Seven Preposterous Things

by bloodcult_of_freud

Summary

The story takes a sharp turn before Half-Blood Prince, with discussion of culture, politics, cultural gender norms, and art.
A Nice Little Pre-Fab Job

The world is crazier and more of it than we think.

Incorrigibly plural.

-Snow

Louis MacNeice

Millicent Bulstrode was enjoying the common room fire and darning six sets of socks at once with the new needles she'd got for Yule when it occurred to her that she had been misnamed. In a just world, she would have been called Gertrude, or possibly Grundellyn.

Millicent was a name better suited for the type of girl whose hobbies included drawing pictures of unicorns and delivering hand-knitted mufflers to the home for infirm wizards. Witches named Millicent wore gauzy robes in pastel colors and spent a lot of time singing, in tune no less. They liked flowers.

Above all, Millicent was the name of a pretty girl. Bully, as Crabbe and Goyle called her, was well aware she had all the physical charm of a slab of congealed kitchen grease.

It was the sort of thing that made her wonder exactly what her parents had been thinking. They had no reason she was aware of to expect she'd be a lovely little ray of sunshine: her gran was a typical hag and her mum was working on it. Her parents did quite a few utterly bloody inexplicable things in Millicent Bulstrode's assessment. No one in the wizarding world lived like they did any more. A gingerbread house might seem picturesque, but the number of charms required for basic upkeep was a pain in the bloody arse - she glared at one of her needles that seemed moments from dropping a stitch -when she left school she was going to find one of those Muggle pre-fab jobs she'd read about in Muggle studies. Something practical.

The practical was Millie's personal gold standard. The practical was what made a difficult life at school bearable. It wasn't her fault that she came to school bigger and taller than any other first years except Crabbe and Goyle, but she could make the most of what had been a liability. The other houses didn't seem to have noticed that she hadn't grown any taller since she first arrived. No, they still gave her as wide a berth as they did back when she could have knocked them about like skittles. Not one Gryffindor seemed to have realized that the terror of their first year was now just another short pudgy witch. She did still have the biggest bubbies in Slytherin, though. It wasn't much, but it was all she could lay claim to. Even puny little Granger was taller than Millie now.

Granger. The very thought made Millie practice her look of death in the direction of her darning. What would it be like to be Granger, all but turning herself inside out trying to please people? Even her penmanship looked like it had been taken from a manual somewhere. Millie had preposterous handwriting and wasn't the least interested in improving. All you had to do was ask and Granger would tell anything she knew. To Millie it seemed not unlike spreading your cunt-lips for public viewing at a train station. Only Millie knew for certain what Millie knew and didn't know. Except for Snape, her school masters had no notion she was brighter than your average steamed pudding, and this pleased her. She hadn't decided yet whether she would take any N.E.W.T.S., but she had managed to almost perfectly calculate the minimum of effort necessary to pass her O.W.L.S by the barest margin possible.
Still, Millie's housemates didn't underestimate her and neither did her head of house; this was enough for her.

Sometimes though, she wondered if Granger and she had been sorted together, if perhaps they could have been friends. As it stood, Millie didn't believe in casual hate. In Millie's book hate, like love, was too important to throw around like candy sprinkles. Millie imagined hate, real hate worthy of the name, was something you had to work at, tend like a loyal gardener, you couldn't properly hate someone you had known for less than twenty years.

Given time she thought she could learn to hate Granger. Love or Hate, either way, there was something about Granger that pricked Millie's brain like a thorn; she was not a witch to be ignored.

"Can I ask you something?" someone behind her said.

Millie looked round. It was Draco - not exactly surprising - lying on the divan like a young sultan. He was up late pretty often these days and it showed. He didn't have her constitution.

Millie shrugged.

"There's no one else here, I want to ask you something serious, Bulstrode," he said.

"What for?" Millie answered with her own question; in the past she'd found it to be a useful strategy.

"Because I need help from a person who thinks about things," Draco said with a frown, "and I know that's you."

Millie shrugged again.

"I need to talk to someone with a brain about what's happening and not these...cunts I have all around me," he said.

Millie didn't want to talk about the war, particularly because she wasn't sure which side she was on.

"Someone who won't say the same thing as everyone else. I know Potter's a wanker, and Bumblebore's a senile old sod," Draco said impatiently.

Millie just looked at him, unmoved and expressionless; she'd heard it all before too.

"Stop looking at me like that, it's unnerving. I'll give you my wizard's oath that I won't repeat what you say," he said.

"That would be stupid of you," Millie tilted her head then turned back to her sewing.

Draco didn't say anything for a few moments after that, and she thought perhaps she'd embarrassed him out of bothering her. She'd known him since she could remember, but that didn't mean she was especially interested in following him onto the limb the adults had thrust him out on.

"I need someone clever, Bulstrode, and I'm not sure I can trust Snape," he said. He sounded frightened.

Millie put her head down and focused very hard on her sewing before she answered him

"Dumbledore may be senile, and Potter might be the biggest cunt at this school, but they're still going to win."
"Come here," Draco commanded her in that voice that sounded more like Mr. Malfoy's all the time. It was a voice that demanded obedience because it didn't even consider rebellion an option.

Millie tried to remain composed as she edged toward him, perhaps she should have made him take the oath after all: this could turn very bad very quickly.

"Why do you think that?" he asked his eyes wide. "Why do you think they'll win?"

"Because," Millie straightened her green chenille bathrobe and fought the urge to swallow, "All you have to do is stay awake through a history class or two to know wars don't stop change. The Muggleborns are going to take over, one way or another; it's how the world works. There are a limited number of us and more of them every day. Say the Dark Lord wins tomorrow, it won't change anything. Muggles will keep giving birth to witches and wizards even if they don't go to this school. We'll just be a handful of purebloods rattling around inside Hogwarts, and meanwhile there'll be more wizards outside the magical world than in it. If our dads win it's going to be the beginning of the end for the next generation of purebloods, everything we are is going to disappear. The truth is, the best we can hope for is to be assimilated by the Mudbloods, and maybe it's for the best."

Her row of sewing needles stopped and hovered mid-air beside her row of socks.

"You can't mean that," Draco said with quiet solemnity.

"Think about it. My mum didn't have a choice, she grew up this way herself, so I don't suppose she's to blame, but why in the name of all that is green and good did a wizard like my dad choose it? Before you say the old ways are best, think about it.

"Normal people like you Malfoys pick your own husbands and wives these days, and your lot have been dating for ages. You've changed with the times, even if you don't want to admit it. You do not respond to a set of magical challenges carved on a boulder, win a hag-to-be, and settle down to a gingerbread cottage in the heart of an enchanted wood. Don't get me wrong, I love my dad, but even I admit he is a bit off and as soft as toffee to boot.

"No one is going to bring my granny a dragon's treasure so they can marry me.

"No wizard these days gives two shits about getting a hold of my family treacle mines," Millie said and to stop herself from saying anything more she took a chocolate out of the box in front of Draco and shoved it in her mouth.

He raised his eyebrow at her, but he couldn't quite pull off Snape.

Millie pursed her lips and thought of her mum. She was more the strong silent type, which Millie considered a good option, all things considered. When she'd gone away to school, because her had Granny insisted and there was no doubt who was in charge at the Bulstrode household, her Mum had started to choke up but managed to turn away before any traitorous tears could escape.

Her dad on the other hand couldn't stop bawling into that big blue hanky of his. Millie did not want to use her father as a role model.

"I didn't quite get the point of it all at first. I didn't understand why my granny sent me to Hogwarts. Couldn't I conjure whatever I pleased before they ever put me on that train? Didn't I know how to stitch a wizard's shadow to the hem of a witch's robes so his heart never left her? Couldn't I waste my enemies away to nothing without leaving so much as a wisp of smoke as
evidence?

Wouldn't I learn more at home with my gran? People come to the enchanted wood to learn magic, they don't leave it.

"No, my gran sent me here for a reason. She wants me to learn Muggleborn ways. There can only be one motive for that, she knows they're going to win. If not this go round, then the next. I am as close as it comes to the last of my kind, and they aren't making any more. No one is going to come to the enchanted wood and struggle with a list of impossible tasks for my sake no matter how many times all our dads put on pantomime masks and light green fireworks in the sky," she said then inhaled at the unaccustomed effort of saying just what she thought.

"I thought you and Crabbe and Goyle..." Draco gestured vaguely.

"They'll do for wrestling about in the dark if that's what you mean, but even then it takes both of them to accomplish anything," Millie said, telling altogether too much. Another witch might have blushed at the admission.

Draco giggled.

"Would you want to be stuck to one of them for life? Bear their clueless spawn?" Millie scowled at him.

Draco cringed appropriately.

"I'm sure someone..." he started.

"Shut up, Draco," she said not particularly interested in pity.

"What do you think I ought to do, Bulstrode?" Draco said, his face strangely close to hers.

Millicent considered the answer before she spoke. "If our dads and the others follow the Dark Lord, it's because the only other choice they can see is to let the magical world as they know it go down the sewer drain of history. He-who-everyone-is-so-poncy-about-naming might be a wanker, but no one else has stepped up. There's a good reason only lunatics volunteer to lead our lot; we can't win. All blood loyalty aside, you don't want to be on the losing side, Draco. Stay out of it."

"I don't think that's an option for me anymore," Draco said and pulled up the sleeve of his silk dressing gown. The stupid bloody Dark Mark showed like a blurted word on his pale skin.

"You stupid cunt," Millie said shaking her head.

Draco sighed "It gets worse; the Dark Lord wants me to kill the headmaster.

What do I do?"

"Why are you asking me? As far as I can see the only thing for you to do is try to kill the headmaster, you can't run away once you have the Mark, can you?" she said.

"What are you going to do? Are you going to turn me in?" Draco asked rubbing his face.

"Don't be insulting," Millie said.

"So?" Draco asked impatiently.

"So what?" Millie asked back, confused.
"So what are you thinking?" Draco insisted.

"About what?" Millie answered.

"About what?" Draco all but squealed. "About what?"

"I'm wishing I had ingratiated myself to a Mudblood or two. I'm wishing my first time on the Express when that Finnegan wanker asked me if living in a gingerbread house was the reason I was so fat, I hadn't kneeled on his throat," Millie said.

"He's lucky you didn't get out your wand." Draco winced. "But what about my problem?"

"Why don't you ask Pansy to help you?" Millie said.

Draco looked incredulous "Pansy?"

"I'm not your girl, she is," Millie insisted right back at him.

She was not in the least prepared for what happened next. Draco knelt easily beside her on the floor and took her hands in his, pricking himself with the one needle on one side and clutching a holey sock on the other. Red blood slithered onto her hand from his.

"I, Draco Malfoy, give my oath as a wizard I will marry you Millicent...owww," he yelped as she kicked him in her haste to get away.

"You're must be really desperate," Millie said backing away in awe and horror.

"Life and death does that to me," Draco said "I mean it, Bulstrode. Get me out of this and you'll never have to worry about dying alone and unwanted."

"Who says I want to marry you?" she said, her voice rising.

"Who wouldn't want me? Have you taken a look at me?" Draco shouted back.

"You shag those two baboons and you say 'no' to me?"

"I'd rather wind up married to a goat like Hepseba The Unwell," Millie snarled.

A small voice in the back of her mind told her this was the most fun she'd had since she'd come to school and her magic had been curtailed into plodding academics and keeping the Mudbloods at bay. It was a dangerous thing that small voice.

"You want a goat, Bulstrode?" Draco hissed.

"At least a goat would have more than ornamental value," Millie hissed right back.

"Ornamental? Ornamental? You want to see what I can do?" Draco said, starting to draw his wand.

"Looking out for yourself isn't on the list," Millie said, her wand already at his throat. She wouldn't have admitted it to Draco, but Millicent Bulstrode was extremely excited at that moment.

Draco swallowed hard, looking as though he were trying to decide whether to faint or wet himself. The box of chocolates lay overturned on the divan.

"Please, Bulstrode, he defeated Grendelwald. I don't have a chance," he whimpered. "Pansy isn't... she isn't... she's not like you. She gets sick to her stomach cleaning doxies out of the curtains. I need
"You're a matched set, then, both useless," Millie said, careful not to drop her guard or her wand.

She always knew Draco was softer than he let on, but she could hardly believe it when the whimpering gave way to fat, salty tears. For several flustered seconds she was at a complete loss. Draco was sobbing harder by the moment, his pale face red; she wondered vaguely if he would notice when his nose started running. She patted his shoulder experimentally.

Unfortunately, he took this as encouragement of some kind and threw himself against her, knocking both of them backwards onto the divan.

"I'm not going to help you kill the headmaster," she said trying to wiggle out from under the sniffling Draco. He was tenacious when he was frightened for his life, she had to grant him that. "But I think I might have a chance to do something about the Mark so you can run away."

"Can you, really?" he stared down, still half on top of her. Millie winced as he wiped his nose on the hem of her robe.

"I'm going to try, that will to have to be enough," she answered shoving him off of her, "but I still don't want to marry you; you're a right pain in the arse."
Chapter 2. The Potions Master Exposed

Please note this never would have been written in the first place without the encouragement and help of Shiv and Scattered Logic, to whom I am eternally grateful.

The world is crazier and more of it than we think.

Incorrigibly plural.

-Snow

Louis MacNeice

Her faith was unshakable. Hermione knew without question that there were any number of things worse than being caught rifling through her Potions master's private things. Nonetheless, she failed spectacularly to bring any one of them to mind.

It was probably the result of shock. Not only was Snape looming over her giving his best B movie vampire glare but he also appeared to be wearing a shroud.

No.

He was wearing a...

That couldn't be right.

He appeared to be dressed in someone's granddad's old nightgown. The material was so thin she could clearly see his dark nipples through the threadbare material. His knees were decidedly knobbly.

Hermione understood she hadn't taken a breath since she saw he had come into the room, but somehow she couldn't bring her lungs to cooperate.

Then Snape took a strange staggering step towards her, and she realized his fist was clenched round the neck of a bottle of fire whiskey. The label as unmistakable. In his other hand was a fiercely smoking cigarette.

She finally found the wherewithal to draw a breath and nearly retched at the smell of him.

He jolted closer but paid more attention to the yellowing paper in her hand than he did to the fact that this was perhaps the last place a student belonged on a Friday night. Or was it a Saturday morning?

As if determined to shock and ignore her both at the same time, Professor Snape attempted to
snatch the aging copy of The Daily Prophet out of her hands. His clearly impaired reflexes couldn't quite manage the logistics, though, and the pages scattered about him in a circle.

If anything, Hermione was at more of a loss than before, watching Professor Snape crawling on his hands and knees gathering the papers. He had let go of neither his whiskey nor his cigarette.

As Hermione saw it she had two choices, she could run or she could sneak away quietly. He hardly seemed to have noticed her. If she ran she might remind him of her presence, he might even see it as provocation. She reasoned it would probably be for the best if she left as discreetly as possible.

She truly intended to get out of the dungeon as quickly as caution allowed.

But then, blearily assembling the pages, he spoke, addressing no one in particular.

"Toby was a Teddy," he said and brought the noxious bottle straight to his lips, "The entry says he was a Muggle, but Toby was a Teddy, dyed in the wool. Which is to say... which is to say..." he seemed to struggle a bit with his thoughts. Apparently the answer to that was two more swallows of whiskey.

Hermione felt as though her legs had been petrified to the spot. She could not leave while he was speaking.

"Toby was a Muggle but not... run-of-the-mill... the mill... the mill. I hate bloody mills. The only thing worse than mills are mill towns." Snape began to laugh and it was not a pleasant sound. "The sanctimonious bastards will tell you the best things in life are free, but I'll wager they never had the pleasure growing up poor. Not even honest working poor either. They get a certain amount of condescending respect... the fools. There is a special sort of poverty reserved for the children of incompetent ne'er do wells. If one is going to... oh bugger," with that Professor Snape began frantically patting the place where an errant spark had fallen into the folds of his night gown.

It was Hermione's chance to escape, but true to form she thumbed her nose at the fates for offering her a way out and stood fast, eager to hear what was coming next.

For a disappointing moment she was afraid it was going to be snoring because her professor stretched out full length on the stone floor leaving his bottle unattended.

"He called her 'Mad Eileen' when she started to come round to the pub he and his so-called mates used to haunt... she had no idea how Muggles lived. I'm not sure how it began. I imagine she simply saw him one day and followed him in; not unlike the proverbial moth to the flame. She didn't know how to render herself inconspicuous and she was not... exactly... alluring." Snape threw one arm over his eyes and brought the cigarette to his lips with the other.

"I believe she tried to gain his interest using legitimate methods, at first. She was so hopelessly naïve, she transfigured herself the whole Teddy get-up, trousers and everything," Snape said, his words followed by a cough.

Hermione tried to imagine the girl whose picture she had seen obsessing over a Muggle Teddy boy. Meanwhile, Snape blew three heart-shaped smoke rings which somehow broke jaggedly, one after the other.

"Of course, he was quite the lady's man; why else would she want him. The female of the species were drawn to Toby Snape the way flies are drawn to shit. Eileen didn't have a chance in hell. Or she wouldn't have if she wasn't a witch," Snape said "Old Toby would shag almost anything, but he drew the line at mad girls who dressed like boys and carried an old stick everywhere they went,"
Snape said "What a stupid cunt," he said and sat up, reaching for his bottle and knocking it over in the process. Undeterred, he drank what little he hadn't managed to spill.

"Love potions may work to bind an unwilling mate, but it doesn't give a bloody fool like Toby Snape a profession. You can't raise a family on the sort of money a second rate thief like my father made. It's the fence who cleans up in the end. And love potions won't keep a man from beating a woman if that's the sort of shit he is. No, a man beats a woman because he wants to rule something he knows he can't. Love is immaterial.

"One hardly need say the Princes were horrified. But Eileen would not leave her Toby. Perhaps she was mad after all. Toby tried to go more than once, but the magic she used bound him to her. The torment was mutual I suppose."

He suddenly seemed to remember the paper before him, half soaked with fire whiskey; he dabbed half heartedly at it with the hem of his gown giving Hermione full view of his lack of under garments. It was an image she was never going to successfully scour from her retinas.

"Still, it wasn't all fists and tears and bowls of cold gruel in the corner. They both loved Elvis." Snape closed his eyes and began, to Hermione's mortification, to sing. With his grotty greying night gown up around his waist and his bits hanging out. They were too big to be called bits, in her opinion, but if she used a more descriptive term her head was going to explode.

"Love me tender, love me truuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuue," Professor Snape sang, swaying back and forth. He was fairly on key for someone as pissed as he was.

"Who are you?" he asked, as if she had just now entered the room.

"Hermione Granger, sir," she answered keenly aware he had yet to cover himself.

Rather than respond he cocked his head, looking confused, "Why is that name familiar to me?"

"I'm a student, sir. I've had you for five years of Potions and one year of Defense Against the Dark Arts," she said, incredulous. While she wasn't under the delusion Professor Snape liked her at all, she did think he ought to know who she was. He was unquestionably very drunk indeed.

"Oh, Potter's little girlfriend, aren't you?" he asked, his brow knitting.

"I should say not!" Hermione lost all shame at being caught sneaking about the dungeon by a half-naked school master at the accusation. "Harry and I are just good friends!"

"As if I care who you lot shag; Potter can bugger Weasley for all I care," Snape said wincing. "What are you doing here?"

"I believe Harry," perhaps she ought to clarify that in Professor Snape's current state, "Harry Potter, that is, sir. I have reason to believe he is in possession of a book that may have, at one time, belonged to you, sir."

"I know Potter has my old Potions book," Professor Snape said rubbing his temples and looking wobbly. "There's no need to address me as though I were the Queen."

"Students owe their school masters a certain level of respect, sir," Hermione said, trying to avoid looking Snape in the eye while not allowing her gaze to wander below the area where she guessed
his navel to be.

"Is that why I found you snooping around in my personal rooms?"

Hermione would have answered that but Snape was on the floor again, and she made her way to the door.

Professor Snape's inimitable voice rang out once more, stopping her just as she was about to slip away.

"Get my fags and a new bottle of whiskey," he called. "I require fags and whiskey."

Against her better judgment, Hermione turned around; clearly, her much trumpeted common sense had been left in her other robes.

"I can't. I have no idea where they are, sir," she said.

"In my bedroom, you silly cow," he sneered.

It wasn't the sort of order Hermione had it in her to resist. Quick calculations told her she was practically being required to look through his things.

"Alcohol," his sonorous voice called out. "Bring me alcohol!"

Hermione called out Lumos in the professor's bedroom and immediately wished she hadn't. The scant illusions she had managed to cling to over the past half an hour were dispelled when she saw what a tip his room was. The floor was covered with piles of black robes reeking of sweat and asphodel, and there were books everywhere: on the floor, on the bed, and three on the dressing table.

A quick survey of the shabby bedclothes showed a third of a bacon sandwich and a smear of mustard across the pillowcase.

Forget a Lumos spell; what Hermione needed was a sherpa guide. Some places were too filthy to enjoy a good snoop.

In the end, the alcohol turned out to be with the cigarettes inside his desk drawer. What sort of person kept loose cigarettes and quills jumbled together?

"Get a move on!" the voice called from the other room.

It took her some time to locate a glass, but Hermione Jane Granger was not going to be complicit in further drinking from the bottle. In the meantime, her professor launched into a medley of skiffle tunes.

"Thank God," Professor Snape sighed when she returned laden with provisions. "I was dying for another smoke. It's the only thing that drives away the stench of failure."

"It can't be that bad, sir," Hermione said gently.

Professor Snape stuck his tongue between his lips and made a noise that Hermione usually associated with either one of the twins' pranks or the hind end of a hippogriff.

"What ever you're imagining, I can confidently assure you it's much worse," he said dourly.

"Really, sir, you know what the Chinese say, they say 'when we see our troubles coming we say
'they are unbearable' but when they come, we bear them'. You'll be able to play your part. I'm sure of it, sir," Hermione said.

"Ancient Chinese wisdom, oh goody," the Professor glared at her as spoke "More philosophy is exactly what I needed, especially from a spotty faced little swot. Now all my problems are solved."

