We had a goal, but no map of how to reach that goal. And, as Harry said, we were traveling with a bit of very dark magic dangling ‘round our necks. I cut and run after a particularly horrible row and didn’t come back for weeks, leaving these two here,” he jerked his thumbs in either direction, “to pick up the pieces and try to finish our mission without me.”

“Excuse me, Auror Weasley?” a young Ravenclaw raised her hand. “What exactly was your mission. None of the accounts after You-Know-Who’s fall really said.”

“Say his name, Teresa,” Hermione chimed in. “Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself. Though, I personally prefer irreverent nicknames. Ron, I believe your sister prefers Voldy-toes?”

The class chuckled again as Hermione continued. “We didn’t widely disseminate the full story of what Tom Riddle did because, frankly, the Ministry asked us not to. But sealing away information is never a particularly effective way to keep the public from knowing what happened. Part of the reason we three have come to speak to you is because Professor Snape has finally secured permission from the from the Ministry to teach about the origins of such dark magic and how to dispel it.”

The class waited with breath bated for the conversation to continue. It was Harry who picked up the thread.

“So who here has heard of a Horcrux?”

“Well, that’s a third of the battle done,” Harry said at the end of the class period. He ruffled a hand through his hair to satisfy the self-soothing habit he’d had since his own Hogwarts days.

“I honestly didn’t think we’d make anyone cry. Why was she crying?” Ron said, clearly baffled by the tear-streaked Hufflepuff who’d run through the room.

Severus snorted. “Your descriptions of hunger were rather...poignant, Auror Weasley. That one has always been a soft touch.”

“Leave off with the Auror this and that business, Snape. Just call me Ron like everyone else, will you? You’re marrying my best friend, so you can’t go ‘round calling me Auror Weasley from now until doomsday.”
“Very well, Ronald,” Severus nodded his head in acquiescence.

He made a face at Hermione in response. “Blimey, he’s worse than you.”

Hermione finally let loose the laugh that had been building since Ninta Kapur ran from the room with tears streaming down her face. “I should laugh!” she wheezed, “It’s just so ridiculous! We wandered around the British parks with a piece of Tom Riddle’s soul strapped to our necks and she tears up at the fact that we subsisted on stolen eggs and mushrooms!”

“Nice job in blaming Hermione for that, by the way,” Harry poked Ron.

“I’m not the one who forgot to pack more than four weeks food!”

“So sorry, Ronald, for not remembering that you eat three times your bodyweight every day. I mean, it’s not as though I had nothing else to focus on.”

“So you packed clothes for a few months. And soaps and some first aid stuff. What’s the big deal?” Ron retorted, clearly baiting his ex.

“The big deal?” she shrieked. “I’ll show you big deal you sodding --”

“Um, Mione?” Harry interjected.

“--nincompoop! You couldn’t plan your way out of a paper bag, much less a Death Eater attack.” She slapped at Ron’s shoulders. “And I’d like to see you find something edible in the woods you great --”

“Hermione?” Harry said a bit louder.

“--flapping gasbag!” She continued to slap at him as Ron laughingly defended himself by hunching his shoulders.

“Hermione!” Harry said again, slightly louder. Hermione proceeded to ignore him in favor of switching her slaps from Ron’s shoulders to the back of his head, thoroughly mussing his hair.

Finally, Harry and Severus shouted together. “HERMIONE!”

“What?!” She turned around, sparking hairs coming out of her plait.

She turned around to see that the second sixth year class had arrived for the guest lecture. Half of them were gaping, open mouthed as their Transfiguration teacher slapped one of the top Aurors at the Ministry about the head and shoulders with what could only be described as familial frustration. A camera clicked somewhere at the back of the room.

With a great sigh, Hermione sat back on her chair. Severus could barely hear her whispered “Bollocks” as he launched into his introductory speech for the second time that day.

----------------------------------------------

“No, she was hitting him!”

“Punching his face? An auror? What kind of witch is she?!”
“No, like...slapping. And shaking a little. It was still pretty intense.”

“Must’ve been. Everyone’s talking about it!”

“I heard she left him for Professor Snape.”

“Keep up, man. He left her, according to Rita Skeeter. Don’t know why, though. He’s fit and all, but have you taken a look at her lately? Professor Granger is hot.”