It was true; Hermione did have a rather horrid spot right in the corner of her left nostril, but that was no excuse for him to be nasty. It wasn't her fault she was too concerned with war to spend too much time on her complexion. She'd forgotten he didn't need an excuse; he was Professor Snape.

"Did it ever occur to your brain of great repute that I might be unhappy precisely because I know I will 'do my part' as you say? Or that I might not even be sure what my bloody part is?" Snape snarled, waving his unlit cigarette wildly.

Hermione knelt closer and lit it carefully with the end of her wand.

Suddenly a strange closed look passed over the Professor's face.

"Are you certain you aren't Potter's girlfriend?" he asked.

"Absolutely, sir," she said "I'm too busy."

"Allow me to rephrase the question. Have you ever observed any signs of sexual or romantic interest on Potter's part?" he asked, sucking hard on his cigarette for punctuation.

"No, sir, never." Hermione was getting rather tired of this line of discussion.

"Has anyone else noted Potter carrying a torch for you?" Snape asked, his eyes slitted.

Really, this had gone on quite long enough.

Hermione looked the drunk man straight in the eye, and the words came out in a torrent.

"No, no one has ever even suggested such a preposterous thing except for Cho Chang, and that's because she's a complete nutter."

Snape was now giving her a hard look indeed. "I have found Miss Chang to be eminently reliable."

It was now Hermione's turn to imitate a gaseous Buckbeak.

The effect was ruined by her smelly, inebriated professor grabbing her and ramming his tongue, rather sloppily she'd like to add, into her mouth.

On the whole, it was not impressive. She hoped the clumsiness could be attributed to drink.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," Professor Snape said, looking utterly pleased with himself. "I've had first crack at you."

Hermione quickly straightened her robes and, rather than grant him the satisfaction of her running, walked briskly out of the dungeons.

Behind her a voice rang out in singsong chant.

"I snogged Potter's girlfriend. I snogged Potter's girlfriend."
Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Chapter Summary

Events Begin to Turn for Millie and Draco.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3. Treacle and Gall

Millie tried. Millie honestly tried her very best to keep Draco at arm's length. It didn't seem to do much good. Every time she looked up during her sixth year it seemed he was there, staring at her - bloody annoying, if you asked her.

Then it got worse.

After Hallowe'en, he started making a point of cornering her alone and offering her chocolates between bouts of piteous whinging. She refused to extend the stupid cunt any sympathy; she did accept the chocolates, though.

Millie had a clear idea of the sort of future she wanted for herself, and arrogant pretty-boys weren't on the agenda. She was not interested in getting weighed down by a wizard who was little more than a trophy, and neither was she interested in getting involved with someone she was going to have to rescue at regular intervals.

The last thing on her mind was love. Or rather, to put it another way, not falling in love was at the forefront of her mind. The more Draco followed her and offered her sweets and careful compliments, the more Millie resolved she did not want to be like Parkinson and the other girls and "fall in love". Love was a losing proposition, especially with Draco.

If Millie ever chose to bind her fate to someone else's, it was going to be a mutually beneficial arrangement with a wizard she could trust to look after himself. A chap who couldn't quite cope on his own might be gratifying for witches like Parkinson, but if Millie ever had a baby, she wanted the kind who grew up eventually.

Draco was hopeless. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy had arranged his whole life so that nothing would ever be difficult or unpleasant. Now that death, murder, and Azkaban were real possibilities, Draco spent half his time crying like a firsty in the fourth floor bog. The girl's bog at that. Not that Millie was keeping track.

She wasn't developing a soft spot for the sniveling bugger, either.

The only reason she was helping him with the Dark Mark was that there was more to gain from helping Draco than there was from staying out of it. She knew she could find the answer; the only question was when. It worried her to think of Draco coming wand to wand with the headmaster in a duel. It worried her even more to consider what the Dark Lord would do to Draco if he didn't.

Caring whether or not Draco Malfoy lived or died got straight up her nose, in no small part because he had no one but himself to blame if he did die, stupid git.
A line had been blurred: his problems making themselves somehow her problems. That was not practical at all. He was like some great creeping fungus spreading under the wet grass of her mind, no sooner had she blasted one thought of him out of her attention than a dozen others popped up around her, chocolate boxes in hand; a nasty little fairy ring of concern.

Still he moved closer in, like a wolf in the forest. Millie was no bunny, though.

Draco was one wolf who had a good chance of running away with his tail between his legs if she had any say in the matter.

One dull rainy Saturday, when quidditch practice had been cancelled, she and Greg and Vincent had climbed behind the curtains of Greg's bed and cast their silencing spells before setting to their time-honored method of fighting off boredom.

Millie was sweating and shaking in the throes of climax with Greg under her, and Vincent buggering her from above when someone pulled aside the bed-curtains. She wasn't completely surprised to see Draco standing there.

She was surprised that he stood there and held her eyes until Crabbe and Goyle both finished. Sod him, she wasn't going to be the one to look away.

It was strange though, to feel Vincent spraying his seed inside her and Greg following soon after, all the while looking into Draco's eyes.

The battle ended abruptly when Vincent lifted the silencing spell.

"Want somethin'?" Crabbe asked, grinning at Draco, but Draco ignored him, his attention never leaving Millie's face.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked.

Millie lifted her chin. "I wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"Crabbe, Goyle, get out of here. I need to talk to Bulstrode." He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He folded his arms across his chest to emphasize his point.

Really, Millie thought to herself, Goyle and Crabbe were doing their best; if they'd vacated the premises any quicker they'd have left their clothes behind.

His arms still folded, Draco gave her a look that suggested perhaps she'd do well to dress herself, or at least wrap herself in one of Goyle's blankets.

Out of sheer bloody mindedness she decided to stay as she was. After a scowl and a raised eyebrow from Draco in response, she leaned back on the bed and stretched.

"Have you come up with anything?" he asked.

"I've figured how to do it, I think, but it's going to take time," she said.

"My time's almost up," he said.

"When?" she asked, her heart beating hard despite all her steely resolve not to care too deeply.

"Most likely tonight. What's your solution for the Mark?" he asked.

"There's a spell I've found to move the Mark, but it's got to have some place to go. We need a fully
developed homunculus, one made from your essence so the mark won't know it's not you," she said.

"That'll take months," Draco said, looking desperate.

"I know. What're you going to do?" Millie asked.

"I'm going to kill the headmaster," Draco said solemnly.

"That's a nice sentiment." Millie snorted.

"I mean it," Draco whined.

"You can mean it all you like, it's not going to change the fact that you're a green novice going against the destroyer of Grendelwald," she said slowly, as if he was a bit thick and didn't understand this well enough on his own.

Draco leaned toward her. "I'm going to kill the headmaster. I'm going to do it because I haven't got a choice if I want to survive. I'm going to kill the headmaster, and then you're going to help me get rid of this Mark."

Millie didn't respond to that. She had no idea what to say. Laughing in his face wouldn't have been very nice under the circumstances. With nothing else to do, she searched his features for some hint of brutal purpose, but there was none. If he succeeded, it would be the result of sheer dumb luck. Her stomach clenched in sorrow, but she kept her expression flat. It wouldn't do any good to give in and feel sorry for him now. Tears were less than useless; they only made you slower, weaker. She forced her lip into a sneer.

"I've got something for you," Draco said, reaching into his robes.

Millie could have said something rude but chose not to, under the circumstances.

When he extended a tinkly charm bracelet to her, she wished she hadn't held back. She was incredulous. Millie was willing to do a certain number of things for Draco: wearing girly jewelry was not one of them.

"You give Parkinson another just like this?" she asked.

"Just you, Bulstrode, Pansy isn't... She's not like you and me," he said.

"Or more to the point, I'm not like you two." Millie snorted.

"After tonight, I likely won't be back at school," Draco said impatiently. "Open the locket."

Amid the baubles dangling from the bracelet, an ornate locket required some looking to find. Instead of a picture, inside was a tiny mirror. Millie understood its purpose instantly. Now Draco could whinge at her anywhere, anytime.

Lovely. Still, somewhere in the back of her mind, she took some comfort she'd rather not admit to.

Draco opened his robe, revealing the locket's twin hanging from a chain around his pale throat.

"We'll be in contact even when I'm in hiding," he said earnestly.

Millie looked the bracelet over trying to straighten it all out in her mind.
Most likely none of it would matter because Draco would be dead in a few hours.

"We'll need to talk if you're going to get rid of the Mark. And after you've removed the Mark, I'm going to marry you," he lectured her. For some reason, he had taken on the exact tone Snape used in class. With that, he slipped the bracelet out of her hand and around her fat wrist.

"Wha?" she reacted in surprise.

"Now it won't come off until I take it off," he said, looking pleased with himself.

"I'll do my best to remove the Mark, but I've told you, Draco, we aren't getting married," she said, forgetting in her irritation that it hardly mattered what he said, since he was a few hours away from being dead, and therefore ineligible for marriage.

"We'll see about that," he said, his face showing more purpose than it had before. It was worrying to know he meant it.

"I suppose we will," Millie answered.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora
Chapter Summary

The homunculi in this chapter are prepared as per the directions of Phillipus von Hohenheim, aka Paracelsus himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 4. A Kiss for Paracelsus

That night, Hermione spent most of what was left of the darkness reconciling her fearsome Potions master with the smelly drunk who had kissed her so badly. What she came up with was a figure of decidedly human proportions.

For one thing, it cheered her immeasurably to know Professor Snape was as confused by the Headmaster's constant machinations as she was. A Professor Snape who lived like a pig and worried, actually worried, about the future seemed an altogether different creature than the stern taskmaster she had worked for years trying to impress.

The cool, obsidian god had... not feet of clay, but rather an everyday sort of human heart.

And he'd kissed her.

Badly.

It put him in the same category as boys like Ron in a certain way. He, like them, saw her sexually, wanted something sexual from her. It meant, in some strange manner, he saw her as attainable and on his own level.

The trouble was that he was undoubtedly mistaken. He was a spy and a schoolmaster. She was a schoolgirl - a bright schoolgirl, she'd grant herself that - but a schoolgirl all the same. She might have been through a scrape or seven, but that was hardly comparable to 20 years of experience and the no-doubt exciting life of a spy.

Boys, even the fully-grown variety, were a bit slow, weren't they?

Still, she couldn't dismiss the kiss entirely. A bad kiss was more encouraging, less frightening, than it would have been had he kissed her as though he were a character from one of Lavender's romance novels. Theoretically, at some point in the future, she very much wanted to do further research, despite the fact that she found the entire being-kissed-by-a-drunken-teacher business inappropriate. As she drifted off around dawn, she hoped for one last time that some portion of his clumsiness could be attributed to drink. She also hoped, someday in the future, she would have an opportunity to give him a second try. In a more appropriate setting, of course.

Less than twenty-four hours later, Professor Snape murdered the Headmaster, and Hermione's late night wonderings became painfully irrelevant.

Millie was both relieved and annoyed that her Head of House had pulled Draco's tenderloin off the
spit when push came to shove. It pleased her that he wasn't dead, because she had to admit she had
known him as long as she could recall, and she might miss him a little.

A very little.

His father used to bring him round to play while the adults plotted, so even though he was
somewhat poncy and tended to pout when he didn't get his way, she was used to him and might
have been a little sorry if he had wound up a natural blond spot on the front steps of Hogwarts. It
was also irritating, because wasn't that just like the jammy bastard: getting someone else to save his
lily-white arse in the end.

The school descended into exactly the sort of chaos Millie would have predicted. Classes were held
but attendance was optional. No one paid much attention to anything that wasn't Potter. Not
students. Not teachers. Not even Filch. She liked to think under normal circumstances the
Slytherins, at least, would have noticed her wearing such a bloody ugly piece of jewellery. Or any
jewellery, for that matter.

Summer holidays came and Millie kissed her daddy, took a deep breath of gingerbread scented air,
and got down to work. Deep in the enchanted woods, she fashioned herself a place where she could
go about her business unbothered. She crowded the trees and wove them round with vines until
they made themselves into a living green wall that from the outside looked like nothing but a
thicket. Inside, she took her trusty Nimbus and swept out the ground, so no plant would grow; it
was a broom after all. She made herself a door of rough stone and set the wards. Neither her
parents, nor her Gran said much of anything about her long absences from the cottage, except that
she was growing up, and at the age when it was perfectly natural for a witch to want to wander the
woods alone with her familiar all hours of the day and night.

And, of course, "I don't mind how long you're out with the moon and the sun so long as your chores
got done."

She collected sacks of hippogriff dung to gestate the homunculus and bell jars for after, and she
assembled her swallow bones, liquid silver, and the globes of poison gas which were the final
ingredients she was able to gather on her own. It was Draco's homunculus, when all was said and
done, and she needed nail, skin, and hair from him, if he expected her to get started. That, and fresh
semen. She wasn't sure how they were going to manage that one.

One day, an utterly nondescript barn owl brought her a plain brown-wrappered box. In the box was
chocolates.

Millie, with nothing else to do, stretched out on the dirt floor with her cat, Whack, purring on her
chest, and ate candy. It was better than hitting herself in the forehead with a plank.

She had ordered Draco, over the bracelet mirror, not to tell her where he and Snape were. It wasn't
bloody likely anyone would ever think to ask her, and even less likely that she'd tell them, but she'd
rather not take the risk. Still, she got to wondering sometimes, where he was and what he was
thinking of. Not her, of course; she took that as granted.

She had worked her way through half the box of chocolates when she heard the sound of a team of
horses running, yes, running through her wood. She sat up quickly, earning one of Whack's claws
right in her chest for her trouble.

No one came to her wood by accident. In the distance, the sound of wheels striking stones caught
her well-tuned ears.
She literally flew back to the cottage, weaving back and forth among the trees, barely above the ground, Whack yowling on the back of her broom all the way.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or scream in terror that it was the Malfoy family coach and six that pulled to a stop in front of her Gran's gingerbread house. Well, at least it wasn't someone evil.

She was more than puzzled, though, when she saw Mrs. Malfoy step from the carriage, then carefully help another Mrs. Malfoy from the carriage, followed quickly by another Mrs. Malfoy, who stepped out of the carriage in her own.

Despite herself, Millie smiled; those silly buggers. A second later, hot and cold warred in her gut; those silly buggers.

Millie wiped most of the leaves out of her plaits with her hands, and decided having a dusty arse was better than knocking the dust off your arse in front of Mrs. Malfoy, whichever one was the real her. She probably had a special spell to repel all dirt from her person. Come to think of it, she probably didn't go around lolling in the dirt in the first place.

Millie curtsied looking from one Mrs. Malfoy to the other, and her Dad opened the door behind her.

"Narcissa," he said, grimly "good to see all of you. You're a bit early; Prunie just put the kettle on."

In a line, the Mrs. Malfoys filed inside and Millie watched in fascination as the second in line allowed Millie's dad to seat her, while the other two sat themselves without any trumpeting.

Millie's mum was fiddling with the cabinets, bringing out the breads; two black, one white, one brown. Butter pulled out of the peat just yesterday, currant buns with icing sugar on top, cakes - a white with pink sugar, a ginger with white sugar, and one with green sugar runes marking x's along the top edge and sugar violets. She didn't like the look of that last one. She watched as her mum set it a bit away from the others, on top of her little silver filigree stand.

Her gran watched them all, puffing on the stump of her black cigar and rubbing, as it always seemed to help her think, on the hairy mole on her left cheek.

"Severus... Narcissa... Boy," Gran nodded three times and blew a feather shaped plume of smoke across the table. "If you'd come looking to make a match before, we might have been tempted, but you've come to us after you've fallen on hard times."

What?

What?

"Granny?" Millie said desperately.

"You're not the only one who has secret conferences, girl." Her granny laughed then turned back to the three Mrs. Malfoys. "Narcissa, the boy is going to have to prove himself. We may be known for our treacle mines, but this is the real treasure of the Bulstrodes." Millie's granny waved her cheroot in her general direction and Millie felt sick.

"What I don't understand is where you got this barmy idea in the first place, Draco," Millie said, addressing one of the two Mrs. Malfoys who seemed to be getting taller by the moment, but whose hair was staying the same wintery white.
Millie's mum pulled the treacle tart off the cooling board, and set out the biscuits, all with jewelled centres. She felt pleased in a cosy, defiant sort of way that they hadn't gone and made a fancy tea on account of the Malfoys.

"Did you forget my kippers, Prunie?" her dad asked; he hadn't even braided his hair. She noted he wasn't wearing his robes, only the rough shirt and knee breeches he wore when they weren't going anywhere. He wasn't out to impress anyone.

"Out of kippers; owl's late." Her mum grunted absentmindedly almost stirring the tea with the stick end of her potions spoon, but remembering herself at the last moment.

"Blast," he muttered.

"I'm sorry about your kippers, Mr. Bulstrode, but we were talking about Millie and I," Draco whinged as he, well, turned back into Draco.

Millicent looked to see Snape staring at the ceiling as though he would succumb from sheer boredom at any moment. He'd probably heard quite a bit of Draco whinging over the past several weeks.

"I want to marry Millicent, sir, madams, because she is..." Draco waved his hands in the air. "She's like a..." he sputtered.

All heads turned to him expectantly.

"Tea's ready," Millie's mum said shoving a mug in front of Draco.

He took a swallow. "Millie could hex any Slytherin at Hogwarts into last year."

"Anything else, Boy?" her mum asked.

"She's got the biggest bubbies in school, and I hear she's a champion shagger," Draco said, then pressed his lips together hard, his entire face turning beet red.

"Veritas, how droll," said the real Mrs. Malfoy, "and sensible."

"That all, son?" Mrs. Malfoy asked Draco.

"She scares me, and I think I love her. I trust her implicitly," Draco said in a great rush.

Millie didn't know whether to burst out laughing or run from the house in tears.

"If I may ask, what have you got against my son, Millicent, that you don't want to become my new daughter?" Mrs. Malfoy asked smiling sweetly.

Millie couldn't help it. She squirmed.

"Well?" her granny asked.

"He whinges and whines... as much as a new born pup," she said simply.

"He'll grow out of that; his father did," Mrs. Malfoy said. "Why don't you like him?"

"I like him all right." Millie looked around desperately. "He's not hard to look at and he's respectful...to me at least. But he is awfully full of himself."
"That he won't grow out of; I suspect it comes with the name," Millie's would-be mother-in-law said. "But is a bit of arrogance really so distasteful? You seem to have more than a portion yourself."

"Do not!" Millie said indignantly.

Every adult at the table started laughing.

She didn't see what was so bloody funny!

"And like he said, we haven't shagged. I don't want marry him if he's crap in bed," she said, as her granny laughed louder than ever.

"He's 17, what else would he be?" Her granny laughed, waving her cheroot.

"I beg your pardon?" Draco said, his tone reeking with offence taken.

Mrs. Malfoy covered her mouth with her hand, but the look of glee filled her eyes.

"Not a wizard under 30 worth takin' off your knickers for," her mum nodded in agreement, "but at his age you could train him up right."

Her granny took a bite of biscuit. "Severus, why don't you take these young people out for a bit. Let the grown ups sort things out. You are, of course, free to find refuge in our wood."

"I am forever in your debt, Mrs. Eye, and I could do with a walk," Professor Snape said, rising from his chair. "Phillip, I believe your kippers have arrived."

Sure enough, a whopping great owl was winging its way toward the front window, the familiar grease-stained parcel of smoked kippers in its talons.

Millie rushed forward to open the door before it...

Too late. She hated it when the stupid bird smashed into the boiled sugar window. Half the bloody fish were scattered in front of the house, and someone had to cook up a new window. Millie had the ridiculous feeling there was an omen she should be trying to recall, something about a front garden full of fish.

Her mother whistled loud and shrill and the grocer's bird made his way in with what kippers he had left, flying over her shoulder through the crowded kitchen.

"Are you gonna to get going or do you plan to stand there with the door open all day?" Her granny squawked at her. Before she knew it the three of them, four if you counted Whack the cat and she did, were hustled outside without so much as a napkin full of biscuits for nourishment, not a single cake. Some people certainly were losing track of their priorities, letting their child go hungry like that.

Oh well, there was nothing to be done about it at the moment.

Millie wondered between thoughts of biscuits exactly how they were going to get shut of Professor Snape so she could gather the last of the ingredients for the homunculus from Draco. Only he wasn't a professor any more, was he.

Professor or no he was still one of her Daddy's best chums, and if her Daddy got wind she was being disloyal to the cause... Well, Millie had never had a spanking in her life, but if anything
could get her in trouble this would be it.

It was stupid. She was practically a grown witch and they treated her like an infant. She had a sinking feeling her Daddy would still be calling her

"Millipede" when she was 100. She wondered if that was just the way of life; you could be as serious and competent as you liked away from home, but the mere presence of your mum and dad reduced you to a toddler.

Snape cleared his throat meaningfully as they walked, as if she was supposed to come up with some great emotional revelation. She looked at him sharply.

"Uncle Severus is a traitor," Draco said, and Millie almost tripped over Whack winding his way back and forth between her feet.

"Good thing he isn't really your uncle then," she said, righting herself.

"We don't need to hide anything from him," Draco insisted.

"Is that so?" Millie asked, giving nothing away.

"Yes, it is most definitely so," Snape said, stopping dead in front of Millie's magical bower. She'd thought it was perfectly camouflaged. She thought she could simply veer slightly off course and they'd never even know they'd been close. Now Snape was standing at the door expecting to be let in.

Snape suddenly turned round and looked down at her, his arms folded. Where did he get off, being so tall?

"Millicent, have you sufficient ingredients for a second homunculus?" he asked.

Millie shrugged; she had enough for three or four. Trust fucking Draco Malfoy to spill all to the one person who could get them both in loads of trouble.

"Then I would like to ask you, Millicent, as someone who has done his best care for you - almost as a second father, if I may flatter myself - I ask you to make me a homunculus as well, and when the proper time comes, transfer my Dark Mark to it," he said it, staring into her face, earnest with the barest edge of a plea to his tone.

"Why'd you turn? I thought they were your friends?" she asked him. It was the only thing she could think to ask.

"My friendship for your father is not feigned, if that's your question. I simply doubt the Wizard who leads them," he said.

Millie looked up at him blankly. That wasn't enough and they both knew it.