“Good Godric, you’re such a boy Janec.”

“Yeah, well I thought you liked that about me?” A beat of silence.

“Ew, get off! That wasn’t an invitation!”

“Sorry! Sorry, sorry! I’ll...um...lunch. I have to...lunch. Later Leia.”

By dinner that evening, Severus could tell that Hermione’s nerves were thoroughly fried. They’d hosted Harry and Ron in their rooms for a quick tea after they’d spoken to the combined NEWT class -- which had thankfully gone significantly better than the Gryffindor and Slytherin sixth years. One of those brats had actually had the audacity to ask whether she had dated either of her friends while on the run, to which Hermione had tersely responded, “Oh, yes! Nothing but laughs. Between avoiding snatchers, foraging for food, and breaking into heavily fortified buildings, it was nothing but a snog-fest.”

That student had found his seat again in a hurry. The death glare his professor sent him might have helped him speed up that particular pursuit, as did the detention he assigned to be served over the next Hogsmeade weekend for inappropriate address of a professor.

After an afternoon of being on display, no one was really looking forward to a meal in the Great Hall. A quickly dispatched patronus informed the Headmistress that they would partake of a casual dinner and some quiet time in the Snape-Granger rooms before the exhibition duel, and even Ronald was pleased when the elves delivered rosemary roasted pork loin, potatoes, asparagus, and a lovely trifle for pudding. They rested for awhile post meal before finally rising and making their way to the Great Hall as a quartet, prepared to duel one another for the title of Hogwarts champion.

They were greeted Filius putting the finishing touches on what appeared to be a three-part dueling platform.

“Ah, the guests of honor! Welcome back Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter,” the tiny man said, rushing forward. “Or, rather, Aurors Weasley and Potter. I am tickled pink that you agreed to participate in today’s demonstration.”

“I’m always happy to help Hogwarts,” Harry replied with a sincere smile.

Ronald smirked at his friend and elbowed him in the ribs. “And someone has to show the students that Harry here isn’t infallible.”

“But the two of you aren’t actually facing each other,” Flitwick protested. “Auror Potter --”
“Harry, please.”

“Harry, then. You’re facing Professor Luna Longbottom in the first round. Auror Weasley is facing Professor Neville Longbottom. You won’t face one another until the second round, possibly the third!” Flitwick squeaked.

“How many rounds are there?” Harry asked curiously.

Severus chuckled from behind the oh-so-dynamic duo. “Three, Potter. This is a traditional dueling tournament. Filius, perhaps you can show them the brackets?”

With a quick nod, Filius flicked his wand at the far wall (the one without widows) and a row of glowing letters appeared with the competitors and their respective seeds. Severus’s eyebrows raised when he caught sight of the list.

“Goodness, Filius. You pulled out all the stops.”

The Charms professor tittered. “There was a letter writing campaign amongst some of my sixth and seventh years. I’m still surprised at some of the participants myself.”

The first round was already laid out.

1. Minerva McGonagall vs. Kinglsey Shacklebolt
2. Neville Longbottom vs. Ronald Weasley
3. Bill Weasley vs. Hermione Granger
4. Molly Weasley vs. Mohinder Bhatti
5. Luna Lovegood vs. Harry Potter
6. Lucius Malfoy vs. Theodore Nott
7. Thorfinn Rowle vs. Mafalda Hopkirk
8. Draco Malfoy vs. Severus Snape

Severus laughed aloud, causing more than a few heads to turn his direction. “You have me fighting my godson in the first round? I trained him, Filius.”

“Indeed you did, Uncle, which means I know all your secrets.”

Ron coughed to cover his laughter.

“Something funny, Weaselbee?” the blond sneered.

“Just the idea that anyone could know all of Snape’s secrets.”

“He has a point there, Malfoy,” Harry chimed in.

“Oh, shut up Potter,” Draco said, though there was no heat in his voice. The two had long since buried the hatchet.

“Ah, it’s almost like I never left school.”

“Some of us never did,” Hermione said, looping her arm through her fiancé’s. “I can’t believe you got Mafalda Hopkirk to participate. Wasn’t she the British Champion back in 83?”

Severus nodded. “She was, and she’s still sharp as a tack.”