"I was Draco's age when I took the Mark. By the time I was 21, I knew I had made the greatest mistake of my life. The cause is a pile of steaming dung; I'm sure you've worked it out for yourself. Unfortunately the other Death Eaters refuse to accept it's little more than an excuse for an overblown lizard to gain power. In the end, blood purity, as an ideal, is bound to fail. It is a simple question of mathematics. Since the deaths of the Potters, everything I have done I have done at Dumbledore's request," Snape said.

"Including kill him?" she asked soberly.
"More or less. I gave Draco's Mother my wizard's oath I would protect her child. A dead man is of little use to any master. With that in mind, Dumbledore insisted I fulfil my pledge regardless of what the particulars were; therefore, I believe it was Dumbledore's desire I do as I did," he said, a hint of discomfort suddenly apparent.

"So you aren't sure?" Millie asked. "What do you know for certain?"

"Not much," Snape answered.

"So it is possible that Dumbledore wanted you to sacrifice yourself?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Not a thought I relish but, yes, it is possible," Snape said.

Millie's brain made a number of rapid calculations, and she came to a decision. "Well, step into my parlour, you two, and I'll see what I can do," and with that she lifted the wards and the immovable stone door swung wide.

Snape's eyes swept over the place she had made for herself, the work area in particular. Draco picked up her half-finished chocolates and started in on them.

Millie turned her back to the pair, separating a small pile of ingredients for each homunculus: swallow bones, ground ruby, dust of emerald, powdered lapis lazuli, red earth, green earth, a quantity of lead, mercury, copper, and sulphur, and all that was left was to collect the hair, blood, nails, skin, and semen.

At the end of the table, she formed two nests of dung.

"Who's first, then?" she asked.

Snape nodded jerkily. "May I?" he asked, taking Millie's knife.

He made quick work of dropping a slip of nail, a sliver of skin, a long black hair, and a splash of red blood on the pile closest to him. Millie couldn't help but stand mesmerized at the thought of what was going to come next.

"Excuse me," Snape said archly.

Millie found herself embarrassed to realize she was staring rather pointedly at his crotch.

Snape raised one eyebrow at her burning red face and motioned with one long finger for her to turn round. She forced the shame out and felt her blood obligingly turn back cold in her veins.

"Someone should have a talk with your Granny about your manners," Snape said before falling silent.

Sod him. As though he was going to tell her granny about this. As bloody if.

When Millie looked up Draco was smirking at her. The smirk quickly turned into a leer.

If she listened, Millie could hear the rustle of Snape's clothes and his restrained but speeding breath. If she concentrated, she could hear his heart pounding. Draco draped his hand casually across his pelvis. His lips pursed.

Her skin went to gooseflesh, Snape was taking bleeding forever. She folded her arms across her chest and frowned at Draco. He laughed silently.
Bastard.

After what seemed like years, Whack yowled. Loudly.

Snape cleared his throat.

"My contribution is complete," he said, adjusting his robes.

Draco laughed aloud at that. "It's about time. I thought we were going to have to get your picture of Granger out of your bag."

Granger? Millie felt sick at the idea. She was so gauche, so beneath Snape.

Could Snape really fancy that know-it-all bag of bones?

"Shut up, Draco," Snape said in a tone more harsh than he would have used were there nothing to the accusation.

Remembering herself, Millie stepped to the worktable and drew her wand.

"Assa Nissi Massa," she said, tapping her wand against the messy pile, drawing all her power of concentration to a single beam of focus.

The puddle of semen began to grow amidst the dirt and gems and bones, blood, skin, and nails, churning through the other ingredients until the entire mass took on a gleaming pearly white sheen. Still it pulsed.

Millie set down her wand, and with bare hands she shaped a likeness of Professor Snape. The nose was a bit out of proportion, but the legs were the same length, which would have been worse.

With infinite care, she set the embryonic homunculus into the nest of dung and carefully, ever so carefully, covered the tiny pulsing shape with more dung.

"Is that all?" Draco asked. "That wasn't proper Latin."

"It was the incantation in Paracelsus' notebook. And it's not even close to the last of it. I have to tend it every day for the next forty days and after that I have to find a way to keep it from running off and getting eaten by something in the forest. They're notorious for running off, homunculi. We'll have to start all over if they run away before I can transfer the marks. One of you fetch me a towel, I'd like to wipe my hands before I go on," Millie said. Draco really did have a talent for getting right up her nose.

Draco meanwhile had stripped down to nothing and was smiling like Christmas had come early.

"I'm ready if you are, Millie." Draco shook his todger at her.

Snape rolled his eyes.

"First things first," Millie snorted and unceremoniously plucked a small cluster of blonde pubic hairs from their nest, set them with the other ingredients, and picked up her knife.

Draco, screamed like a little girl and leapt backwards in surprise, though it was difficult to tell whether it was caused by having his pubic hair yanked or from fear of the blade Millie was wielding.

"Of all the..." Draco squealed.
"Where shall I cut you?" Millie asked. "The thigh isn't likely to show in public, but I 'spect it will hurt more."

"I'm not afraid," he said and opened his legs to her.

"Never said you were," Millie said flatly, and out of the kindness of her heart she avoided further torment of Draco and collected his nails, skin, and blood efficiently. "I suggested you were vain."

"Now the..." she said, as she added the ingredients.

"My..." Draco said.

"Paracelsus called it 'essence,'" she said scornfully. "Sounds like a cooking term."

Snape was meanwhile studying the greenery with rapt attention.

Draco nodded, most of his bravado gone, and came to stand naked in front of Millie's worktable.

He wrapped his left hand familiarly around his hard penis.

Watching him like that, Millie had to admit he was not painful to look at. The well-formed muscles in the back of his thighs were particularly not unpleasant to watch, tensing as his hips bucked forward. His piece itself wasn't bad either. Of the handful - she sniggered inwardly at her own joke - Millie had seen, quite a few were dead ugly, or runts, or both. Draco's cock looked to be nice sized, but not unnatural, with good symmetry and even pigmentation. A good looking prick all around, not unlike Draco himself. It had taken her five or six times of seeing Greg's todger to get used to the purple.

The way the muscles on Draco's belly fit taut together like well-woven reeds was quite comely as well.

She had to fight off the urge to give him a smack on the bottom. He would have taken it as encouragement.

Meanwhile, Draco was making some rather frustrated noises.

She kept looking.

"Could you...lend me a hand... get your finger out of your mouth... or something, Bulstrode?"

Draco said tersely.

She hadn't realised she was biting her thumb. She'd have been embarrassed if she hadn't been the one who was fully dressed.

It was in the name of magic and not just for fun, so she supposed it wasn't completely weak of her to, as he put it, lend him a hand.

As he requested, she slipped her small, rough hand over his perfectly manicured fingers and added slightly to the pressure. She brought the other to his balls, and he used those long white fingers to brace himself against the worktable.

Millie, as a rule, liked to do things well. She had no reason to try to draw this out, so she didn't. She squeezed his cock hard, then relaxed her grip to brush up and down his length with only a whisper of a touch. He moaned on cue.

She squeezed the head hard, then again at the base. Once more, she lightened her touch to the
softest zephyr over his cock and balls. She squeezed the base in her fist once, twice, four, then five times, all the while tickling his glans.

He whimpered, and she aimed him quite easily in the direction of the rest of the components for the Homunculus. If she took a bit more care sculpting the figure of his "little man" than Snape's, who would know, or blame her?

When they returned to the cottage, there was bottle of wine on the table.

"Can you give me a good reason you don't want to marry young Malfoy?" her daddy said the moment she set foot through the door.

For the life of her, Millie could not think of one, and she tried, honest she did.

"I'm too young," she said finally.

"Of course you're too young, that's how it works. Marry young, while you still don't have the sense of a goat, or you'll wind up luring unsuspecting wizards into the woods and bearing bastards like a sensible witch," her granny chortled and lit a new cheroot.

"That settles it," her mum said, pounding her ham-sized fist on the table.

"You'll marry young Malfoy for a year and a day. If he can't show us all what he's made of by then, we'll throw him back and cast our line again."

"To set things off on the proper footing, may I present you with the bride price, Mrs. Eye," Mrs. Malfoy said, daintily removing a hanky from her reticule and passed it to Millie's Gran.

Millie's Granny unfolded the hanky to reveal a ruby the size of a duck's egg nestled amid the black lace. Millie's Granny almost smiled.

Millie wondered how much of Mrs. Malfoy's price was paid because Draco had his spoilt little heart set on marrying her, and how much was paid because as long as he was in Millie's wood he was impossible for the outside world to touch.

Millie's blood ran cold in her veins, and the next few minutes didn't seem quite real. Draco's mum touched her wand to the corner of her eye, and a single glistening tear attached itself to the tip of her wand. Her own mum did likewise, and they both dropped their tears on the top of the cake decorated with runes and violets. The whole business shimmered for a second.

Then Millie's dad and Draco's mum stood them in front of the hearth and made them promise...something. Honestly, Millie was too busy panicking to pay close attention to what she was saying. Inwardly, she was swearing to herself this was going to be the last time Draco Bloody Malfoy got his own way with anything if she had anything to say about it.

Her granny kissed her when they were finished. "May your new husband be young, meek, and lusty abed, and may you soon be widowed if he isn't."

Millie watched Mrs. Malfoy give Draco a look that meant this was no game.

"My little boy is all grown up now," she said, and dabbed at her perfectly dry eyes.

In a fit of insanity, Millie took a long look at Draco. They were married now; why the hell shouldn't she do as she liked? She'd show that Draco what he'd signed up for. Roughly, she grasped Draco by the waist, leaned him back and gave that over-privileged brat the most thorough kissing
she could muster.

When she finished, his eyelids were fluttering and his face was flushed. Sweet Merlin, the tosser had fainted and there was small damp circle on the front of his robes.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Of All The Luck

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of All the Luck

Hamlet: My excellent good friends! How dost thou Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do you both?

Guildenstern: Happy in that we are not overhappy. On Fortune's cap, we are not the very button.

Hamlet: Nor the soles of her shoe?

Guildenstern: Faith, her privates we.

Hamlet: In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true! She is a strumpet.

Draco had never not known Millie. She was one of those people, like Pansy, like Crabbe and Goyle, who would always be there, he assumed; mostly because they had always been there in the past. She was part of the landscape. He had never much thought about her, because what was there to think? Millie was what she was.

Then somehow, in the cauldron that was sixth year it had changed. It wasn't one simple thing; rather it had been a steady precipitation of change.

First off, she pulled her wand on him. When you knew it wasn't in earnest - the witch wasn't going to kill you, at any rate - that was pretty sexy.

Secondly, Draco remembered something his father liked to say, which was "When you choose your wife, you choose your children."

That thought made him uncomfortable when it came to Parkinson. True, she was vicious, but she was not exactly brilliant. To be brutally honest, except for a gift for flattery, she was dumb as a sack of gobstones.

He had enjoyed her fawning when he was younger, but it became fairly dull over the years. That was the trouble with Pansy; he still liked her, but that didn't do anything about the fact that she was dead boring.

Like everyone else, he had figured buck-toothed Granger would wind up with either Potter or Weasley. In that light, Parkinson looked even worse. He didn't want either one of those cunts to have better offspring than he did. He was Draco Malfoy, he deserved only the best. He began to realise the best might be Millie Bulstrode.

Then she told him "no."

It was shocking, really, and only served to seal her fate.

He took to studying her.

You know, she really wasn't ugly at all, only a bit odd looking. Mostly because she didn't put the effort into being pretty that the other girls did.
Draco noticed as she was making her way up the stairs, trying not to be late for charms class, that her bum was as perfectly round as her bubbies. After a certain point in the school year, he couldn't look at her wide, sensuous, and ever so slightly cruel mouth without wishing his prick was in it. He wondered at times what her hair would look like out of plaits. At others, he thought they'd make a perfect set of reins.

It was fate the day he looked across Defence Against The Dark Arts class to notice her small, nearly slanted eyes were the same pale blue as his.

Parkinson had been a fine girlfriend for a boy, but a grown wizard needed something, no someone, less cloying and more exciting. Someone who could be trusted to watch your back if you needed it. That someone was not Pansy Parkinson, but Millie Bulstrode fit the bill perfectly.

And now he had her. He could hardly wait to take her out for a spin.

He grinned at her with glee.

They were in the same bedroom where they'd played cards for cakes when the weather was too bad to fly or play in the wood.

He had a better game than cards, tonight.

Millie, meanwhile, was glaring at him; she'd soon get over that.

"I've had a bad day, I'm going to sleep," she said and lay down on the bed still in her bath robe and pointedly unalluring pyjamas. She even had on socks.

"Excuse me?" he asked in horror. This was not how wedding nights went.

There was passion. There was sex. There was a lot of sex. He was supposed to get to see her bubbies. He was supposed to get to touch her bubbies.

"Excuse me?" Draco repeated himself.

Millie didn't reply, but rather put a pillow over her own face.

"Come on, Mil," he said, punching her shoulder, both lightly and experimentally.

"Hit me again and I promise I will rip your arm out of its socket," she said from under the pillow.

"Isn't there something I can do?" he asked, leaning over her. He would have whinged, except that he was a grown up, married Death Eater now, and therefore was incapable of whinging.

"My feet are sore," she said, from under the pillow. At least that was what it sounded like.

"Brilliant," he said, and he meant it.

The instant he pulled off her little cotton socks, he knew he had done the right thing in begging his mum to get Millie for him.

Her feet were a thousand times nicer than Pansy's. Millie had dainty little feet with short round toes like a row of pink grapes at the end. Her arches were gorgeously high.

Pansy had feet like a rhinoceros.

With all the care he could manage, Draco began rubbing slow deep circles on the ball of her foot.
He certainly didn't want to make a mistake tonight. He switched to the other foot after what seemed like an appropriate length of time. She had a cute little mole on her instep on her left foot. Forgetting himself for a moment, he bent and kissed it.

"If you really want to make yourself useful, you can lick my cunt," Millie said, taking the pillow away from her face.

Without so much as a by your leave, Millie had pulled off her pyjama bottoms, nearly kicking Draco’s face in the process. He flinched, some things were sacred, or should be.

She then spread her legs, not even bothering to remove her robe. She was more difficult to warm up than Draco had anticipated, drumming against the rail of the bed with her fingers like that.

She certainly was...feisty, at times. Never mind, she'd be smitten before it was all over with. He had faith in that.

From the hour of his birth, Draco Malfoy's natural hedonism had been not only nourished, it had been educated. His mother had wrapped him in only the finest silks, the richest velvets, the softest furs. She had poured her best perfumes into his bathwater. He had been taught to enjoy the finest music, the most delicious food. More than that, he had been kissed intelligently, cuddled with discernment. Now all he had to do was synthesise it all to the singular application of being Millie's. He would give her the finest the wizarding world had to offer: himself. Not only that, but he would give himself generously. He would please her or he was not worthy of his upbringing.

"Turn over," he said. "Like this, on your hands and knees." Draco was slightly surprised that she followed his directions.

Draco slid his face directly under her quim, but he didn't start right away.

Instead he ran his hands slowly up the inside of her thighs feeling her chest tense up. Her cunt hair was plaited, just like the time he'd caught her in bed with Crabbe and Goyle. It sent a surge of jealousy into his gut until he reminded himself she was his now, all he had to do was convince her of it.

He closed his eyes and breathed in. She didn't smell at all like Pansy. No, Millie's cunt smelled like treacle. That was odd. He stuck out his tongue for a taste just to see.

Merlin's Balls! It was going to be like having tea in bed. He teased his tongue along the sticky slit. The juice was clear, but it tasted for all the world like treacle. Six...Seven...Eight...Nine... He went slowly, but what he really wanted was a deeper taste. He knew enough not to go too fast. He'd show her what this seventeen-year-old boy could do. It was murder holding back, though.

It didn't matter much because Millie responded quicker than Pansy and she wasn't shy about grinding herself on his face.

Heavenly.

He licked and sucked and she growled and swore, then she came in a spray of profanity that would have impressed Filch. But instead of falling off in a near faint, the way Pansy would have, she kept going and came two more times before rolling back on her side of the bed. Her side of the bed, he liked the sound of that. Being married to Millie was going to be bloody brilliant.

He was trying to climb on top of her when Millie opened her eyes and put one little hand around his throat. Draco shouldn't have had to tell himself not to be afraid, but he did. She wouldn't actually hurt him, would she?
"I thought you were smarter than this, Draco. Let me to spell it out clearly, if we are going to be married, you are going to do things my way. You're a dumb cunt and you do dumb things. That mark on your arm is proof. You have therefore lost your decision making privileges... And for future reference, I like to be on top." With that, she flipped him easily onto his back and climbed on top of him as if he were the new Thunderbolt.

It was amazing. If he thought she'd been magnificent before, that was nothing compared to the way she rode him. She was like a terrible goddess looming over him; Boadicea herself. Her magic crackled the air around them. He reached up and eased off her robe. She pulled off the hideously ugly pyjama top herself, throwing it forcefully across the room. Their bodies together, every inch naked, he felt he was drowning in flesh. And inside, inside she was tighter than Pansy had ever been, even the first time. It was hard to explain but Pansy, at first, had been like a new shoe, but Millie was like... all he could think of was a hand shake. It was like the muscles in her fanny squeezed and relaxed; whatever it was, it was brilliant and every time he got close to coming she stopped doing it. He was going to cry if she didn't let him come soon.

Her breasts were shaking in his face and her skin was soft and smooth as cream and inside her was a power like a clenched fist. He drew a deep breath, trying to hold back and took in a lung full of biscuit-scented skin.

Suddenly, he felt as though his entire self was trying force its way out the head of his prick.

When the room stopped spinning, he saw two small, black lashed blue eyes staring at him.

"You know, your eyelashes are white," Millie said with her usual scowl.

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

Millie looked as though she was trying to think of a reason to deny him.

"I suppose," she said reluctantly.

He didn't need to be told twice. He knew he'd won some kind of victory when he felt her hands grip his bum.

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It was a peculiarly miserable mood in which Severus Snape found himself as he lay on the other side of the gingerbread wall that night, and for Severus Snape that was quite a statement. His equivalent of cheer was a shade darker than the average wizard's homicidal rage. But after sitting up and drinking to "old times" and "the new generation" with Phil Bulstrode, he was discovering new depths to the abyss.

He'd murdered one master, supremely hacked off another, his fate lay at the feet of a teenaged hag, and to add bad to worse he was never going to get to steal away Potter's girlfriend. Snape knew better than to believe that clap trap she had tried to hand him about her not being Potter's girlfriend. He might have been pissed, but he wasn't stupid. She'd hardly left the little cretin's side since they had been sorted together.

It would have been such sweet vengeance. He had planned it all out, down to the sneer he'd give Potter as he cradled the adoring Granger in his arms. At the rate he was going, he would never get his cock wet again, much less with a bright and nubile young thing who would simultaneously either scandalise or turn green with envy every single living person who'd done him wrong. Life
was patently unfair. It was as if the architect of all things had designed the whole of creation with the singular intention of fucking Severus Snape. And not in a good way.

That was the only reason Severus Snape had for believing in a deity of any sort. Otherwise, he was just a monumentally unlucky bastard. It was the inverse equivalent of winning the lottery once a fortnight. And how bloody likely was that? No, the answer was clear, regardless of which religion had it right, their god despised Severus Snape above all other beings. He never got anything he wanted out of life. Never. If he had had the fortune to have been born an animal, someone would have put him out of his misery long ago. He was a prime example of fate's caprice.

He should have known Albus fucking bloody Brian Wulfric Dumbledore would find a way to bugger him beyond repair before it was all over. It had been such a beautiful plan.

Potter would rid him of the Dark Lord, freeing Snape, himself, to emerge from the war a dashing, heroic, and somewhat mysterious figure. He would then trap Granger in his web by granting her the approval she'd yearned for during her tender school years. It had first occurred to him when he saw her scrubbed and pretending at being a grown up witch at the Yule Ball, the year of the fiasco of a Tri-Wizarding tournament, driving Potter to sullen misery, with the numbskull Krum.

He imagined precisely how much he would enjoy her on his own arm in another ten years. He turned it over in his mind until he sometimes forgot that the original point was to wound Potter and focused instead on the witch Granger was going to grow into. The sort of witch he normally had a tendency to send sniggering gaily in the other direction. He'd seen that witch's infuriating shadow repeated in the girl over the years. He'd thought it out, though. He could seduce Granger if he was afforded half a chance.

Now the only way he was going to get to chance at her was if he wound up on trial for his life and she was appointed to defend him, which was less unlikely than he'd like to consider.

On the other side of the wall, Draco was getting his brain shagged loose.

Severus swore, if the prince of brats so much as stubbed his precious toe, he'd look down and find his path littered with the lost jewels of Atlantis. It was classic Malfoy luck.

Severus had inherited his luck from Old Toby, may he rot in Muggle Hell. As far as Severus knew, he was still living but he wished him in Hell all the same.

He was a worthless bastard, in both the literal and figurative senses of the words, without the common decency to simply get it over with and drop dead.

Of course, Severus' luck was far worse than Toby's, really. Toby could have changed things if he'd wanted. No one forced him to keep at a pursuit at which he had long since proved himself inept. As far as Severus knew, he hadn't been under a curse requiring him to be an utter shit smear of a human being either. No, Toby could have been happy had he set his mind to it, but instead he preferred to torment anyone with the misfortune to be in a ten meter radius.

Severus Snape was nothing like that. He was just hard done by.

Despite the silencing spells that had obviously been cast, Severus felt a clear thump against the wall at his back as something, Millicent's bed, most likely, hit the other side with resounding force.

Severus counted the length of time since he'd had a shag. He couldn't decide if it seemed worse expressed in months or years. At any rate, it was three Ministers of Magic ago.

With singularly dour resolve he lit a fag, wishing vaguely he'd set the bedclothes afire in his sleep.
Not that he was that lucky.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora
Chapter 6. Bloody Contingencies

Had Hermione Jane Granger not been born a witch, her course would have been clear. She would have selected an area of interest, possibly law or chemistry, and settled into a period of concentrated study at university. It should have gone without saying, she wouldn't have stopped until she'd exhausted her chosen field, at which time she would seek out either a place within a respected firm, who would appreciate her intelligence, or a research position. Research was, all things considered, ideally suited to her temperament. She imagined life as a researcher would be endlessly fascinating, regardless of field. The unknown was infinite; the process of unravelling the mysteries of the universe like a poorly constructed jumper couldn't help but help but occupy one's full attention.

As things were, the partnership of Granger and Granger DDS had indeed given life to a small, but singularly irrepressible witch; even if, for the first time since she'd received her Hogwarts letter, Hermione had started to wonder if life in the magical world really was all it was cracked up to be. There were no magical Universities. Mostly, as far as Hermione could tell, because there simply weren't enough students. That left the apprenticeship option, which was no option, at present. Every single expert in every single field Hermione had contacted, and she had left no rock undisturbed in her quest, refused to consider an apprentice who didn't have at least two years practical experience in their area of study.

To add insult to injury, everyone she knew seemed intent on steering her toward one of the two professions she had categorically ruled out years ago: teaching and healing. Not only was the pay scale for teachers insultingly low, but as far as Hermione could see, as a full time activity, teaching promised to be both tooth-grindingly frustrating and mind numbingly dull. Healing might offer an ever so slightly better salary, but that was offset by the constant stream of ill and injured people. To be truthful, Hermione didn't really like sick people. It was a personality flaw, she knew. Still, she didn't think that the sinking feeling she had when she imagined the life of a healer was so much something to be overcome as a warning to be heeded.

In the end, she applied to, and was accepted by, the Aurors, right alongside Harry and Neville. Ron worked across the hall in the office of Magical Games and Sport. If anyone was under the impression Percy Weasley's obsession with cauldron thickness was tiresome, they had obviously never sat on Ron's sofa while he regaled Harry with the intricacies of quaffle, bludger, and snitch standards.

She and Ronald had tried to date, but that had ended abruptly when he assumed she would take on his laundry. Hermione regretted the break-up occasionally, mostly because he was quite a bit better in bed than he had a right to be.

They remained as much friends as ever, though, and he was a remarkably good person to drink with and curse the unfairness of the world. Behind the affable face, there was thick ribbon of bile
and vindictiveness. She supposed to some degree it was what they had in common: the understanding that life was unfair. She need hardly note that Harry was part of this society of rancor as well. Harry was practically the chief executive officer.

Hermione had been rather keen on branching out and meeting new people when she left Hogwarts. Unfortunately, that was rather more difficult, not to mention awkward and uncomfortable, than she had imagined. She had always believed she would make a better adult than a child. In some respects this was true; she appreciated being able to make her own decisions, thank you very much. But socially things had changed little since her first day on the Hogwarts Express. There was still a great gaping conversational chasm between her and other people most of the time. People who seemed to think being "smart," was the Alpha and Omega of Hermione Granger. It was useful in that she could push through her ideas fairly often on the job, when she wasn't locked away in an office with forms like the peasant girl spinning straw into gold. Truly, the amount of paperwork generated at the Aurory was staggering. Adult life in general was rather more dull than anyone had let on, and being "the bright one" was pain in her arse because it made her feel like a poorly-written character in the novel of her own life. Maybe that was the trouble: it wasn't the novel of her own life. It was Harry's story; one where the part she played most often was deus ex machina. Being reduced to a plot device would annoy anyone, but there was little chance of change until Harry had his final assignation with He-whose-name-made-some-people-lose-control-of-their-bladders. That wasn't a joke either. She'd made the mistake of saying the name "Voldemort" aloud, in front of Ron's assistant, and caused the poor wizard to wet himself.

What sort of world was it where Ron Weasley had an assistant?

She admitted he was more enthusiastic about his job than she'd ever seen him about anything, but giving him an assistant was a bit much if you asked her. Not that anyone did.

At least she didn't have to date him.

Dating was one thing in her life that appeared to be working out fairly well.

Since Madam Pomfrey's impromptu dentistry during fourth year, she'd been attractive enough. After leaving school, she learned the rather astonishing fact that a witch didn't have to make a nitwit of herself, and flirt like Lavender Brown, to go out with a wizard; all she had to do was ask him. She never had met with refusal yet. Somehow, her attention didn't last longer than a week or two before she spotted the next bit of potential on the horizon, leaving the last behind her, read and discarded like a cheap paperback. It seemed even the wizards who appeared to be fascinating at first glance were painfully simple on closer inspection. Still, there were plenty of single wizards in Great Britain she hadn't dated yet. Sometimes she wondered, with vague horror, if perhaps all males were at their core exceedingly dull.

So it was that on this particular Tuesday when Hermione Granger awoke groggily after her accustomed hour, the bed she left was still occupied by a not-yet-discarded wizard. It had been a four-day weekend. She was vaguely uncomfortable leaving a wizard unsupervised in her flat, but she shook it off as she made her way to work. She didn't have another choice; she was going to be late as it was. In any event, Ted was having tea with his mother, and she already knew he preferred to sleep late. He wouldn't have much chance to root around in her things, even if he wanted to. Besides, it was an unabashedly glorious morning. Bright and sunny, freakishly lovely, even. The sort of day when the entire population, both Wizard and Muggle, seemed to be under the influence of a cheering charm. She dismissed the idea as silly, whistling a few toneless notes in reply to the sparrow twittering on the corner lamp post and nodded to a Muggle who passed her wearing obscenely high heels. Unless her eyes deceived her, flowers were blooming between the cracks in the pavement. Curiouser and curiouser; though harmless enough.
She was going to have to go through the usual suspects to see who might amuse themselves casting a spell over the entire city. She was certain Moody would be ranting when she got into the office but couldn't quite bring herself to worry. He always found something to get worked up over.

The Aurory was empty; she'd quite forgotten they were assembling at the Atrium level. She braced herself as she hurried to the meeting.

When she made her way inside, Alastor Moody was in fact the first person she saw, though she hadn't expected to see Bellatrix Lestrange waving his decapitated head on a stick. She had to fight the urge to laugh in a mixture of hysteria and dark humour. A lung full of the thick sweet smell of human blood caused her morning tea to rise in her gullet sickeningly, and she was glad she hadn't taken the time for something more substantial. At least twenty-five wizards were splayed out on the marble floor. As far as she could see they had been turned completely and precisely inside out. Guts curled and snarled and spilled like so much yarn on the blood-slicked floor.

Years of preparation did their job, and Hermione shielded herself and ducked behind the receptionist's desk, in that order. Despite the legless and armless torso she shared the position with, it was an ideal vantage point. Using the mirror she kept in her pocket for just such occasions, she could see what was happening and throw curses, all from a hidden location. Methodically, she began scanning the great room for people she knew. Neville, of all people, appeared to be fighting off Death Eaters near the floos. She sent a curse flying in the direction of the dark wizard he was currently locked in combat with. She aimed well enough, but not soon enough, to stop the Death Eater's cutting spell shearing the side of Neville's head, taking his right ear off. To his credit, Neville didn't even pause as he fired off curses at the other Death Eaters.

Order members and Aurors kept pouring in, but the Death Eaters were waiting. It was the smartest tactical move she'd ever seen them make. She supposed, as she sent well aimed curses toward the white masked figures, if one only had a limited number of smart moves one ought to save them to use at the end of a conflict.

Moment by moment, more workers arrived by floo. Between them, she and Neville saved perhaps half of them. The others were picked off by the Death Eaters; some turned wrong side out, some cut in half, others burnt alive.

Whenever she could, she scanned the room looking for the same person, she imagined, as everyone else: Harry Potter.

And then, what seemed like years later, he was there. He was rumpled. His hair stood up in the back. His glasses were slightly askew, and she had never seen a more beautiful sight in her life.

"Tom Riddle," Harry called out.

"Harry Potter," called Voldemort in return. That was Voldemort? Despite Harry's descriptions, she hadn't expected him to look so young or so human.

All movement paused as they stepped toward each other, then erupted with more fury than before. There were two Death Eaters flanking Harry. Hermione was somewhat surprised when they pointed their wands at Voldemort. She didn't hear the spells, but it didn't appear to matter. With a flick of his spotless hand, Voldemort sent them flying backwards. One slammed hard, if not fatally, against the wall, but the other slid on a pile of entrails, careening round the bloody marble floor until his body hit hers full force. At first she thought the sickening crack she felt as he hit her was only her wrist, but one quick flex and she realised it had been her wand. Her wand was broken. Fuck!
She positioned her mirror along the edge of the desk and took a look at Harry.

She could feel the hot breath of the Death Eater on her neck, as whoever it was worked to keep themselves hidden behind the desk as well, but she had too big an investment in the outcome of Harry's duel with Voldemort to waste her time wondering precisely who had decided to turncoat.

"I've taken off my mask, Hermione," a low familiar voice said. "Please don't do anything to draw attention." But she still wasn't going to turn around.

Or perhaps she was.  

She turned her head to find the person pressed up against her was Professor Snape bleeding copiously from his nose. Not that he was a professor any more. It was flustering enough that when she turned back to the mirror, it took a moment before her brain was able to process exactly what the green light around Harry's limp but floating body meant.

They'd lost.  

Snape clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Do not speak," he hissed in her ear.

A great roar went up on all sides, so it was hardly necessary. Those who opposed Voldemort appeared to have come to the decision that martyrdom had more appeal than they'd previously imagined as they rose like a wave against the Death Eaters who fought back, laughing.

A Death Eater who almost casually cursed Nymphadora Lupin turned his head to scan the high domed room.

"I am going to remove my hand from your mouth, make no sound," Snape said, wiggling strangely against her.

After a moment's groping, Snape produced a small oyster tin wrapped carefully in a handkerchief. A portkey, obviously. She struggled despite knowing that wherever Snape was taking her it could hardly be worse than where she was. It mattered little. The last sight she saw before Snape forced her hand to the oyster tin was Neville firing a volley of curses at Bellatrix Lestrange.

The next thing she saw, once everything stopped spinning, was a wall of white tiles and a row of lavatories. They were in a public loo. And so, she realized looking to her immediate left, were Draco Malfoy and Millicent Bulstrode... and a cat. Peeking out from Bulstrode's robes was the head of a very unhappy cat.

"What have you done?" Hermione said, pulling her hair out of her face and turning around to look at Snape.

"Other than save your life?" he answered, spitting a mouth full of blood onto the pristine floor.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"The last place anyone would look, Granger," Bulstrode said, stroking the cat's head.

"Which is?" she asked.

"Dallas, Texas," Snape said, tilting back his head in an effort to staunch the bleeding.

Hermione was unnerved by the way Draco looked from Snape to her and back again.
Chapter End Notes

For Lora
The Degraded Heart of Texas

Disclaimer: None of these characters are my invention. I think we all know that.

If I am unable to make the gods above relent, then I will move Hell.

-Virgil

Hermione Granger? Of all the people to decide to drag along at the last minute, Snape had to bring Granger. Millie scowled, trying to calculate exactly how this deviation would affect their original plan.

Granger, meanwhile, was scowling back, like they were a pile of washing to be done.

"Would someone mind terribly telling me what exactly is going on here?"

Granger said, with a sort of sweet coldness.

Snape was too concerned with the state of his nose to answer, and Draco was rather distracted doing all the washing he could manage in the lavatory sinks without stripping completely. His Death Eater get-up was in a pile on the floor, along with his trousers. She was glad she'd made him put on underthings before he left the house.

"They're almost out of soap." he said, lathering his chest. Snape wouldn't do badly to take a page out of his book. He was crusted up with blood and smoke, and several things she'd rather not speculate about.

Granger looked at Millie as though she expected an answer.

"We've run away," she said simply.

Granger nodded, as though she was looking for rather more elaboration than that.

"We couldn't stay, regardless of who won; the only reason we waited until the final battle was because these two hero-puddings wanted to help the great Harry Potter. Bucking for a pardon if you ask me. Anyway, we came here because it's a major city where we're fluent in the language, and we have geographical distance between us and anyone who wants to throw us in Azkaban, don't underestimate that, and..." Millie said, wondering how many History of Magic classes Granger had managed to stay awake through.

"Thirdly," Granger interrupted, "it's right on the border between the two Magical nations within the confines of the Muggle US; New England and California. Any magic that might happen to be noticed by Magical Enforcement agents of one country will probably be assumed to come from citizens of the other. You will have to live as Muggles, you know. You can't risk drawing attention on a regular basis, but it does afford you a certain margin of error."

"Obviously," Millie said impatiently.

"You, Granger?" Draco said, dripping water from head to toe. "Don't you mean we?"
In an instant Granger went flat, all except her hair.

"You don't want to go back, do you? It might be difficult, but I imagine it can be arranged," Draco said slyly. He was enjoying baiting Granger so much Millie felt obliged to poke him in the side.

"Did Snape even ask you if you wanted to come along?" Millie asked.

Snape made a point not to look at either of them.

"Of course not," Granger said.

Snape perched nervously on the bathroom counter furthest away from Granger, still giving no suggestion he might have the slightest urge to clean up.

"Then I'll ask you formally, would you like to join us? We have some provisions made, but I don't expect it will be easy. Still, it would likely be better than setting out on your own," Millie said. "Or going back and getting killed."

"You'll have to sleep with Snape if you want to stay," Draco said grinning, and Millie jabbed him again, harder this time.

"As you know, my husband talks straight out of his arse half the time," Millie said.

Millie couldn't help noting that Snape had pulled his hair forward to cover his face.

"Allies?" Granger said extending her hand.

Millie nodded. It wasn't a day she'd ever seen coming but there you were; she'd never pictured herself Mrs. Malfoy either.

After an instant of hesitation, she clasped her palm to Granger's.

Once the handshake was ended, Millie glanced at Granger with microscopic carelessness. She noted Granger did the same to her. Tall and short. Fat and thin. Pureblood and Muddy-as-they-come. She had the odd feeling for all their differences they had something in common as well; though under the circumstances she couldn't be arsed to say what exactly it was.

"So, what's the plan?" Granger asked with a false brightness Millie usually associated with people on the brink of gory mayhem.

"First, we change clothes. Sorry, we didn't bring any for you. I didn't know you were coming. Looks like you'll have to go naked," Draco said, winking meaningfully at Snape.

What a wonderful way to make the best of their new ally. Granger could stand to be quite a benefit to them, as long as Draco didn't muck things up playing the arse.

Her temper pushed to the brink, Millie reached up and grabbed Draco by the top of his ear, twisting slightly, until he was nose to nose with her.

"Don't be a bloody idiot, Dearest. Granger is an asset, and she's on our side, and she'll stay on our side if we treat her nice enough; it's the Gryffindor way.

So stop trying to be cute, you're getting up her nose. Be careful or you're going to wind up getting on my wick, too," Millie said, making a conscious effort not to grit her teeth.

"Sorry, don't know what I was thinking," Draco said, sounding not the least bit contrite.
"Snape does carry a torch..." Draco went on, not quite under his breath "You think she'd be grateful...Ow!"

Millie elbowed him hard.

"Stop it. I think The Lizard Lord broke a couple of my ribs back there," Draco said pitifully.

"Serves you right for following him in the first place," Millie said, paying Draco no more mind as she opened her travelling bag.

"Here. It's all I can give you at the moment. Muggle witches do wear trousers, don't they?" she asked, offering Granger Draco's pale blue trousers. Of course he'd packed a ridiculous amount of clothes. His mother bought these particular silk trousers right after they were married, along with dozens of others, "to match his eyes."

"My mum bought those," he said, with a wounded air.

"Shut up, Draco," Snape cut in, still holding the bridge of his nose. "After we all look more...Mugglish, we're to find our way to the house. Draco managed to buy a house through entirely Muggle channels, leaving no trail whatsoever for the magical authorities. Shopping: the true talent of the Malfoy Clan. And to think he managed it without any lesser beings to help with the sweaty parts.

It must have been quite an ordeal."

Draco rolled his eyes and handed Snape the travelling bag.

Millie noted with interest that Snape's slitted eyes followed Granger as she closed the cubicle door behind her.

Draco Malfoy had seen Muggle cars before. He was a man of the world, after all. It was true, however, that the impression they gave when one was flying dozens of yards above them, cloaked by an invisibility charm, was rather different than seeing one face to face. One moment he was telling Millie what he'd like to do with the garden at the new house, and the next thing he knew, this metal and glass monstrosity had come irresponsibly close to mowing him down. They clearly didn't know who they were dealing with.

"As I was saying," Draco said, glaring meaningfully at the back end of the car that had had the temerity to try and kill him. "I would like to get a good look at the house colour before we decide definitively on which roses we'd prefer for the front garden...Excuse me?" Granger, of all people was pulling him by the collar.

"You're standing in the street," she said, gritting her teeth at him.

"And your point is?" he said, turning from Millie only long enough to give the Mudblood a withering look.

"Standing in the street chattering away is a good way to get flattened," Severus said pompously.

Draco was a grown man now and much too old to call anyone "Uncle." Draco noted Severus was safely on the median, leaning casually against a street sign.

"I wasn't chattering. We were discussing the selection of roses. It would hardly do to have the roses
clash with the house," he explained, though it was obvious. It had been a difficult day, so he would give Severus the benefit of the doubt.

"Narcissa would likely disavow knowledge of us all," he said sarcastically.

"Fortunately, neither your esteemed mother nor anyone else of consequence in the magical world will have an opportunity to evaluate the landscaping, so perhaps we would be better served to apply our energies to more pressing matters."

The kill joy.

"Such as?" Draco asked. Despite all his useful life-saving qualities, Severus had a remarkable ability to spoil a good time.

"Money; as in, we haven't got any," Severus said.

"What, Muggles don't take gold?" Draco said, shaking a handful of the gold Muggle coins from his pocket.

"Those are doubloons, Draco; they haven't been used by Muggles in these parts in a hundred years," Severus sneered. "Where did you get them?"

"Mother found them at the back of the vault," he said "She thought perhaps we could use them. Before you get your knickers in a twist, I'll say it again, she doesn't know where we went."

Severus sniffed at him. "There's no way we could pass those off without arousing suspicion."

"We need money for food, and what else?" Millie asked.

What a question; strictly speaking, one needed money for everything.

Sometimes Draco thought his wife lived in a reality parallel to, but not quite lining up with, the one where his bank account lived.

"We'll have to pay to turn on the utilities," the Mudblood said.

"What's that?" Millie asked.

"In Muggle communities, businesses provide electricity for light and the operation of machinery, gas for cooking and heating, water routed to homes through pipes, a deposit of some sort is usually required to receive these services," Severus' Mudblood said.

"And without them we'll be sitting in the dark, with no tea, deciding which of the others to turn on and eat raw," Severus said, visibly stifling a yawn.

Another car zoomed toward them; this time Draco watched in horror as Granger pulled Millie out of its path.

"Thank you," he said, once he was certain the love of his life had been saved successfully.

"You're welcome," the Mudblood said pleasantly. Draco silently granted Severus a look of acknowledgement for being so adamant about bringing her along.

"We should find work as soon as we can get properly cleaned up," Millie said.

"We'll need convincing documentation; Muggle governments tax the same as Wizards," the
Mudblood said.

"We've got it. The three of us do, at least," Millie said.

"Oh, I'm sure good old Severus could come up with something for you," Draco said, leering at the good old Severus in question. Severus glowered. Some people had absolutely no sense of fun.

Millie caught Draco's eye for the exact length of time necessary to let him know she was suspicious. She knew Draco'd done all the forging. Luckily, he knew she wouldn't grass them out to the Mudblood. He smiled back at her innocently. As long as she didn't realise that he'd been in on Snape's plan to take the Mudblood from the beginning, he would be fine.

Hermione never imagined she'd take a portkey to an airport loo, then dress head to toe in Draco Malfoy's clothes - silk clothes, no less, hemmed up by Millicent Bulstrode in the aforementioned public lavatory - and as a finale help Severus Snape steal a car. The obvious answer was that it wasn't happening.

The entire day had had a dream-like quality; any moment now Crooks would leap on her chest and wake her up.

She looked to the east, at least she thought it was the east, and imagined she saw the very first beginnings of dawn. The only cat she could see was the one with its head peeking out of Millicent Bulstrode, no, Millicent Malfoy's, bag.

The sun wasn't up yet and it had already been a very long day.

"Explain again why we're stealing a car?" she asked Snape, still scanning the horizon for the police.

"It is not stealing if the previous owner no longer wishes to maintain possession. The vehicle before us," Snape said, his breath heavy as he knelt, somehow cramming his rather large self under the steering wheel, "has been labelled abandoned by the authorities. Observe the notice on the windscreen.

I am, in fact, saving the constabulary the cost and inconvenience of impounding it."

"I always knew you were civic minded," Millie said, and Hermione stifled a laugh. It may have been hysteria.

"I don't wonder they didn't want it," Malfoy said. "Couldn't you not-steal a nicer one? Something that didn't smell like cat pee?"

"I believe the right to complain is reserved for members of the company who did not leave our Muggle currency behind to make more room for shoes."

Snape said, grunting as he delved deeper into the car's wiring.

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably in his Muggle clothing, as if it were somehow rougher than he was accustomed to. Hermione didn't like to judge, but it was poncy on his part; people had died, and he was behaving as if jeans and a white cotton t-shirt were equivalent to a hair shirt.

Dead. Harry was dead. She forced the thought out of her mind. If she thought of that, she would think of nothing else, and now was not the time for distraction.

"Just keep alert," Snape growled.
The sight of him, dressed as a Muggle, similar to Draco except for the colour of his shirt, was especially jarring.

There was something fitting about Millicent Bulstrode, her hair still in braids, wearing a cherry printed dress that looked like it dated from the 1950s.

Together with Draco, she looked like the unwitting epitome of retro chic; all she needed was conspicuous tattoos and black lipstick. Hermione grumpily imagined Malfoy would manage to look well-dressed in an ensemble made of bog paper.

Snape looked weary and older than he was. Worse than that, he looked weak.

Somehow, amid all the trauma of the day, she pitied him more than the dead.

She pitied Snape, without his black robes rippling behind him, tired and stealing, or not-stealing, a car.

"But why are we not-stealing a car, then?" Hermione asked.

"Because...," Snape said as he continued working and Hermione pointedly avoided looking at him and wondering precisely where he learned this particular skill. "Draco and Millie have nearly been mown down by passing motorists three times in the space of half a mile, and I have no wish to deal with Muggle doctors if it can possibly be avoided." Suddenly the car's engine roared to life.