The group was startled from their conversation as the door from the staff room cracked open and the rest of the competitors strolled in. “‘Bout time you lot showed up,” Thorfinn Rowle, who’d been
freed from Azkaban on Severus’s testimony shortly after the latter’s recovery, shouted at the group.

“Thorfinn,” Severus said, nodding. “I do hope you haven’t been chasing my seventh years.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” the taller blond said with a broad wink at Hermione. “I’ve learned to avoid the jailbait.”

Severus placed a casual hand on Hermione’s shoulder as she smiled up at the hulking viking in front of her. Thorfinn cleared his throat, catching the wicked smile on his former head of house’s face.

“Then again, I’m here to duel, not to date.”

“Wise, as always, Rowle.”

“The burly ones are always all talk, no action,” a hyper-feminine voice giggled from the back of the group. “I’ve found that size infrequently has anything to do with the power of the jinx, haven’t you Minerva?”

The elder woman chuckled in response. “Too true, Mafalda. Though I’ll warn you that the Slytherins tend to be a bit sneaky with their spellcasting.”

“Of that I’m well aware.”

Their conversation -- and oh-so-subtle preening -- was promptly interrupted by Molly Weasley bursting through the crowd and embracing her son, her other son, her son-in-law, and finally Hermione. “Oh, I’m so happy to see you all at once!”

“Wait, Molly’s dueling? I’m doomed. She frightens me with a wooden spoon, much less a wand! Tell Ginny I loved her!” Harry exclaimed, eliciting laughter from the entire group.

“Well, if you’ll all take your places on the dais, I’ll let the students in and we’ll get started.”

Chapter End Notes

I know. It's been...like...six months.

Work is still hell. Like, super duper hell. I've got one more week of super hell before the semester begins, at which point I might actually be able to resume a normal life.

Did I mention my job is slowly killing me?

I love you all. I hope you've stuck with me. Happy Holidays and Snapely hugs and kisses.
The first round of dueling passed more quickly than Hermione thought it would. With three separate platforms, they were able to rotate through all the first round pairs in a matter of an hour. The longest battle had predictably been between Draco and Severus, both of whom favored the offensive rather than the defensive when dueling. They’d engaged in a delicate game of give and take, testing one another’s reflexes and spell repertoire with a series of showy flashes and bangs on Draco’s part and more subtle misdirection on Snape’s. Severus managed to disarm Draco with a combination shield, light flash, and confundus that found the younger Malfoy facing the wrong direction and partially blinded for five minutes after.

The other duels were no less exciting. Kingsley Shacklebolt narrowly defeated Minerva by charming her hair to escape the confines of its bun and attack her face like a sea leviathan while he disarmed her. Neville bested Ronald with a simple but particularly well-timed *flippendo*, leaving the redhead muttering “I meant to let him do that.” Neville’s was gathering some rather shocked looks from his second and third years, who -- despite knowing of their professor’s war-time heroism -- had a hard time connecting their mild-mannered Herbology professor to the talented duelist they’d just watched defeat a top-notch auror.

Molly handily defeated Mohinder Bhatti by causing the younger man to fumble his own wand. He’d been so surprised the strength and rapid-fire nature of the Weasley matriarch’s spell-casting that he’d cast two simple shields before allowing his own wand to drop from between his numb fingers. He laughed a bit at his own clumsiness before congratulating Molly on her success before retreating to the corner, shamefaced. Only once Minerva informed him that Molly had dueled Bellatrix Black to the death in the Battle of Hogwarts did Mohinder perk up a bit.

Luna Lovegood nearly bested Harry when she used her characteristic absent-mindedness to focus at something over the auror’s left shoulder just as the duel began. Harry narrowly blocked the *stupify* she sent his way before retaliating with a time-limited *lysergia* jinx that made Luna chase after a hallucination calling after the “snicking snicksnatches!”

Lucius lost his battle to Theo Nott after the younger wizard charmed the elder Malfoy’s hair and robes a horrifying shade of puce. Lucius could be heard proudly proclaiming that he’d sonner lose a duel than win one while attired in such a horrifying color. This caused Throfinn Rowle to laugh aloud during his duel with Mafalda Hopkirk, who -- previous champion that she was -- took advantage by causing the laugh to descent into the wizard’s throat, which gave him a case of hiccups so severe that he couldn’t cast correctly, wandlessly of otherwise.

Hermione and Bill’s duel ended when Hermione tossed a handful of confetti in the air and transformed it into a full flock of seagulls to attack the eldest Weasley son. Bill shook her head in wonder at her ingenuity and Ron’s loudly voiced commentary on the sidelines. “It’s like I told you, Harry. Brilliant, but *scary*.”

The entire hall took a well deserved break for light refreshments as they rested before the second round of duels. During the interval, Filius hurriedly waved his hand over the displayed brackets to reveal the next set of match-ups.

1. Molly Weasley vs. Kingsley Shacklebolt
2. Severus Snape vs. Neville Longbottom
3. Theo Nott vs. Harry Potter
4. Mafalda Hopkirk vs. Hermione Granger
In the end, the second round of duels went more quickly than the first. All the combatants were now aware of some of the more particular tricks of the other contestants, and were therefore shooting more quickly and offensively than before. In short order, Molly, Severus, Harry, and Hermione were declared the victors of their respective duels and another interval was called as the final matchups were announced: Harry v. Severus and Molly v. Hermione. Severus spotted Hermione chatting with Mafalda and joined the duo as tea and biscuits appeared on the small tables at the edges of the Great Hall.

Severus was watching Filius and Minerva dismantle two of the platforms as he listened to Mafalda with half an ear. “If I were a few years younger, you never would’ve gotten me with that bat-bogey hex. Nice work, by the way. I’ve never seen bats quite that large! Or neon.”

Hermione laughed. “Thank Ginny Potter for that one. She had the bat-bogey hex perfected by the end of her second year. She can make them pulse in changing colors like a deranged disco if she wants.”

“That’s...disgusting,” Mafalda cackled. “I meant to congratulate you and Professor Snape on your engagement, by the way. It’s quite the talk at the Ministry.”

Severus frowned, redirecting his gaze toward the undersecretary for Muggle Misdirection. “I wasn’t aware the Ministry was aware of our relationship,” he said coldly. It wasn’t that he wanted to keep his engagement a secret, but having it batted around the halls of the most insipid bureaucratic institution in Britain was a bit much.

“Oh, Mr. Weasley there,” she said gesturing toward Ron, “was bemoaning his friend’s fate rather dramatically -- and comically, I might add -- in the cafeteria a few weeks ago. I’m afraid news traveled quite quickly after than.”

“Hn,” was his only reply to such a revelation. Hermione merely rolled her eyes in frustrated acceptance.

Soon, Filius clapped his hands to reconvene the final four competitors. Hermione and Molly would be dueling first, followed by Severus and Harry.

Severus watched with pride as Hermione took her place on the dais. The two women hugged warmly and Molly extended an invitation to come to Sunday dinner soon, which Hermione accepted before they took their respective places for the duel.

The battle was quick and fierce, with both women vying for supremacy. Mafalda leaned in and whispered in Severus’s ear. “If she hadn’t been so determined to start her family early, that woman could have had the dueling world at her feet.”

“I hadn’t realized she duelled at all, actually,” Severus replied, not taking his eyes from the competitors.

“Oh, yes. Bested me more than once in our school days, for all that she was two years younger. “How do you think she caught the eye of young Arthur to begin with?”

“I had rather assumed it happened naturally,” he replied.

Mafalda’s chuckle was one of deep satisfaction. “Oh, my dear boy. You’ll learn that some wizards just love a dominant witch.”

The duel finished when Molly disarmed Hermione with a flourish, catching the younger witch’s wand and then conjuring a small flannel for the red-faced professor to dab her face. “And that, Molly
Weasley, is why I endeavor never to raise your hackles!” Hermione said with a laugh.

“No shame in a good duel, love!” Molly said with a maternal smile. “You tend to leave yourself open after your jinxes. We’ll have to work on your follow through after lunch on Sunday.”

“I look forward to it. Severus, love, you’d better watch yourself. If you win, you’ll have to fight Molly…and she’s a right terror!” Hermione proclaimed as she rejoined Mafalda and Severus.