"Besides, the car sits at the very epicentre of American culture, such as it is." With this, Snape gestured for them to get into the damned car.

"As immigrants, we are somewhat obliged to follow the customs of our new country, within the bounds of reason. First lesson: as the driver, I have sole dominion over the radio, both station setting and volume control."

"And why such an old car?" Hermione asked, all the day's events conspiring to loosen her tongue and manners.

"The newer models have computers. I have no idea how to get one of those bloody things going," Snape said, the corners of his mouth curling farther down than they had been earlier.

"Something Snape doesn't know?" Malfoy crowed. Hermione heard a popping noise and didn't look to see; whatever it was Millicent had done, he had it coming.

The next thing she knew, Draco was leaning with his head out of the window like a spaniel, and Snape was twiddling with the radio. Millicent looked queasy, holding tight to the cat on her lap, not that Hermione blamed her.

Snape drove with all the graceful precision of Ernie of Knight Bus fame. The car itself didn't help either; besides smelling of cat urine, it was decidedly tank-like in its movements. Hermione had ridden in smaller boats. Perhaps it wasn't a dream. The stench seemed depressingly realistic.

"Feeling superior yet?" Snape shouted at her as he passed through static and pop music stations.

Hermione wasn't sure whether it was a rhetorical question or not, so she ignored him, sifting through the swirl of questions circling in her brain.

"How long were you in contact with Harry?" she asked, staring straight ahead.

"I wasn't. I simply honoured my promise to Albus Dumbledore I would stand by the brat's side
when the final battle came. He isn't difficult to pick out in a crowd. Wasn't, rather." Snape said.

"Why didn't you warn us the Ministry was going to be attacked?" she asked, turning to watch him. The radio was playing a strange hiccuppy song, and Snape's knee was bouncing as he drove, which didn't appear to facilitate his ability to control a motorized vehicle.

"You assume I knew what was to come," Snape said.

"Five minutes notice might have changed everything," she said.

"Or it might have changed nothing, assuming the Order would even have listened to a traitor," Snape said "Would you have believed me had I come to you?"

"Possibly," she said, afraid to be too sure of herself. She recalled rather vividly the night Snape had tried to tell he was going to kill Dumbledore.

"And would you have been able to convince the others to listen as well? Could you have convinced Moody? Potter?" he asked quietly.

He didn't give her a chance to answer, but rather turned the radio up until it was so loud it drowned out everything but the pounding of Hermione's head.

"That'll be the daa aay aay that I die," the voice sang.

Suddenly a horrible thought occurred to her; the Dark Mark. Voldemort could summon Draco and Snape whenever he liked.

She turned to Snape panicked and reached for the volume knob.

Snape slapped her fingers.

"What if the Dark Lord decides to summon one of you?" she shouted, uncertain whether he had heard her or not.

Snape turned the radio down slightly.

"If Voldemort," Snape said smugly, as though he relished his ability to say the name without fear, "attempts to summon Draco or myself, it will be completely immaterial as our Dark Marks have been excised."

Hermione blinked. "How did you manage? I thought it was impossible."

"That's what Dumbledore led me to believe as well," Snape said his hands tight for a moment on the wheel. "It seems it suited his purposes for me to remain as I was."

"But how did you...?" Hermione asked, at a loss. She had always imagined the Dark Mark was indelible. She hadn't even thought to question Dumbledore. The man in her mind would never leave a hideous piece of magic like the Dark Mark on a person if it could be removed. She'd never felt so stupid in her life.

"I didn't," Snape said, wiping his forehead in the creeping heat. "It was Millie."

"Millicent Bulstrode removed your Dark Mark?" Hermione boggled, too shocked to modulate her voice. "She's the female equivalent of Crabbe and Goyle."

The moment she said it she knew it wasn't quite true. The day's events added up rather differently.
Snape took a sharp turn, throwing Hermione against the door; good thing she'd locked it or she'd be lying in the street. "Perhaps you don't know the members of Slytherin house as well as you imagine."

"Apparently not," she said bracing herself against the dashboard.

"Have you heard of Black Alice Eye?" Snape asked, sniffing, his nose still seemed to be distracting him.

"The fairy story?" she asked "It's a typical warning tale, designed to remind teenaged wizards to be careful around strange witches."

"No, it is not," Snape said, gingerly touching the bridge of his nose. She watched as he gave it an experimental wiggle.

"Yes, it is. It's a classic example. Not that there's anything wrong with that, all cultures have them," she said, warming to the subject. She'd read a book on the topic recently.

"Black Alice Eye is Millicent Bulstrode's maternal grandmother," he said, wiping away the fresh trail of blood creeping down his upper lip, leaving his forearm the worse. If he'd left it alone, it wouldn't have started bleeding again.

He might as well have said Bulstrode's grandfather was Santa Claus.

"No, really," Hermione laughed.

"Yes, really," Snape said both slowly and sourly. "Millie's gran is Black Alice Eye, which explains, to some extent, how it was that she came to Hogwarts with abilities beyond those of some graduating students."

Hermione looked at Snape sharply. He was in complete earnest. The only prodigious thing she recalled about Bulstrode from her school years was the number of buns she could put away at one sitting.

"Her school work was appalling," she said.

"When she could be bothered do it at all, and her ridiculous spelling and punctuation were not feigned, I will grant that much," Snape said with a look of remembered annoyance on his face. "But Millie's abilities could have wiped that smug smile off Minerva's face once and for all with just a modicum of effort. But, no, of course not, it only would have enabled her poor beleaguered Head of House to hold his head up in the staff meetings; what did she care?"

"But why play stupid?" Hermione asked, baffled.

"Black Alice hoards knowledge the way a goblin hoards gold," Snape said.

"No doubt she passed her attitude on to her granddaughter."

"Does Black Alice actually...." Hermione asked, still holding tight to the car.

"What? Lure adolescent wizards into the woods and shag them until they're dead or close to it?" Snape said.

"It would be Dark Arts," Hermione said. "Someone would call the Aurors."

Snape sniggered, "Calling the Aurors after Black Alice would be as effective as calling the Aurors
on a lightning strike, and as likely to result in an arrest."

"But..." Hermione began to protest, the law was the law, and a witch couldn't go about ravishing boys with impunity.

"Her wood is unplottable; her powers greater than you can imagine," he said.

"And you know her?" Hermione asked.

Snape turned and with a look of utter smug pride grinned at her, his show of teeth reminded her of something feral and she recalled his former self. "It was Black Alice from whom I learned the subtle science and exacting art of potions."

Hermione had experienced all the shocks she was capable of and so her next question only stood to reason. "Were you her victim as well?" She laughed. If the world had gone mad, she might as well go along with it.

Poor Snape's response was to look crestfallen and shake his head sullenly and mumble.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"She said I was weedy," Snape enunciated clearly.

Hermione mentally noted the past tense; since she'd last seen him two years ago, Snape had gone from being whip thin to starting to thicken around the middle.

"Does she really live in a gingerbread cottage?" Hermione asked.

Snape nodded. That explained quite a bit.

"The spell work for something like that has to be extensive," Hermione said thinking aloud.

A groan came from the back seat.

"A right pain in the arse is what it is," Millicent said hanging her head over the front seat "There are charms for keeping away the insects, charms for mice, for heat, cold, humidity, dryness, rain...and even with all that you're constantly baking new walls, reshingling the roof with biscuits, pouring new sugar windows. The upkeep is murder."

Hermione had never been near enough to Millicent to smell her before; the definite odour of tea and cakes clung to her and seemed to be getting stronger in the heat.

"So the point of a gingerbread house is..." Hermione asked.

"Exactly," Millicent said nodding. "I'll take... what's it called? Drywall and linoleum any day."

It was then that Draco let out a long loud noise Hermione could best describe as a hoot.

"There it is!"

He had thought his life was going to be salvageable. How bloody naïve. Of course it was going to be buggered irreparably; it was sheer folly to think otherwise.

Severus Snape was drenched in sweat, on his knees before the loo as the twist in his stomach rose like a basilisk uncurling in his gut. The last of his long ago breakfast of Firewhiskey, Wensleydale, and black bread hit the bowl with force, splashing his face with yet more bog water and sick.
Unbidden, a sob came up from his belly.

This was not how it was supposed to have gone. It would have been easier had someone ended his miserable life; either Voldemort or Potter could have done it without undue effort. He wasn't picky.

What the hell was he to do? Cunting Draco Malfoy. The son, like his father, would not rest until he destroyed any chance at happiness Severus might have once had. Severus thought to the papers lying abandoned on the floor of his room. There was no way to account for them, except perhaps for the truth.

He might as well jump in front of an oncoming lorry himself as explain to Hermione that Draco had drawn up documents making her his wife out of a misplaced sense of largesse.

True, he had more or less asked the little turd to do it, but they had both been pissed beyond all reason at the time. He had never expected the boy would make good on the promise. The House of Malfoy deserved to be scoured from the face of the earth. That settled it; he was going to kill Draco with his bare hands, provided he ever set foot outside of the loo again.

Not knowing what else to do, he lit a cigarette. He'd wiped off most of the blood and offal from the debacle at the Ministry, but the front of his shirt and trousers were now crusted with sick; he couldn't avoid a shower. At least they had water. It wasn't exactly Maison de Malfoy, but it was a damn sight better than Spinner's End. Of course, he'd seen cardboard boxes lying in London alleyways that were more inviting than his childhood home.

It was morning and the heat was already grotesque; a fact which made the notion of unheated water almost bearable.

His reverie was broken when he heard female voices on the other side of the door.

"He does fancy you," said one and he felt his stomach roil again. Et tu, Millie.

He forced down the bile that threatened to rise.

Fancy her? His soul cried her name in the dark of the night.

"I know," the other answered and the skin on his arms went to gooseflesh.

"I've known since he stuck his tongue in my mouth in my sixth year."

Severus' stomach plummeted.

"A witch could do worse; still he is pretty..." Millie said, somewhat encouragingly.

"Pretty what? Demanding? Hygienically challenged?" Hermione said, and Severus laid his forehead against the cool tiles of the wall, his shoulders shaking.

Draco's voice broke in full of shrill outrage. "Severus Snape is a great wizard, Mud..."

"Go to your room, Draco, this is a discussion for witches," Millie said.

"What am I supposed to do in there?" came the reply.

"Not butt into our conversation," Millie said. "If you don't like our room, why don't you go out and assess the back garden?"

Indecipherable grumblings were followed by the sound of sullen padding feet.
"I was going to say he requires a good deal of maintenance. Still, Draco's right, he is a great wizard," Millie said.

"I am well aware of that; I have a great deal of respect for Severus Snape,"

Hermione said. "This has been a very trying day and to discover he's married me, at least technically, without so much as a by your leave..."

"That was Draco's work," Millie interrupted.

"Are you certain?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Millie said. "Draco did our documents so it only stands to reason he did yours as well. Besides, Severus doesn't have the nerve. The Snape I know'd prefer suffering in silence to risking being turned down."

"You think?" Hermione asked.

"I'll put like this: I've known him since I was born. He's one of my dad's best friends. He studied with my gran 'til she thought he'd learned enough, and I've never even heard of him being involved with a witch," Millie said and Severus willed her to shut her big mouth. "He doesn't have the nerve enough to ask a witch to dance much less marry one."

"Really?" Hermione asked, sounding genuinely fascinated.

"My mum thinks he's probably never had a good grope, let alone a shag. I've seen him in action; he's right awkward trying to talk to grown up witches,"

Millie went on, and Severus added Prunie Bulstrode to the list of people he would roast slowly on a spit with impunity if he ever rose to dark lord-dom.

"Severus Snape is a virgin?" Hermione said. "I find that very difficult to believe."

"I know," Millie said. "He's dead sexy when he isn't trying."

"Perhaps it's all the frustrated energy," Hermione said.

Millie chortled. The cunt.

"Still..." someone said; he thought it was Hermione.

"Old Snape put the F in Fucked didn't he?" That, he knew, was Millie.

"Good god, what a day," Hermione said. There were quite a few different ways he could choose to take that.

"I'm not asking you to go in there and suck his dick," Millie said.

"Why not? It would make as much sense as anything else that's happened today. I'm wearing Draco Malfoy's trousers, and I've been an accessory to stealing a car. All my friends have most likely been killed, and evil has triumphed over good," Hermione said. Her voice sounded eerily light and cheerful. "So why shouldn't I go in there, tell him to drop trou, and make his eyes roll back in his head."

Millie was chuckling. How bloody delightful that the idea of his receiving some small portion of the happiness due him amused her so.
"I need to get my bearings," Hermione said.

"We all do. But you'll give him a chance? You'll consider Snape an option?"

Millie asked. Severus was unsure whether he loved or hated Millie Malfoy at that moment, it likely depended on Hermione's answer.

"I won't rule it out," she said.

Severus blinked. It wasn't fellatio, but suddenly his head felt light, and he'd gone from clammy to sweating again. She hadn't ruled him out, despite Draco's little stunt. Severus realised his cock had gone from trying to burrow into his abdominal cavity to painfully hard in seconds. That accounted for the light head, at least.

The words echoed in his brain: she wouldn't rule it out. Hope was both exhilarating and terrifying.

He opened the shower door and stepped inside, fully dressed. The cold water was refreshing pounding against his chest. He stood there for sometime. He hadn't realised how much blood he'd left under his nails. He scrubbed vaguely at the sick on the front of his shirt. There was no soap, or if there was, it was in Millie's bag where it wasn't going to do him any good.

Perhaps he should have taken off his clothes before he stepped into the water. Awkwardly, he pulled his shirt up over his head. There was thick-crusted blood turned brown and yellow on his chest. He scrubbed at it as the tepid water poured, rubbing until his skin began to protest; the rest would have to wait for soap. Hygienically challenged indeed. He resolved to shower compulsively from here out, whether he needed it or not.

He ran his hands over his own belly, allowing himself to pretend the touch was hers.

It seemed pathetic, so he stopped.

He stopped and ducked his head under the showerhead in hope of washing some of the sick out of his hair. Something in the Muggle processed water stung his eyes. He closed them a moment before he identified the culprit as chlorine. Unbidden, he pictured Hermione before him. He had trouble imagining her as she was - older, more poised - but her 17 year old self was disturbingly easy to conjure: unkempt hair, softer face, and narrower body. It was even easier to imagine the pressure of the water on his lips was her kiss.

He fumbled, the wet unfamiliar trousers taking a moment to open. He clamped his eyes shut tight. It was so much more natural to play this game when he had a little alcohol in his belly. Still, he squeezed his cock roughly; it could be her, she could touch him, she had agreed to consider it and that was as heady as any vision of fellatio. He loosened his grip and pulled once, twice, three times, knowing she was not far, only a few feet beyond the door. His breath grew ragged at the thought. Unlikely as it was, she could walk in at any moment, strip wordlessly and join him.

He opened his eyes and pulled back his foreskin to see a drop of clear fluid weeping from the slit, and even as the cold water washed it away he imagined her taking it with her tongue. There was plenty more where that came from.

His lip curled into an approximation of a smile at the thought. Be my guest, dear, dear Hermione, drink deep. Not only the best and brightest, she was such a pretty, pretty girl.

His left hand built a steady rhythm sliding back and forth over his cock. He kept his grip loose in an attempt to mimic her no doubt gentler touch. With his right, he pulled his nipple hard. His hips bucked forward of their own volition.
Her imagined kisses were exquisite, raining down his throat and across his chest. He was certain without question she would study the text of his pleasure as though it were Hogwarts: A History. The very notion made his knees buckle briefly. Hot and cold pleasure radiated out from his cock, until his entire body trembled.

Hermione on his arm would wipe out forty odd years of abject failure. A witch like that was not only lovely and powerful, but pointedly possessing an elusive quality he could neither name nor describe, except to say he knew it was a thing he was desperately lacking. A thing with which Hermione Jane Granger had been richly endowed.

Shoving his cock into whatever part of her beautiful body she allowed him would mean rebirth as that which had eluded Severus Snape his entire life, even if he could not express its basic nature. It didn't matter.

His hand a blur, his hips thrusting wildly, Severus ejaculated, sending sticky white strand after sticky white strand over his fingers and into the pelting water.

He stood under the endless flow of cold water, watching the cloudy clots of semen wash down the drain.

Granger would keep the promise both his former masters had broken and grant him favour that would transform his life. Provided Draco didn't bugger it up.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
If the Shoe Fits

There is nothing unbends the mind like women.

- John Gay, 1724

The next thing Millie knew, Snape had stalked out of the bathroom to stand before the patch she and Granger had cleared so they could sit in the lounge. The best approximation of stalking he could manage soaked to the bone and dressed in wet Muggle clothes, at any rate.

"I am not a virgin," he said, clearly cheesed off, drawing it out slow as if he was telling them not to add the shrivelfigs before the tiger's blood, and any fool wouldn't need telling.

After glaring down at both of them, he did something like stalking away again.

It wasn't nearly as impressive without the rippling robes.

She supposed he'd been listening in. All the better for him if he had; he wasn't usually very smart at guessing other people's reasons for doing things and could use a leg up on Granger. Millie's mouth crinkled at her own joke, and she wiped the sweat from her forehead. He had a good idea with the wet clothes. The heat was worse than baking day.

Granger's eyes were wide. She looked mortified.

Then Whack meowed. It was a funny sort of a meow, probably because he had a mouse swinging from his mouth by the tail, twitching. So there were mice, but Millie wasn't much bothered by that.

Whack would have their tiny skulls stacked in a corner before Draco managed to get the house up to snuff.

She turned her head sharply when she heard Granger clear her throat.

"That was embarrassing," Granger said.

"For him, or you?" Millie asked, confused.

"He overheard us," Granger said, looking somewhat appalled, "speculating about him."

"And?" Millie asked.

"And?" Granger said. "And? And he heard me say I'd consider him."

"He's probably thanking his lucky stars you didn't call him a pervy old..." Millie was explaining when Draco raced in, dripping attractively with sweat, and plopped himself onto her lap.

"I think it's hotter in here than it is outside, though it might be a question of the company," he said, pulling one of her braids with a smile. She swatted his hand reflexively.
Snape slammed the door to the room he had just decided was his own, throwing himself down on the dust covered bed. The heat was like a curse, and he hadn't been a virgin since Thatcher.

He'd been fifteen and home for the summer for no other reason than that Dumbledore insisted everyone go home over the summer hols. And there, inevitably, was Toby, wheedling and bullying him into lending a hand with the scheme of the moment.

In the summer of 1976, Toby had taken a hiatus from the usual breaking and entering and, just for the hell of it, Severus supposed, he'd taken to selling a variety of drugs. It was new, and thus made the entire family a bit more on edge than normal, if such a word could be used in the same sentence as a family like theirs.

Eileen's job, as always, was to keep the fuck out of men's business and provide tea, pints, and fry ups.

It didn't make any sense.

She was a witch, not to mention quite a bit smarter than her husband. If Toby had allowed her to help, they could have lived like kings. It was enough to make young Severus choke on his own frustrated rage. How could she let him talk to her the way he did? How could she let him hit her? How could she let that dunderhead run things? He had no idea what he had in her. He hardly allowed her to do more with magic than light his fags. He treated magic like it was carnival trick. From a purely practical standpoint Toby had, predictably, cocked it all up.

If Toby would have just listened to him, Severus could have brewed up drugs that would have made his current stock look a paper sack full of lollies. His own job was hardly better than Eileen's. Aside from running messages and packages to and fro, he stood watch and was to whistle upon spotting a law enforcement officer.

"Whistle twice for the Old Bill and once for Eileen," Toby said, as if young Severus had forgotten his entire childhood since the last hol.

More often than not, he merely watched father duck into the alley with some tart and come back doing up his trousers. He wasn't going to make any money giving away his hard bought drugs to every Muggle willing to go on her knees in front of him. Not to mention that the slag in question was frequently even younger than Severus.

It was a wonder Eileen let him live, not to mention the rest.

She blamed love.

If that was love he wasn't having any. He'd had enough humiliation for one life, thank you.

That didn't rule out getting a shag. In theory, at least. The trouble was he wasn't the sort -- Toby's sort, that cunt Sirius Black's sort -- that girls went for.

He and Toby had gone to London, ostensibly to pick up product. Toby disappeared right away, because that was what he did. Severus went about his father's business; just because the old man was irresponsible, it didn't mean Severus was. He relieved himself of certain questionably procured goods, received his contraband parcel to be divvied up into saleable packets later under Toby's supervision, got himself something to eat and drink, hung about.

...Like a week old kipper, Toby would have added.

He had been working at staying inconspicuous, leaning against the fire escape with his bag of chips
in his dad's leather jacket with the sleeves ever so slightly too short, reminding himself that all the girls who strode past without giving him so much as a glance were Muggles and therefore, by definition, his inferiors. They weren't failing to notice him; he didn't choose to draw their attention.

He was deep in that thought when a long black nailed finger stuck itself into his chips.

His eyes travelled up the finger to the white arm and black vinyl dress of its owner. She had cleavage which could only be described by the word epic.

Make that tight, black vinyl dress.

He looked up into her face. Her eyes and lips both were painted black, a state which did little or nothing to improve looks that were at best plain.

Either side of her head was shaved to the skin, and in the middle her hair stood out like a fan. She smelled faintly of sick but, he decided taking the cleavage into account, there were worse things.

He wound up using part of Toby's hard earned dosh for the two of them to enter a club down the street. The music sounded like his mum and dad going at it on a Friday night accompanied by rubbish bins rolling down the stairs.

It mattered not, several passes round of more than one bottle, and he joined her in the dancing that was more than half brawl. There, in the crowd, just a few meters from the cunt singing on the stage, she lifted her skirt and let him fuck her hard against the wall. It was over almost as soon as it started, and her kisses tasted of vomit.

The next morning, he could recall that she did tell him her name. He just couldn't remember what it was. Neither did he remember the two of them cutting into one of Toby's parcels, but apparently they had.

The realisation had come only seconds before Toby's fist made swift contact with his gut, dropping him like a stone. Instinctively, he curled up into a ball as Toby's boot met his spine, ribs, then arse.

As he lay there he wondered, how was he any different than Eileen?

Did he take it out of love? Not bloody likely. He took it because he was used to it. He resolved to make himself unfamiliar with anything that smacked of Toby Snape.

Over the years, he had succeeded in that to a great extent.

His luck with women did not improve markedly. He did manage to get shagged a few times in the years that stretched between that summer and his return to Hogwarts as Potions master. Never by witches, though. A Muggle with a few drinks in her he could coax into bed, or at least a suitable position.

His luck with witches was downright disheartening.

After his return to Hogwarts, his only companion was his own left hand, and sometimes his right, for variety's sake.

Draco had circled his quarry for the last three quarters of an hour in the wretched heat. He thought his skin was going to crack open from the pounding sun.

These were the times that tried men's souls. He'd heard that in Muggle studies class, but he couldn't put his finger on the context. It sounded good, at any rate. His arse had been rescued from
Voldemort in one relatively unscathed piece. Still, while surviving was something of a feat in the current political atmosphere, he hadn't endured all that mess in order to waste away in a filthy hovel.

Under normal circumstances, he'd have turned the whole thing over to the house elves, but as it stood, it looked as though he was going to be forced to make this house liveable through the sweat of his own brow. Not only appalling but grotty as well.

His only other option was to live in squalor, ala Uncle Severus. Not much of an option, if you asked him.

Speaking of Snape, his mentor might have more than his fair share of admirable points, but neatness wasn't one of them. This was just his sort of tip. Inside was literally knee deep with stacks of Muggle newspapers and magazines. Outside every tree, bush, and blade of grass on the property was dry and dead.

On the positive side, he had reason to believe a good deal of furnishings lay buried under the paper, and the dead landscaping did mean he wouldn't have much trouble ripping out the old plantings to replace them with his own.

Still, he shuddered; he'd seen a tin of beans in the kitchen that was older than his dad, and Snape looked as though he was considering prying it open.

Lucius. Draco maintained a vague hope against hope that they would somehow bump into his father.

When Lucius went into hiding, it was obviously somewhere obscure; somewhere no one would ever look for a Malfoy. He could have very well gone to Texas.

Draco might have felt that his father coddled him a bit, but he understood that he'd done it out of love. What was more, he admired his father, more than anyone except, perhaps, his head of house.

Lucius set the standard by which all other wizards were judged. He was cunning, impeccably elegant, and loyal to his own.

The only wizard Draco might have secretly held in higher esteem was Severus Snape. He was not impeccable, even if he had a certain undeniable style. His loyalty was tempered by a healthy regard for his own neck. His cunning was legendary. But none of those things explained his most basic appeal.

The wizard was indomitable. In fact, compared to the other wizards Draco knew, Snape was impossible to destroy. At his core was a sort of toughness that no one else in Draco's small circle approached.

Millie, though, she had the potential to embody the greatest strengths of both Lucius and Severus.

Not that she realized it. It was frustrating; Millie steadfastly refused to be moulded, even if it was into something pleasant.

Still, he admired the brilliant brute that she was. Unfortunately, if she remained a brilliant brute, her latent greatness would remain just that, latent. Except for the sex, it had been a disheartening first month of marriage. Then he had his epiphany.

His father had told him all his life that clothes had the power to transform. His mother, furthermore, had taught him that shoes were the true foundation of any ensemble. More than that, shoes were
aspiration.

"Close you eyes and imagine perfection. Now, Draco, choose your footwear accordingly," Narcissa would whisper in his ear.

So he gave Millie shoes. Special shoes, made from sketches he'd owled to his mother. The construction was overseen by Narcissa herself.

At first, Millie had snorted. Then tentatively, in the privacy of their own room, she had tried them on.

He watched her slowly change under their influence, standing straighter, her eyes shining brighter.

The first pair were most like her old thick soled school shoes, although older, more sophisticated, more demanding. He did not want to shock her. They were straightforward, but undeniably special: black, leather, lacing all the way up to the tops of her plump thighs, but it was the red satin lining that made them magic.

Four times a year, or so, he gave her new shoes. The latest were his most daring, the farthest reach yet. The heels were high, encouraging Millie to project her great round breasts and her high round bum. The shoes themselves were rich red silk brocade trimmed with ermine. Narcissa had insisted on including a matching ermine hat.

When she wore the two together, Draco could see nations fall, trembling under her dainty feet. She had already conquered him.

There was no way he could have left her shoes behind, bugger the bloody Muggle paper money.

Millie's shoes were not only his aspiration, they were his inspiration. The stage on which both their sexual fantasies were played out, and the ladder they would climb to their future.

He wiggled on Millie's lap and gave her his best smile.

"I don't know about you, dear, but I need a lie down," Draco said, pretending to stifle a yawn.

Millie frowned at him, it was her standard frown and he could easily ignore it.

"Don't you need a lie down?" Draco said, winding her plait around his forefinger.

From her end of the divan, the mudblood raised an eyebrow. Draco chose to ignore her.

"I certainly could use a rest," the mudblood said. "If you'll excuse me," and she walked away, taking the room farthest from the one Severus had taken.

"I was talking to her," Millie said, sounding annoyed.

"Wouldn't you rather converse with me?" Draco said trying not to whinge.

"I talk to you all the time," Millie said, her little hand lifting the bottom of his shirt so she could stroke his belly.

He wondered idly which shoes she'd wear this time.

The answer was written in fur.

In the narrow bed with a musty counterpane, Severus Snape dreamed he was short. It was strange.
He was short, shorter than he was in his waking life, although not child-sized.

He stood in the Atrium level of the Ministry of Magic watching the battle rage around him, for some reason overly concerned with the fate of Neville Longbottom. Some part of him exercised its right to consternation, while another cried out in pure horror. There were loops of bloody intestines sullying the formerly pristine floor. Innards spilled everywhere. Screams like the most terrible vision of Muggle Hell. And then.

Then.

Then one small pale figure surrounded by a nauseating green glow and floating high above the crowd.

He couldn't breathe. He tried to force the air, but his lungs had shut down in pure terror.

He wasn't certain how long he'd been awake because the screaming hadn't stopped; it went on and on.

Fuck!

The dream had not been his own.

There was only one person in the immediate vicinity who gave two shits what happened to Longbottom.

It had been Hermione's dream, and she was still screaming.

He all but leapt from the bed and flew to her. The trouble was, once he came to her doorway he was fucked if he knew what to do.

Millie and Draco stood there as well, necks craned, peering into the room; the scent of sweat and sex radiating off of them in waves. Still Hermione screamed.

Severus took a deep breath and thought to his days as nursemaid to every whinging infant in Slytherin.

He walked deliberately to the cluttered kitchen and poured a glass of water.

Tepid was all that could be managed.

Just as deliberately, he carried the glass to Hermione and forced the drink to her lips.

She sputtered for an instant, then drank deeply.

"It was only a dream. A nightmare if you will," he said, self-consciously resting one hand on her back.

Her shirt was soaked with sweat.

Her eyes stared at him dumb, uncomprehending. "Harry's safe?"

"Potter is dead, but you are safe," he said, forcing the glass to her lips once more.

"Harry can't die," she said, not yet fully emerged from her dream.

"Potter can die, as most definitively demonstrated by today's events," he said, not sure what else to
"No," she said. "No." She shook her head. He longed to either pull her close or throttle her; he couldn't quite decide.

"Listen to me, Granger," Severus said, shoving her hair out of her face and cupping her cheeks in his hands. He leaned in until they were nose to non-descript nose. "Potter is dead. The Dark Lord has triumphed. Potter failed, and Potter died. It was a forgone conclusion. His preparation was inadequate. His training was inadequate. Dumbledore was inadequate. I was inadequate. All is lost. The world we knew is gone. But we are still alive. That has to be enough because it is all we have."

He knew she was at last awake because she began to weep, her hands twisting his shirt to knots. She did not cleave to him, and he could not bring himself to hold her tight.

Millie and Draco continued to watch from the door.

It should have been the dead of night but the house was stifling and merciless sunlight streamed through the bedroom curtains.

"I believe we have all rested quite long enough," he said, gesturing vaguely toward the red-eyed boggart sobbing before him. "Make yourself...presentable, and you may accompany me on a few errands I would like to complete before the day is out."

A great panic seized him, though he gave no external sign. He had the witch of his dreams within his grasp. What was he supposed to do now?

"Eight gallons of petrol on pump number four," Severus said, holding the clerk fascinated with his impenetrable black eyes. "You'll find I've already paid."

In disbelief, Hermione watched him pocket several boxes of cigarettes and a packet of crisps as he held the woman's gaze.

"Would you like something?" he asked, without looking her way.

"No," she said, feeling her mouth curl downward.

A moment later she joined him in the car, slamming the door and unleashing her tongue.

"You are incredible!" she said, livid.

"Nothing of the sort," Snape said casually. "It was simple fascination. Anyone could do it."

"We needed the petrol, granted, but stealing cigarettes and crisps like a common hoodlum?" Hermione said.

Snape's forehead wrinkled; he seemed both annoyed and somewhat confounded, which only served to anger her more.

"I fail to note the moral difference made by some fags and a packet of crisps," he said, ripping open the crisps, she supposed, for emphasis.

"Besides being a filthy habit, smoking is hardly what I would call a necessity," she said, feeling her face flush in anger, "and stealing crisps...."
Snape looked her dead in the eye and up-ended the crisps into his mouth. He raised one eyebrow, chewing slowly as he pulled out of the parking lot and into the street.

"Oh, that's very amusing," she snarled.

"I happen to consider fags a necessity," he said.

"And what of the crisps?" she asked.

"I wanted them. I took them," he answered, enunciating with exaggerated clarity, then lighting a cigarette.

"That seems to be quite a habit of yours," she said, her voice taking on a quality she would have called acid had it been directed at her.

Snape pulled hard on the cigarette, staring into the rear view mirror.

"I would hardly equate saving a witch's life with nicking a bag of crisps," he said, smoke curling around his nostrils.

"How noble," she said, fairly consumed with rancor. It could no doubt be argued either way, and yet it enraged her to think Snape might expect something in return. He had to. She might have some inclination toward him, but she'd be damned if she'd be coerced into anyone's bed.

"You will note, that unlike the crisps, you are a free to leave at any time," he said, and balancing both the cigarette and crisp packet in one hand, dumped the rest of the crisps into his mouth. "I am hardly holding you hostage, and I have yet to eat you up."

"I am perfectly capable of caring for myself," Hermione said.

"Of that I have no doubt," Snape said, his black eyes hooded.

It was infuriating of him, refusing to argue. By his gallingly amused expression, Hermione took it he was well aware of that.

She glared.

Her gut instinct was to tell him to pull the car over and then storm off in a snit.

Unfortunately, her instincts were untenable. She was still uncomfortable after the crying episode. She wasn't used to her own tears, they made her feel both weak and somewhat unclean. She would either have to slink back cowed and admit defeat or Snape would have to apologize. Both were equally unlikely and uncomfortable propositions.

The silence stretched as they careened down the street.

Still, he hadn't made any attempt to hold her nightmare over her... yet.

"Yet" was probably the operable word.

They both understood the reason things stood as they did. He was a third wheel in the grand passion of the Malfoys. Hermione had already seen that.

Yet if he left them, he would be adrift among Muggles. Severus' position wasn't that different from her own, when it came down to it. He was likely grateful to be alive or grateful as Severus Snape could manage, anyway, but he would almost certainly be lonely and probably bored to tears before
He knew it. She knew it. She also knew that while she'd do fine on her own among Muggles in the practical sense, she too would quickly grow listless.

Her mere presence would save Snape a certain amount of isolation, but she wasn't entirely certain whether he would do her any good or not. He was making an effort, but that did not guarantee success.

She watched him as he flicked his ash out of the car window and took another suck of his cigarette.

Severus Snape had never been what Hermione, or anyone else, would call handsome, but it had only been three years since he'd been her teacher, and the time looked much longer on him. His face had gained a certain puffiness that didn't do anything to mitigate his hard features. Most likely, it was a pit he'd been sliding into for some time.

"What have you been doing for the last three years?" she asked, wondering if he'd call her an impertinent little shit and toss her out of the car.

"Drinking, for the most part. It passes the time," he answered laconically.

One look at him bore the truth of his statement.

"And you?" he said, looking straight ahead, black eyes focused on the road.

"Alastor Moody's paperwork," she said and some perverse internal demon forced her to add. "And dating. It helps pass the time."

Snape gave a little start at that. "So, I take it the course of true love didn't run clear," he said, almost instantly unruffling, as if he hadn't looked utterly undone for an instant.

Hermione was baffled. She blinked. "True love?"

"Or the facsimile thereof taking place during your time at Hogwarts," he said, flicking his cigarette ash out the window again.

Hermione blinked again.

"Potter," Snape said

"Are you still going on about that?" she asked in amazement. "It wasn't Harry, Professor; it was Ron."

Under most circumstances she would have been embarrassed to slip and call him Professor, but under current circumstances she was too surprised to even note her faux pas.

"Call me... Stephen," Snape said, the car lurching as he pulled a plastic identification card from the front pocket of his trousers.

He tossed it into her lap. Stephen Liston, it read. Millie had already shown her everyone's new names, but she hadn't expected to use them.

"Weasley?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, Ronald Weasley," she said, folding her hands primly in her lap.
She didn't know how to respond to Severus Snape chuckling to himself as he turned up the radio.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Setting in Motion

Disclaimer: I did not invent any of these characters nor did I invent the state of Texas

The best of all our actions tend

To the preposterousest end.

– Butler

Genuine Remains; Satire Upon the Weakness and Misery of Man

Severus Snape aka Stephen Liston drove on, his magic manifesting itself in a dozen narrowly-missed collisions as he manoeuvred the behemoth of an automobile through back alleys and city streets, frequently avoiding stops by cleverly cutting through parking lots. One would assume he'd learned to drive in Cairo, instead of the north of England. His companion imagined the whole business might have been marginally less nerve-wracking had he shown himself able to refrain from bloody whistling as they careened from near miss to near miss.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked, her fingers aching from their death grip on the cracked vinyl seat.

"A number of places," Snape said with a mysterious smirk.

"Where?" Hermione asked, keeping none of the annoyance out of her voice.

The look Snape gave her in response slid quickly from the ire of the surprised back to amusement. What a self satisfied shit. In the rear view mirror, Hermione watched as the smirk spread itself into a smile so broad and nasty it deserved some other name. Full of vicious, crooked teeth, it held some secret that allowed for contempt of everything outside itself. It was the smile of an entity complete in itself and content watching the weak fall and flounder within arm's reach. More a warning, more a signal of danger than anything even vaguely like joy. It was the smile of a shark or, somehow more frightening, a crocodile.

"Where are we going?" she repeated, biting the words as though they burnt her lips.

Snape had the utter lack of disregard it took to chuckle at her displeasure. "My agenda has but two aims; although I cannot say precisely how many stops will be required to achieve them. Firstly," he said, releasing his haphazard grasp of the steering wheel to wag one long finger in the direction of the windshield, "to secure paying work for myself. There are certain of my skills which translate into life as a Muggle..."

"Are you going take work as a chemist?" she interrupted him, as curiosity overcame her other emotions. If not chemistry, what else was Snape suited for? Perfumery? Explosives expert? Druggist?

Snape's smile flattened to a dour frown, and his nostrils flared. "Need I remind you that, as far as Muggles are concerned, you are speaking to a man whose formal education consists of exactly five years of grammar school? My prospects are rather more limited than you imagine."

"And the second?" she asked.
Snape cleared his throat. "I have given the matter some thought, and have come to the conclusion that a sharp eye must be given to our future. Your marks were excellent during your Muggle schooling, or do I surmise incorrectly?"

Hermione's forehead knitted itself. "My marks were fine."

Snape smiled that smile again, only this time somehow she got the feeling she was being included in the inner circle, the enchanted ring of superiority from which Severus Snape sneered at the world. "And by fine, you mean brilliant.

To posit further, you have retained every word to pass your school masters' lips. What's more, you've no doubt studied a number of Muggle topics well into university level, simply because that is what you do, Granger. You learn.

You study. You should have swot tattooed on your arse."

Hermione pursed her lips and mentally flipped through her grammar school examinations. That was why they called it elementary school; it was the basic elements, building blocks if you would, of knowledge. How was one to learn what came after if one lost sight of the basic information? What was she supposed to say to Snape? Of course she remembered it; how dull did he think she was? Still, she also remembered how many times during her school days he'd called her a "show off" and, even more tiresome, "know-it-all". It had to be some sort of trick question. The best option seemed to be a shrug.

She therefore gave Snape a shrug. She was too bewildered to do otherwise.

"False humility does not become you," he said, still including her in that terrible smile.

"What you're saying is...?" she asked, half fearful.

"To cull the pulpy fruit of success from the bitter seeds of defeat, all that is necessary is for each player in our little farrago to devote him or herself to that particular task at which they excel above all others," Snape said, and he looked like his old self for a moment... before he lit a fresh cigarette.

"If you have a point, I wish you'd make it," Hermione said, and the car door scraped against a particularly high sidewalk, sending off a spray of sparks along the side of the street.

Snape rolled his eyes heavenward and flicked the ash of his cigarette into the back seat. Disgusting.

"My second goal for today is to enroll one Jane Liston into whatever local Muggle university my somewhat strained finances can allow." His grin returned, as Hermione's pupils dilated at the notion of returning to school. She felt guilty at her own pleasure for a moment, but she knew there was nothing wrong with taking the opportunity, was there?

"After all," Snape continued cheerfully, "someone has to support me in my dotage, and Draco runs through funds like an inebriated sailor."

Hermione blinked once, then again. Snape had, in the rudest, most self-serving way possible, offered to pay for her to go to university, after saving her life earlier in the same day. It went without saying there was a catch, a great greasy, pompous big-nosed catch.

Snape switched on the radio and began twiddling the knob, peering at her furtively out of the corner of his eye.

With all the firmness she possessed, Hermione forced herself out of her emotional turmoil and into
the waiting succour of rational thought.

The choice was her own; she simply had to sift through her options.

Number one: her life had been spared; did she wish to chance a return to England? The answer to that particular question was clear; she could not succeed alone against Voldemort, besides which all her comrades had been killed. To return to England, even to life as a Muggle, would only serve to endanger her family, not to mention herself.

That was settled, she would not return to England, but it did not necessarily follow that she was obliged to stay with her current associates. Leaving them would pose certain problems, however. Were she to enter into magical life on this side of the pond, there would be questions. Neither the governments of New England nor California, the two magical nations that made up the Muggle nation of America, had expressed the slightest sign of opposition to Voldemort. In fact, he was known to have well-placed followers within both countries. To become at all conspicuous in either would put her in danger, in addition to marking Snape, Bulstrode, and Draco for certain death, and that wouldn't be very grateful considering they'd saved her life.

Still, she wasn't obligated to cast her lot in with them. Except, she noted, that the life saving business meant exactly that.

Muggle or Magic, like it or not, it was one of the basic tenets of Arithmancy and ancient runes, both of which made infinitely more sense than fuzzy headed divination; all actions have calculable consequences. To save a life was to connect oneself to that person forever, to take responsibility for another person, weaving them willingly into one's web of wyrd. Snape seemed intent on deliberately securing her attachment to him. He understood how the magic worked. They were connected forever; although the manner of that connection was their own decision.

She had never got the impression he particularly liked her before those last few days he was at school, and there were definitely prettier witches. The only conclusion she could draw was that he honestly admired her, liked her as it were, and wanted her in his life, even if it meant putting her in a position to cause his death.

It was rather like possessing no weapons other than a row of nuclear warheads. Her choices appeared to be 1) cause his death or 2) give him exactly what he wanted.

And what did she want? Were circumstances different – namely, he had better teeth and hadn't murdered Headmaster Dumbledore - she would definitely consider Severus Snape an option. He was, without question, one of the more interesting and intelligent wizards she knew; though she would readily admit the pool of single, magical males was a limited resource.

No, if he got what he was after, namely Hermione herself, she was going to get precisely what she wanted as well. Any relationship would take place on her terms.

She cast an appraising eye toward her former school master. He fidgeted under her gaze, as well he should, for at that moment Hermione Granger, the newly christened Jane Liston, decided to give Muggle life and Severus Snape a chance. It wasn't as though she couldn't change her mind if either failed to suit her.

He was an utter mess now, but she was rather interested to see what she could make of him. And she had always wanted to go to university.

"Don't imagine you can dictate my course of study," she told him, clear and concise; that would be her method when dealing with Severus Snape.
"As long as it is a profitable field, I am willing to finance your endeavour. I refuse to pour the sweat of my brow into a degree in either philosophy or literature," he said, apparently gauging her reaction in the rear-view mirror, despite the fact that she sat beside him.

"I was rather thinking of studying law," she said, being forthright.

Snape brought the car to an abrupt halt, parking, at least he seemed to be parking, on the side of a street that didn't appear certain whether it was artistically decadent or merely sleazy. The front bumper of their car jostled the rear of the car parked in front of them.

Turning away from the mirror and the street, and looking Hermione face to face for the first time in quite a while, Severus Snape's gaze shook her. She knew no word for the emotion his expression conveyed but black-eyed burning lust, as though what frilly knickers did for lesser wizards, the practice of law did for her former Potions master.

Hermione knew the one thing she wanted in this situation was control. From the look of things Snape was ready to tear her clothes off in broad daylight in the front seat of the wretched car. She had to gain the upper hand. Shaking off the desire that flooded the car like cheap perfume, she frowned quizzically.

"So, you're looking for work in a tea shop?"

"It's just a clever name," he said, looking away again and allowing her to breathe. "According to the paper, The Gypsy Tea Room is a night club of sorts, features live music, needs a barman."

Hermione could only think of two or three wizards less suited for work in the service industry. Fortunately, she was in no way involved in the hiring process.

Snape was as good as his word. By evening time, he was employed, and she was enrolled.

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Draco all but wept when Snape told him the news.

"It's not fair. Granger doesn't have to work because you fancy her? You're sending her to school? Severus, she's over twenty years old," he said trying to keep his voice from going shrill. "Not eleven."

"Had you paid any attention in Muggle Studies..." Severus started wearily, but Millie interrupted.

"That's how they do it; if they want anything better than work as a tradesman, they have to go to university. It was in the Muggle Studies textbook," Millie said, wrinkling up her nose piquantly. "More school, and you're welcome to it, Granger. It's prob'ly in our best interest, but better you than me."