“Duly noted. Molly, Mafalda, your servant,” he said with a little bow and he mounted the dais opposite Potter.

They signalled their readiness and began, fighting fiercely. Severus was annoyed to see Potter block his *levicorpus* and snarled as he dodged the series of hexes -- some of which not even he recognized -- that flew his way shortly after. He knew Potter was quickly rising in the MLE ranks, but he hadn’t realized that the boy’s combat skills had improved this dramatically. He seemed particularly gifted in rapid-fire transfiguration, a talent so like James Potter’s that it made Severus double his efforts to disarm the boy.

He was drawn up short when Harry shouted *leaenortia feroxis* and then performed a perfect shoulder roll to avoid the follow-up hex that Snape sent his way. He watched, bewildered, as pride of angry and, dare he say it, hungry looking lionesses poured forth from Potter’s wand. The sight was surprising enough the Severus hesitated, providing a window of time just large enough for Harry Potter, the boy who lived-to-prove-him-wrong, to disarm him.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said, dumbfounded. “Well fought Potter. Now would you kindly mind calling off your protectors?” he asked as the lionesses advanced, growls rumbling in their throats.

Harry grinned and banished the lionesses, bowing to Snape and then turning toward Filius. “Professor Flitwick, I think I would like to be co-victor with Molly rather than dueling her.”

“Whatever for, Mr. Potter? That was some very inventive wandwork! I’m sure we’d all like to see more.”

Harry snickered and sent a sidelong look at his mother-in-law. “As much as I’d like to help you with that, I have a vested interest in a peaceful homelife. You see, if I defeat Molly my wife will kill me.”

“But --” Filius interjected.

“-- and,” Harry continued, undeterred, “If I lose to Molly, my wife will kill me.”

Filius relented, a smile on his face. “Of course, Auror Potter. Very well, then. I proclaim Harry Potter and Molly Weasley co-victors of Spring Hogwarts Dueling Competition! Well done, both of you.”

Harry held out his wand hand to shake Molly’s as duelling tradition dictated, only to have it knocked aside when she pulled him into a tight hug. “Silly boy,” she said. “And sweet of you to worry after Ginny so.”

“Thanks, Molly, but I was actually more worried about Arthur! He finally figured out how to that weed wacker I got him works. That last thing I need is for him to come at me with that thing,” the boy wonder replied to the laughing crowd.

The atmosphere in the hall was buoyant after that, and Severus quickly found himself answering the questions of many of his defense students as the grilled him on dueling stance and technique. They all enjoyed another round of tea and cakes as the duelers recovered from there exertions and conversed together, but within a few minutes Severus found himself looking for Hermione as he
edged his way toward the door. He’d just reached out to tug on her robes -- the savvy couple’s universal signal of *time to make our excuses* -- when Filius cleared his throat.

“Now we have crowned our victors for today’s matches, and I do hope that you all took note of some of the techniques employed by many of our contestants today. However, the fun isn’t over yet!”

Severus bit back a groan. *Damn*.

“Yes! Where are...there!” Filius pointed and raised his voice. “Professors Snape and Granger, I’m afraid we’re not quite done with you yet. I believe you have agreed to a rematch of the duel from our Fall demonstration. If you’ve both recovered sufficiently?”

Hermione tilted her head toward Severus in confirmation before turning back to the diminutive Charms professor. “Of course, Professor Flitwick. We’re at your disposal.”

“Excellent!” he squeaked in return. “Then shall we begin?”
Hello lovely readers. I know I've been gone awhile. Things have been...rough. My personal life exploded last August. My husband and I separated, though we continued dating in the hopes of reconciling. Except he didn't just date me. He started dating other women and acquired said dates by telling them WE are poly. I'm not. I don't know about him.

I found out about his actions and his most recent girlfriend in early April and acquired an attorney pretty much immediately. So now I'm in the early stages of divorce. And yeah, I ghosted my own husband. Not words I ever thought I'd type.

During this time, I've been working 2 jobs -- one full time, one 75% time. I'm exhausted -- physically, mentally, emotionally. My creative well has been pretty dry lately, but I hate hate HATE that I've left my fics (ma)lingering. They're not abandoned. I will begin updating again. Promise.

(This note will disappear with the next update).

Love to you all,
Snick

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!