Draco stared at Millie in disbelief; would she never take his side on general principles?

"What about me? I did well at school too. Just because I didn't spend all my free time swotting..." He was picking up momentum, when Severus broke in.

"Name the elements, Draco," Snape said, his eyebrow raised.

"What kind of question is that? Earth, Air, Fire and Water, everybody knows that." Draco pushed his hair out of his eyes defiantly.
"Would you mind answering the question, Hermione, since 'everybody knows' the answer?" Snape said superciliously.

"Certainly," Granger said with a nasty smirk; only one day so far, and she was already spending too much time with Snape if she was making faces like that.

"Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, fluorine..."

"I believe that makes my point sufficiently," Snape said.

"Neon, sodium, magnesium, aluminium, silicon, phosphorus, sulphur, chlorine, argon, potassium, calcium, scandium," she went on, not stopping even as Snape interrupted her again.

"You are without a doubt, well versed in the ways and means of wizards, but when it comes to Muggles, you could not compete with a child, Draco," Snape said.

"Polonium, astatine, radium," Granger droned.

"If the Mudblood is going to school, so am I," he hissed.

"Suit yourself, but it's going to be more difficult than you can even imagine,"

Snape said.

"Fermium, mendelevium, nobelium, lawrencium..." Granger went on.

"You're just making those up," Draco said.

Granger shook her head. "Yttrium, niobium."

"What's the difference between them and, you know, our elements?" Millie asked; the little traitor.

"There are more than that, but in essence what wizards call elements are more states of matter. Fire, at least, is a state of combustion. Water, is a combination of the elements hydrogen and oxygen. Air, is a combination of gases, most importantly oxygen. Earth, is a mix of things. But the Muggle states of matter are similar to the wizarding idea of elements, but not the same. Any element can be a gas, a solid, or a liquid depending on the circumstance. What Muggles call elements are chemical building blocks that can't be broken down any further without losing their basic properties," Granger nattered on, and Millie seemed enthralled, who knew why.

In the meantime, Snape gestured for Draco to follow him down the hall.

"Give me this, Draco," Snape said, once they were safely hidden from the excitedly jabbering witches. What had Millie so worked up was puzzlement to her husband.

"It's stupid," he said.

"Believe what you will, only grant it to me," Snape said, his whole body drawn up stiff and commanding.

Draco gave him only what his mother called a "dead codfish stare" when his father did it.

"Please," Snape said, through clenched teeth. Now that was something. It took a wizard of some weight to wring a 'please' out of Severus Snape.

Draco felt inordinately pleased with himself as he shrugged. "It's not as though I actually care." He
Millie Malfoy was fortunate enough to have never actually been inside of Madam Puddifoot's; still she had heard enough from those who had - Vincent, Greg, and, of course, Draco - to know she was in its Muggle counterpart.

Every bloody inch of the place was covered with chintz or lace or gold paint.

Apart from having a poncy sign, the tea shop had seemed like a safe bet. Still, a job was a job, and if they'd hire her she'd take it.

A bell rang as she stepped past the doorway, and a Muggle female came out, straight off looking at Millie like she smelled of week old kipper.

"May I help you?" the Muggle said, with a bright false smile. She had a face like one of the heinous little cherubs some moron had charmed up to deliver valentines when Millie was a second year. She wore the most perfectly clean apron Millie had seen in her life, the sort of apron that not only hadn't been worn for cooking recently, but had probably never been near anyone even thinking about food. Short golden ringlets covered her head, and red rouge marked her doll-like lips and cheeks. For all that, she was an ageing doll, as far as Millie could figure; not too old but at least middle aged. Seventy, perhaps. Millie couldn't recall if Muggles aged the same as regular people.

"I'm here to inquire about a position," Millie said, forcing herself not to scowl as she waived the folded Muggle paper clenched in her fist. "You've got an advert in the paper?"

Millie watched as the Muggle's barely concealed disdain was instantly replaced by delight.

She must have been desperate for staff.

"You're English," the Muggle said, looking for all the world like Christmas had come in August.

"Lancashire," Millie said "more or less."

"But you're from Great Britain," the Muggle said.

"I've work papers," Millie said, wondering exactly what she said to thrill the Muggle so.

"Do you have any experience?" the Muggle asked.

"I've haven't exactly been employed before..." she said honestly, "but I can cook anything you want."

"Can you make a proper English tea?" the Muggle asked, in what appeared to be breathy ecstasy.

Millie looked at the Muggle in abject confusion; what was special about that?

"I've been doing it since I was old enough to be allowed near the stove," Millie said.

"I usually require at least three references but under the circumstances..." the woman said.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," Millie said jumping in, trying to hold down the soaring feeling in her chest. "If you show me the kitchen, I'll show you what I can do."
From there, it was fairly straightforward. The butter smelled of something Muggle and unnatural, and the milk was strangely not-fresh, yet at the same not gone off either, but that said, Millie could get used having all her cold foods at her fingertips in a Muggle refrigerator.

Her finest hour was using the automatic stove like she'd been born to it. She turned those knobs like champion. Not having to chop wood, with or without magic, was fine with her.

Working with what she'd been given, an hour later she laid out a gamut of breads, cakes, and buns that would have been barely adequate in her mother's opinion, but appeared to please the Muggle no end.

In any event it was a position, and as such would keep the wolf from the door.

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Draco knew a bit about difficult people, having been raised by two of them.

Still, after Millie's pointed rebuff of his initial request to undo her plaits he was wary enough not to ask again.

Had Millie and her rather definitive "No" been Lucius or Narcissa he might have been more willing to cajole. After all, he was Lucius and Narcissa's precious baby, the culmination of their romance. As it stood, he knew Millie was rather fond of him, but she was in possession of a less than restrained temper and the better part of valour held him back. Not to mention, she was far more inclined than either of his parents to call him a "brat" or a "stupid git".

She'd come around sooner or later. He was hardly desperate. Or so he thought at one time.

Usually, the way she always held some small part of herself aloof was her greatest charm. She wasn't like Pansy, fawning over him, falling all over him like an ill-mannered dog. No, when he got Millie's affection it was because he'd earned it. It was the first thing Draco had ever got entirely on his own in his life. She had more family connections, more money without him than she had with him; yet she'd set it aside and gone with him.

That didn't mean she would be easing off any time in the near future.

Still, so far from home and weighed down with the knowledge the only life he'd ever known was over, he needed something more than Millie's enticing blend of sexual availability and emotional elusiveness. He needed succor.

"Millie," he said, burying his lips in that place at the base of her skull that he knew made her light headed. "Could I..." with all the care he had in him, Draco nibbled his way from Millie's neck to her left shoulder, noting her shudders along the way, "...unlace your hair?"

His heart rose to just under his chin then dropped leadenly to his stomach as he felt Millie breathe in sharply, her muscles going tense as a Petrificus.

He couldn't see her face with his lips still on her shoulder, but he was certain her expression was anything but placid as she sighed deeply, if silently.

"If you want," she said woodenly, and he fought the urge to blink for fear she'd hear him. Millie's hearing rivaled the average hound's.

Astonished, he ran his hand down the length of one plait, thick as rope and black as the forbidden forest, black as some of his favourite thoughts, black as treacle. He traced the line of white scalp
along her parting with one finger.

Then, without thinking, he wound one plait around each fist until he pulled her to him, pressing his face against the back of her head. Millie was not only brilliant but also beastly and divine in a way that was entirely her own. And entirely his, as well. Or was he hers? It was an amusing question. After a moment his senses returned, and he turned his attention to her hair ribbons.

It was not unlike unplafting a rope: the hairs were thick and stiff and Draco had to rake through them with his fingers get them loose.

"Lie back," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion and with the newfound knowledge that, unbound, Millie's hair fell past her bum.

"See what I get for giving you your way," Millie grumbled.

"Lie back. Please," Draco said softening his tone.

"Don't get used to ordering me about," Millie said as she complied.

Draco was comforted to be reminded that some things were eternal.

Spread out, Millie's hair reached past the tips of her fingers. The black tendrils nearly floating on the soft white sheets, it reminded him of nothing so much as Hogwarts' giant squid.

Draco was all wide, mesmerised eyes and hard cock. Millie was a jewel that flashed a new facet from every direction as she glared at him through slitty, blue eyes, unchanging and yet never the same twice. He bent down and brushed his lips against hers, the kiss of a summer breeze across the surface of a lake. Without pause, his lips drifted down her throat, tickled by the vibration of her moan.

First the left breast, soft yet firm, like cake; he smothered it with kisses, ran his tongue like a loving viper along the underside. Sucked unrestrained at her nipple. There was something utterly edible about Millie; her body was as comforting and indulgent as his first box of sweets from home.

The right breast called to him next; it wouldn't do to ignore such a perfect tit, would it? Besides, it was every bit as delicious as the left one. He licked the nipple that stood as thick and as tall as the first joint of his smallest finger.

Sliding down on the right side, he gave a meaningful suckle to the flattened third nipple situated there.

A witch among witches was his Millicent.

Her hands kneaded and pulled at his hair deliciously; it was a perfect counterpoint to the pounding of the blood in his cock.

Her navel was a goblet of fire that accepted only his name... and his tongue.

Her face was like the shining moon, and her back like a cliff, but the warm mound of her belly was a place of special comfort, like the great hill of Maison de Malfoy where his child self would slide until he was dizzy from the first snow of winter to the last, and roll down all summer long, scaring the house elves silly. He did not know how it happened, but Millie's body had become the landscape of his soul, a wizarding England he could curl up with at night.
He kissed all his secrets into her soft sweet abdomen. A thousand kisses for the belly where he staked his heart.

He laid his next kiss on the inside of each chubby knee, sensing both her delight and her frustration. He was in no rush; Draco Malfoy knew how to savour a good thing. There was nothing he knew of as silky or as soft as the skin on the inside of her thighs, and he made a point to enjoy it as frequently and as fully as possible.

He’d stepped away from his name, his birthright, his family. Things as fundamental to his personal happiness, as flying his broom, slipped away in the desperate pursuit of safety, but he could weather it all if he kept this close to him. The wild heart of witchcraft spread-legged before him made it all bearable.

Draco was a man not a child, he savoured his meat before he had his pudding, but pink cunt lips beckoned, and he was more than ready to dive in face first.

Sometimes, he swore the first lick was the best, the way the flavour snapped every taste bud on his tongue to attention, coupled with Millie's first savage thrust of hips. It was like the moment when the broom took flight.

Other times, he would have sworn it was the last suck of the swollen cherry of her, the syrupy juices, the feeling of triumph knowing he, Draco, had brought a witch like Millie to shaking, mad, trembling climax. They didn't call it grabbing the snitch for nothing.

Six of one, half dozen of the other, really. Not one bit of it was half bad.

He thrust two fingers inside her cunt in time to the wet music of her pulse, catching her pink clitoris gently in his teeth. He swirled his tongue round one, two, three times before taking it in and sucking hard. Strictly speaking, Draco was not a homosexual, but he often thought the clitoris was like a little cock, small and hard between his lips, a female cock at least, wet and delicious. He sucked rhythmically in agreement with himself, before doing all sorts of fancy tricks with his tongue that made Millie spin like a sneak-o-scope.

He was torn out of his reverie when Millie forced her way up and shoved him down into her spot on the bed. She climbed astride him and, though she was small, it was as though he was engulfed by her. The wet slurp of her cunt clamped down and pulled at him, muscles like something deadly grasped him.

Sweet dimpled fingers and a mouth like satin belied the crushing power between her thighs. Her hair wrapped itself around the two of them like devil's snare.

Usually all in favour of survival, Draco would have died happy the moment her breasts were in his grasp and his seed sprayed deep inside her.

Later, as Millie slept, Draco felt both brave and curious enough to undo the plaits in the treacle black hair at her crotch as well.

She noticed her absent plaits between her legs in the midst of her morning shower. After a moment of swearing that caused the paint to peel in weak spots, Millie balled her fists and dressed. She said nothing to Draco about what he'd done. His part of it was over. It was all up to her now, whatever she decided to do about it.
Chalk and Cheese

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chalk and Cheese

Disclaimer: I am not JK Rowling.

If All The World Was Apple Pie

And All the Seas Were Ink

And All The Trees Were Bread and Cheese

What Would We Have To Drink?

--Trad.

And so the little group, despite their individual preoccupations, found an angular sort of domesticity in their new home. It was far from conventional, and there was a good deal of bickering, but all were suited to one degree or another.

Hollow threats to further his education aside, Draco pursued the goal of rendering the house fit, not only for habitation, but for his personal habitation, with a zeal his companions considered teetered on the brink of mania. With nothing more than his own hands - well, his own hands and a roller and brush - the heir to the Malfoy line painted the exterior a distinctly unMugglish shade of lavender. He was inordinately proud of himself, in an embarrassed-to-be-caught-doing-manual-labour sort of way.

After the interior was cleaned and sorted, each room, except, notably Severus' own, took on signs of Draco's distinctive treatment. Silk panels, cut from surplus dressing gowns, were stretched to cover the walls of the lounge.

Room by room, day by day, draperies appeared and mouldings were gilded.

The others were unsure if he had found a Muggle willing to launder his doubloons and was being coy about it, or more unnervingly, whether he had taken up sewing while they were out, or in Severus' case, asleep, during the day.

Hardly a week went by without some sort of improvement. Hermione was amused to see Draco's chest literally swell when Severus commented, over one of Millie's extraordinary pre-dawn teas, that the whole place looked "like something Narcissa would come up with".

"Nice," Millie said staring distractedly out the window, but Draco was too busy feeling proud to notice.

Millie, for her part, continued on with her gainful employment. The Tea Shop was not to be confused with Snape's Tea Room. One sported concrete floors strewn liberally with cigarette butts and sometimes featured musical acts with names like "Fist Full of Cunts" and the other had wall-to-wall chintz and oil paintings of dead aristocracy everywhere. In any event, The Tea Shop had a
marked increase in business when the smells of Millie's baking began wafting out the front door.

She spent a good deal of time puzzling over the strange behaviour of Muggles with Hermione. Her employer was a complete nutter, even for a Muggle, even for an American Muggle, as far either of them could reckon.

First off, she wasn't 70 and was, in fact, around Snape's age. Apparently, Muggles aged faster than normal but that was the only thing easily explained about Mrs. Bertolli.

Mrs. Bertolli was inexplicably mad for any and all things English in way that made Millie's eyes cross. She nattered all day, every day, on the topic of the innate superiority of everything English to everything American, a trait that particularly confounded Millie being as Mrs. Bertolli was, herself, an American thing.

And then there were the royals; Mrs. Bertolli could easily spend half the day going on about who the British Royals shagged and didn't shag. While Millie was vaguely aware the Muggles of her nation of birth did have a queen or king or something, in the enchanted wood where she was raised the only monarch to speak of answered to the name "gran" and wore a necklace of skulls when she was feeling festive. To be fair, Millie wasn't entirely sure you couldn't say the same of Elizabeth Mountbatten.

On the occasion Draco walked over because he was feeling a mite peckish, Mrs. Bertolli all but declared a national holiday. Lots of women had that response. That didn't make Millie less cheesed off by it.

The accent was the most perplexing thing though. Mrs. Bertolli would, at random intervals and with varying degrees of success, mimic random English accents, occasionally straying, during an odd phase of the moon, as far afield as Scotland.

Weirder still, Mrs. Bertolli admitted she had never set foot on the sacred ground that was the U.K. and Millie herself was the first real live English person she had known "intimately", though Millie thought "intimate" was a gross overstatement.

Millie couldn't put her finger on anything harmful in any of it; it was fairly fucking bizarre, though.

Millie held her other, more private concern, close to her chest.

For her part, Hermione spent the first month of her new life adjusting to university as well as the minutiae of Muggle life. She was more than a bit disappointed at the lack of real intellectual challenge, but the ease of her transition was cheering, at least. She was also relieved at the marked distance maintained by Snape.

Oh, he demanded she recount each class period in exacting detail and regularly disappeared into the den of revulsion that was his bedroom with her textbooks, not to mention combed her class work for mistakes. But his only act that could reasonably be described as even vaguely romantic was glaring death at any males within a three meter radius of her person when, at his own insistence, he rose a few scant hours after returning home from "pouring liquor down idiots" to ferry her to classes, quite often still under the influence himself. It might have simply been a matter of being painfully hung over; it wasn't as though he was a ray of sunshine even under the best of circumstances.

Millie said she'd never known him to bath daily before, but he continued to be short-tempered, sarcastic, tightly strung, smoking and drinking entirely too much; in other words, on his best behaviour and toned down considerably.
Though she did her best to keep her night time terrors to herself, Hermione sometimes awoke in a cold sweat to find Snape sitting at her bedside fresh home from work, an unlit cigarette in his lips, smelling of liquor, a glass of water and a stiff word of comfort at the ready.

The second month, Hermione came to the striking conclusion she preferred the company of her housemates, Draco included, to any of the people she met at school.

Millie had been the greatest surprise. She'd never had a friend like Millie before. Millie was every bit as bright as Hermione knew herself to be, which was not something Hermione was accustomed to. Once or twice, she had the painful traitorous thought that her former friendships, namely the ones she'd had with Ron and Harry, had been closer to the sort of sort of love one had for a particularly intelligent and familiar Labrador Retriever; the unspoken things like love and loyalty worked perfectly well but most of the subtleties were in short supply. Things would have been different had they known enough to make friends when they were still at Hogwarts.

She sometimes worried that Millie, whose skewering of Muggleborn and Pureblood alike knew neither blood loyalty nor pity, was a bad influence as they laughed at the kitchen table until they choked on their tea. Sometimes, Millie proved herself too astute for comfort as well.

Her assessment of Snape, for example.

Aside from excessive staring with his hair pulled down over his eyes and a jittery sort of hovering, one might think he was a paid tutor the way he treated her. Occasionally, as they discussed her course work and air between them grew tense, she thought the situation might be drawn out of its current miserable limbo through mutual agreement. Unfortunately, each and every time a kiss appeared on the horizon, Snape would excuse himself for a cigarette.

Once, as Severus draped himself across the settee, engrossed in the paper with Whack ensconced on his lap, she took the liberty of petting the cat. He did like being scruffed round the neck. She had never seen a living person go so still without the benefit of a Petrificus curse as Severus Snape did at that moment. The bulb in the lamp nearest them shattered and everyone retreated to their bedrooms, grateful there hadn't been flames.

She sincerely hoped Severus was pleasuring himself regularly, God knew she was. It was a hellish sort of bind. Yes, she understood he was not pressing her despite her obvious obligations to him. She got the bloody point. If there was going to be any movement on that front, she was going to have to seduce him. It seemed unfair. He started it, after all.

One day, during the second week in October, she attempted to give Severus a hand out of their mutual rut. Hermione sat at the aged formica table Draco had yet to replace, working through her calculus with one of Millie's chocolate biscuits in her mouth. She was running through an internal complaint about how depressingly two dimensional the study of calculus seemed after Arithmancy, when she not so much heard as felt Snape enter the room and loom close behind her. The time was past ripe. Keeping her right hand poised holding pencil to paper and doing her best to give Snape no forewarning lest he bolt, Hermione moved her left hand from her lap to Snape standing behind her. The flat of her palm rested gingerly against the front of his thigh.

He grabbed her hand quickly, like a springing trap. She feared him and his temper as he stood there, a death grip on her hand, though she had no rational reason beyond the ever hardening suspicion that, under his usually icy exterior, Severus Snape was as calm and collected as a wet cat in a sack.

As he gripped her fingers with his, she was afraid for an instant that he was going to do something terrible. Bite it off or something. She'd rather not lose that hand if it could be helped. It wasn't her
dominant hand, but they'd still had many good times together.

She was rather shocked when Severus pressed his lips stiffly to the back of her hand then ran, not walked, not strode, but ran out the door.

The cowardly shit. She knew Slytherins weren't renowned for their courage but this was ridiculous. The screen door rattled behind him.

Severus Snape was interested, he'd made that much clear repeatedly, but he could only act on his sexual feelings for her provided he was blind drunk, fully expecting to die in the morning, and she was in the relatively unthreatening role of underage student. It was a fairly narrow set of requirements.

Hermione didn't see herself recreating that particular set of circumstances, even if it were possible. Not even if memory had failed to deceive her, and he was as well endowed as she recalled.

What was she to expect? Well-balanced wizards generally didn't join the Death Eaters, particularly when they were decidedly mixed blood themselves.

Neither did they make entirely inappropriate sexual advances toward students less than half their age. Too bad he'd grown on her so much. Too bad he'd saved her life and was, in all honesty, doing all he could to assure her safety and comfort. Well... driving aside.

She turned the whole knotty question over in her mind. Did she really want him? If so, how badly?

Had circumstances been different, had Snape not been a fugitive wanted for the murder of one the greatest wizards of his generation, had they been back in the magical London, had Hermione been living the life she had since graduating Hogwarts, she would have got Snape into bed weeks ago. The current state of affairs necessitated a bit more discretion than she usually bothered with.

Crap! She was starting to talk like him, in her own mind, at least.

His appeal was undeniable. He had physical grace, keen wit and showed concern for her person, if not in word then in deed. In all honesty, she'd never met anyone as intellectually fascinating as her former potions master, whether the subject was Magical or Muggle. True, he wasn't the prettiest piece of male flesh she'd ever come across, actually he was fairly ugly, but she didn't fault him for it; pretty tended to bore Hermione after the third or fourth time she woke up next to it.

It was when she looked at the other end of the equation that she started to come down with a dull ache behind her eyes. He was obsessed. With her.

Apparently to such a degree that he could barely speak to her unscripted if the topic strayed beyond academics. Which might be a sign to run screaming in the other direction. In addition, he had a myriad disgusting habits. If anything could put her off, it was smoking.

He was not unlike a gorgeous old house fallen into wreck and ruin. Which she supposed cast her in the role of potential buyer, trying to puzzle out whether she was interested in the outlay of time and energy required to rehabilitate him.

What did they say was the deciding factor in cases like this? Oh, yes, location, location, location.

As far that went, he might as well be the last wizard on earth. That almost sealed his fate and left Severus Snape at the mercy of whatever form of self-abuse he got up to in his room; Hermione despised not having a choice.
Unsure what to do next, she went back to simpler maths only to be interrupted by Millie coming in to wash her muddy hands at the kitchen sink.

"What did you do to him?" Millie asked, jerking her head towards the door as she turned on the faucet.

"It was scandalous. I deserve to be whipped in the public square. I touched his leg, Technically, though, all I made contact with was trouser fabric," Hermione said, head down still juggling numbers on the page.

"You do realise if you ever get hold of his prick he's going to burst into tears," Millie said, intently cleaning under her wedding ring.

"What sort of action do you think our Mr. Snape would take were I to decide to keep company with someone else?" she asked, suspecting she knew the answer to that one as she jammed another biscuit into her mouth.

"Not sure," Millie said, drying her hands on the front of her skirt. Hermione ignored the way Draco's muddy handprints perfectly framed Millie's bum and hoped against both reason and experience that Millie would put forth an argument for Snape's self-control and rationality. "Whatever he'd do there'd be gore, most likely a speech as well. You know how he loves melodrama. Not sure which is worse, really."

Hermione sighed and wished she could disagree. "So what would you do in my place?"

"I've no idea," Millie said. "We're chalk and cheese me and you."

"Which am I?" Hermione asked, propping her chin on her fist. "The chalk or the cheese?"

"Definitely chalk, class room chalk at that, made from ancient whale bones,"

Millie said with a frown. "I, on the other hand, am the cheese. Big smelly cheese... an acquired taste, know what I mean?"

"Not extremely smelly, though, roughly Wensleydale level," Hermione said, "not even approaching anything French."

Both witches winced.

"You're making me hungry," Millie said, "You know I heard there's a market not two mile away that carries real live Wensleydale. Neal's Yard and everything."

"You can't be serious," Hermione asked, forgetting her Snape problems for the moment.

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"What the hell are you doing, Snape?" Draco said, fanning himself with a folded piece of newspaper.

"Working, eating, sleeping, moving my bowels... drinking when the mood is upon me. I wouldn't have imagined you could have any question of my occupation under present conditions. I am certainly well aware of your goings... and comings. 'Oh Millie! Oh Millie!,' he answered sarcastically, taking a sip of his wretched American beer. In the sickening heat, the only thing to recommend it was the icy temperature at which it was served."
Ambient outdoor temperatures hovering around 98 degrees were horrid at any time of year; in October it was outright cruel.

Draco responded, looking quite bored. "Granger. What are you going to do about Granger?"

Snape, utilising all his powers of play-acting to neither bolt nor cringe, instead looked Draco dead in the eye and shrugged.

"Is that it? A fat lot of nothing?" Draco said.

Severus noted that while Draco was nowhere as suave as his father, he was every bit as annoying.

"Sometimes the wisest course of action is biding one's time until an opportunity to act presents itself," he said, inspecting his fingernails as though they were tiny chips of the Rosetta Stone.

"Funny, from where I sit it looks less like you're biding your time and more like you're waiting for someone to come along and take her off your hands," Draco said, and Severus' stomach dropped at his words even as he sneered at them.

"Why, precisely, do you care? Haven't you some concern of your own to pore over? The shrubbery, perhaps?" Severus asked, trying to lead him away from the topic of Hermione.

Inside the house Millie and Hermione laid hold of their purses and headed out in pursuit of cheese.

As they walked, matching purposeful strides, Hermione looked to the side to see Millie regard her thoughtfully for a fleeting instant.

"You can understand why Snape might be a little shirty," Millie said casually.

"Not particularly," Hermione said. "By all rights, I ought to be the nervous one."

"You don't know then?" Millie said, a certain tightness in her voice that passed almost instantly.

"Know what?" Hermione said, grabbing hold of Millie's sleeve at the intersection until the cars passed, as was her habit.

"When you have a shag, d'you ever notice you're a bit..." Millie seemed to struggle for the right word, "...peppy afterwards?"

"Why shouldn't I be? Vigorous exercise floods the body with adrenaline and sex floods the system with a host of hormones and chemicals," Hermione said, warming to the topic.

"And the wizard sleeps like somebody dropped dreamless death in his tea?"

Millie asked.

Hermione snorted.

"You have a Muggle explanation for that one?" Millie asked.

"Not particularly." Hermione laughed; Millie had funny ideas sometimes.

"You ever wonder why no one thinks less of a wizard who takes up with a Muggle woman, but a Witch who fancies a Muggle is something of a laugh?"
Millie asked.

"Typical double standard," Hermione said with a frown. She still didn't understand where Millie was going with any of this. She lived in a house with three Slytherins and not one of them could make a point without circling it three times first.

"You ever wonder why all the really powerful wizards are known virgins but not the witches?" Millie said.

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks.

No one had ever pointed this out to her before, and she wondered why it had never occurred to her.

"Millicent, stop dancing around the subject and tell me whatever it is you're trying to tell me," she said.

"It isn't the sort of thing people talk about, not even in private," Millie said uncomfortably.

"Tell me," Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips.

"I thought you knew," Millie said, wincing.

"What? What did you think I knew? What don't people talk about? What is it?"

Hermione all but shouted.

Millie laughed a nervous laugh, with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"When you shag, when any witch, shags a wizard, you... they... we... when we take their essence..." Millie stopped as if she expected Hermione to draw the correct conclusion from half a sentence.

"And by essence you mean semen." Hermione motioned for her to go on.

"Along with their essence, a witch takes a bit of their magic. You can learn to siphon off more with practice, kil 'em or come close to it. That's what my gran does. But even if you aren't trying, you take a little every time," Millie said. "It sounds worse than it is."

"And the Purebloods keep it secret," Hermione said, Molly Weasley's comments about "scarlet women" suddenly taking on a whole new meaning.

Her brain ticking, she suddenly realised her entire life had taken on a different light in an instant. How many wizards had she stolen power from since she'd left school and had a flat of her own? To be fair, stolen wasn't an accurate description; they'd been eager enough to share.

Hermione wasn't sure why she felt unreasonably angry at Millie at that moment. It was the sort of thing any number of other witches could have, no, should have, told her years ago. McGonagall, for instance, was probably in dereliction of duty for not telling her.

Ginny. Ginny ought to have told her before she started sleeping with Ron.

"I thought you knew," Millie said, wincing, "We heard you practically lived with the Weasleys when you weren't at Hogwarts."

Hermione stared at her. It was a strange thing for the Slytherins to care where she spent her summers, though, knowing them, it was likely a great source of amusement. Everything in the
world had changed; only it hadn't. Things remained as they had always been and only her knowledge had been altered.

Suddenly a thousand little things in the magical world made more sense.

No sex before a Quidditch match.

She wanted to laugh. She wondered if anyone gave this pertinent little gem of information to Harry Potter, if it could have saved his life and changed the course of the war. Surely he knew. Surely someone told him. Still, some cynically shrieking part of her wondered if instead of Occlumency Dumbledore should have arranged for Harry to have basic sex education.

She wanted to ask Millie why it was such a bloody secret, but she already knew. She had lived in the magical world long enough to understand perfectly.

Wizards didn't talk about it because they didn't want to let any witch who wasn't already aware in on the secret and put their power in more jeopardy.

Witches didn't share the knowledge casually because they didn't want to encourage other witches to exploit wizards. Or give them competition.

"Wensleydale, remember?" Millie said, jerking her head toward the busy intersection.

This time Millie steered her across.

"Of course, it's not as good with Muggles," she said as they stepped back on the curb.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked. "Have you ever had sex with a Muggle?"

Millie laughed and there was nothing false about it. The pure silliness of the question bubbled up from deep in her chest.

"Neither have I," Hermione said, smiling without intending to. Her instincts certainly suggested Millie was correct in her assertions.

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In the meantime, Stephen Liston, so-called, left the house and arrived at work promptly, liquored up the customers, then himself in the accepted order of operations, all in all keeping a low profile.

He was diligent, as well, about making certain Hermione didn't surpass him academically, though he discovered the holes in his knowledge were rather larger than he'd previously surmised. He didn't let on. More than once he wished... he wasn't sure what he wished. Something stupid about telling Lucius and the others to take a flying fuck when he had the chance, and running off to America twenty years ago, most likely. It was immaterial. All the wishing in the world would not undo the years of mistakes that surrounded him like a dung pile. Even now, missteps clung to the bottom of his boot.

He was determined he would not ruin his chances with her, after all the years she'd eaten at his thoughts like a cancer he would not make the wrong move now and lose her. Draco was a fool. Everything in the boy's life had come so easily he'd never learned the cardinal rule: He who hesitates... is often the sole survivor.

As soon as he managed to work out the proper approach, he would make Granger his own. For the moment unfortunately, every time he looked her straight in the eye his coherent thoughts all disintegrated like soap bubbles in a storm. He was working on that one.
He wasn't too proud to admit he'd impressed even himself when he managed to kiss her hand, despite the fact that the retreat he'd beaten was rather hastier than he'd originally intended.

The only solution was to mix the morons their poncy drinks and do his time; planning a healthy allowance of liquor for himself after closing so he could bear to be in the same room as the love of his life when he returned home.

Standing amid the aisles of food in the posh market Hermione waxed introspective. She wasn't religious but somehow, with their cart loaded with Wensleydale and huge fragrant apples the stirrings she felt could only be described in ecclesiastic language. If she could locate a package of Jaffa cakes she was going to sing hosannas. Figuratively anyway, her singing voice was not exactly pleasant.

"Had anyone suggested any of this when we were at Hogwarts..." she started but was cut off by Millie.

"Any of what?" Millie asked.

"Any of this," she said gesturing to herself. "You marrying Draco..." Again, Millie interrupted.

"I didn't marry Draco. Draco married me. There's a difference. And I didn't pick him out myself," Millie said, scrutinising a jar of lemon curd.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"It was a set up. His mum made a deal with my mum. Paid her two thirds of everything in the Malfoy coffers for the privilege," Millie said shaking her head and putting the jar of curd back on the shelf.

"That's incredible," Hermione said, horrified. "In this day and age, how could someone do that?"

"My mum and dad are old fashioned. They thought they were being very...what do you call it...progressive not making him fight dragons and shag some old hag to prove his mettle. Or knowing my mum it could have been the other way 'round; shag a dragon and arm wrestle a hag," Millie grumbled. "Still , two thirds of the Malfoy fortune isn't exactly small potatoes."

Hermione nodded, though she wondered in passing how Millie's parents verified the amount.

"My uncle's their tax attorney. Or else we never would have trusted their numbers," Millie said matter of factly.

Hermione stared, holding in the thought that came immediately to mind; it was a relatively untested new skill.

Millie looked at her expectantly. "Well out with it. Whatever you are going to say, say it.

"You have to admit it seems uncommonly like slavery. Expecting your daughter to spend her life with the highest bidder," Hermione let the words have their way and jump recklessly from her mouth.

"Who said anything about life?" Millie asked, apparently surprised by the idea.

"They married me to him for a year and a day. Contract subject to renewal at that time and capable of being dissolved at any time by either party."
"When did they... arrange it?" Hermione asked. Was Millie due to leave them any time soon? If she did leave that could change everything.

"We've been married since summer after sixth year," Millie said. "Not exactly sure when they arranged the whole thing. Draco prob'ly put his mum up to it after winter hols."

"Millie, that was over three years ago," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I know," Millie gruffly. "I reckon the brat grew on me."

Hermione chuckled.

"Draco's all right he's just..." Millie said.

"Draco," Hermione supplied.

"And now I'm going to have a baby... Well, I'm pregnant. I don't know if I'm going to have it much longer or not," Millie said, putting a jar of strawberry jam in the cart.

"What happened? I mean I know what happen, weren't you using contraception?" Hermione said automatically.

Millie rolled her eyes. " Of course I was, My granny braided a contraceptus into my pubes when I came to Hogwarts; my fucking husband unbraided it while I was asleep."

Hermione cringed. "That's not very convenient."

"Life generally isn't convenient, in my experience, and Draco doubly so," Millie said with a sigh. Then, after a pause, she asked, "Do you like babies?"

"Theoretically I like them; I don't hate them. I never pictured myself with one, but..." Hermione said, shrugging; what exactly was she supposed to say?

"I've always wanted a baby. I never wanted a husband, but I always planned on a baby or two," Millie said, and Hermione was surprised by the sadness in her voice. "It doesn't seem very practical now. Under the circumstances, looks like it might never be practical."

Hermione looked at her and said the first thing that came to mind. "I always planned on a husband and no baby."

Millie let out a short sharp bark of a laugh that ended just as abruptly.

"I've got some pennyroyal in the cupboard at the house, waiting 'til I work up the nerve," Millie said, randomly tossing items in the cart.

It seemed horribly unfair until a series of thoughts coalesced in Hermione's brain.

"When you think about it, having a baby is never really practical," she said, and Millie just glared daggers at her. Hermione had the feeling she was treading dangerous waters. She was thankful Millie didn't have a wand at present.

"No, no, follow me on this, Millie," Hermione said levelly. "Don't you think, if a witch has all the money and stability in the world and she doesn't want a baby she shouldn't have one?"

"Course not, that's not fair to either of 'em," Millie said gritting her teeth.
"Do witches who aren't wealthy and powerful have a right to have babies, as long as they can care for them properly?" Hermione asked.

Millie rolled her eyes in recognition of the obvious answer. "We're in hiding as Muggles, that's hardly the same as being a Weasley."

Hermione didn't blanch. "Muggles do have babies, you know. If you have this baby, it's not going to be a red flag for you-know-who to come and kill us all in our beds. In the end, I think the only reason to ever have a baby is because you want one."

Millie was silent.

"I'm not saying you have to have it, all I'm saying is you can if you want to. If you don't want to, I'll help you with that. The choice is yours. I'm on your side either way," Hermione said, wracking her brain for the right words.

"Snape's going to have a fit when I tell him," Millie said flatly.

Hermione imagined it went without saying that Draco would be overjoyed at the continuation of the Malfoy line.

"Then why tell him at all? He's bound to put two and two together eventually,"

Hermione said, raising her eyebrow in imitation of a certain obnoxious wizard she knew.

The employee stocking breakfast cereals seemed taken aback when the two women at the end of the aisle erupted into uncontrolled paroxysms of laughter.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
The Moon's Not Romantic; It's Intimidating as Hell

Chapter Summary

more or less what it says on the tin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Moon Isn't Romantic; It's Intimidating as Hell

Disclaimer: This is clearly not the work of J.K. Rowling.

If all the good people were clever,

And all clever people were good,

The world would be nicer than ever

We thought that it possibly could.

But somehow 'tis seldom or never

The two hit it off as they should,

The good are so harsh to the clever,

The clever, so rude to the good!

--Elizabeth Wordsworth - Clever and Good

"Fuck me if I know which one is good and which is clever."

--The Writer

Sunday morning arrived, and so did Severus Snape - melodramatically late from work and even drunker than was his custom. Pity none of his housemates were awake to witness it, unless you counted Millicent, and since she didn't give the proverbial two shits how drunk he was, or how late he came in, he bloody well wasn't going to count her, thank you very much.

"She's still in bed. Asleep," Millicent said, sipping her tea, toast crumbs down the front of her dressing gown and jam on the lapel, not even affording him the opportunity to inquire. When did Bulstrode start leaving her hair loose?

He could have made the effort and strung a few words together in Millicent's direction, but he lacked the motivation to apply his limited attention to the task.

Given the state of his body and soul, the best he could manage was to turn abruptly and half-stumble, half-shuffle to his bed where he threw off whatever clothing seemed most constrictive in
his hazy estimation. Having accomplished a partial disrobing, he curled himself around the large black fuzzy object that had set anchor on the middle of his bed.

Whack. Whack the cat. As he drifted off to sleep he wondered vaguely if it were possible to steal a cat. As soon as he awoke, he would steal Bulstrode's cat; it was very comfy.

Hermione was weeding the garden beside Millie and Draco when she thought to ask after Snape. She hadn't seen him since he'd turned tail in the kitchen the afternoon before, but she'd had other things on her mind.

"Snape ought to be up by now," she said, pulling at a particularly persistent root.

"If he isn't dead of alcohol poisoning," Millie said, not displaying much concern. "He staggered in some time after dawn, looking and smelling like the hind end of a sick cat. Someone ought to go see to him at some point today. The dust man comes in the morning, and I'd hate to have a rotting corpse stinking up the rubbish bin all week."

Hermione rolled her eyes; sometimes the vaunted Slytherin sense of humour was less than tasteful.

It was strange to let herself into his room. She hadn't actually been in his room before. Old habits were hard to break, she supposed. Some part of her still thought of him as her Potions master. Not that any of his behaviour had gone toward making himself familiar either.

Familiar was the word for it, though. He was on his bed, snoring, one naked white foot peeking out of the twisted bedclothes, though he appeared to still be wearing his jacket. On second look, he was shirtless, and the jacket was wrapped around his shoulders. Despite the persistent warm weather, her ersatz husband had taken to wearing a decidedly decrepit leather jacket. She supposed it had usurped the place of his swirling black wizard's robes. It was his way, apparently, to find one costume and stick to it day in and day out, whether he lived as Muggle or Wizard. She hadn't seen him in anything other than blue jean trousers and a short sleeved black shirt in the months since they'd left England.

Both the leather jacket and the swirling black robes were costumes. Both visual shorthand that fairly screamed protective colouring.

He shifted, throwing his left arm over his head exposing the shiny white scar Millie had given him. The horrible gouge where his Dark Mark had been cut out no longer sickened or intrigued her; it was what it was.

Much the same way Severus Snape himself was what he was.

Mostly, down deep, what he was she found fascinating: the most amazing synthesis of Muggle and Magical thoughts and abilities. The half blood prince appellation was truer than he doubtless realized. He was magnificent, both magically and intellectually. It was this quality both Voldemort and Dumbledore recognised and exploited. With the scaly skin of neuroses stripped away, Severus Snape was breathtaking.

His sleeping face was somehow different to the one he wore when he knew people were looking. Without a grimace, smirk or sneer he seemed dear in a way that gave Hermione a wealth of silly, tender feelings.

She was fully aware they were ridiculous. Snape himself would laugh at her, were he awake.

Or perhaps not. No matter what turns life took, Severus Snape got the shit end of the stick. He'd been losing so very long perhaps he had no idea how to do anything else.
Once, as a very young child, she had seen a man in a lift, a Muggle, with the words "Born to Lose" tattooed on his arm. For years she'd wondered what sort of person put that sort of a mark, indelibly, on themselves. Now she was fairly certain she knew the answer: Severus Snape.

At that moment, his hair was as horrible as ever, he smelled, badly, and she would have given anything to know how to approach him.

Gingerly, she sat herself at the edge of his bed. He failed to awaken, but instead tossed restlessly, kicking off a good portion of his sheets.

Pity welled up in her. Was it pity? She was honestly unsure.

She knew for a fact she pitied Neville. She'd long pitied poor Harry, even before he died. It didn't make her nipples hard to contemplate either of them.

No, this was something else; it was strange to admit, but she had never been so enthralled by a male as she had by Severus Snape. She was even able to put her finger on the cause: the frustrating, impossible man's brain. Every time he asked her another strange yet penetrating question about her chemistry books, his tangled hair pulled over his face but his black eyes staring hard, her pulse raced more than it did when other men stuck their tongue in her ear.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he groaned, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, his smallest finger held apart from the others, as she had long observed was his habit.

"What are you doing in my room?" he asked, and she supposed it was a fair and obvious question.

She didn't answer him. She didn't actually have a good reason; instead she repeated her embarrassing thoughts aloud.

"When you ask me about my schoolwork it does more for me than when other wizards stick their tongue in my ear."

Snape blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"When you..." Hermione began slowly, imagining he had missed her point in the jumble of words that had rushed out of her mouth.

"I got that part," he interrupted, wincing. "I think."

"I've thought it through. I've had wizards, you know, but none of them were satisfactory in the long term. I think that's because they weren't intellectually stimulating," she said, desperately hoping he wouldn't choose to humiliate her.

She wouldn't be held responsible for her actions if he did.

His eyes widened dramatically. He looked horrified beyond measure. She'd never seen him look quite like that before.

"What are you proposing?" he stammered.

Hermione brushed her hair out of her face and composed herself. "That we become lovers; it's quite straightforward really."

"So you can toss me aside and be on your merry way once you've had your fill?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as he spoke, apparently recovering quickly from the shock.

"Of course not," she said indignantly. "I don't understand you at all, Severus Snape."
"I will not be used and cast aside," he bellowed.

"Why do you assume I'm going to cast you aside?" she asked, surprised.

"You cast aside every other male to fall prey to your charms; why should I assume I will be any different?" he asked.

Hermione stared at him. "Look, I don't understand what you expect me to..." she stopped abruptly mid-sentence as, for once, he looked her straight in the eye.

Her skin prickled. Each individual hair standing upright and afraid. A cold chill raced up her spine and her cheeks went painfully hot.

She watched as he breathed slowly, very slowly, through parted lips, his white hands curled to fists.

She knew exactly what he wanted from her: commitment, love.

The terrifying part was that this strange, infuriating and intriguing wizard was quite possibly the only one she'd met in her life who was capable of drawing her orderly cart of a mind into the slick-sided ravine of love.

Had things been different, were she less concerned with offending his renowned sensitivity, at least initially, she might have insisted he shower and brush his teeth first. As it stood, sheer magical magnetism held sway, and she dived in and kissed him.

His breath was rancid, but his lips were soft.

It was, overall, rather strange. He acquiesced, clearly. His lips parted wider in response to hers, and when she moved her hands toward his bare chest he eagerly, and prematurely, took down his trousers.

On the other hand, he was definitively submissive. As she kissed him, magic sending sparks that were practically Catherine wheels shooting off the ends of her hair, it occurred to her that really, when it came down to it, he was always someone's whipped dog. Voldemort's. Dumbledore's.

His hands came to her breasts, but he was alternately too tentative or too rough. He really hadn't done this much at all, had he? Perhaps Millie was right and he really was a virgin. It wasn't that horrid an idea. It only meant he needed a bit of practice. She could give him that. The important part, the magic, was so strong between the two of them; she'd never experienced as much palpable magic from sexual contact before.

She cradled his hot, dark head in her hand and pressed her cheek to his, running a trail of kisses from his lips to his ear. She looked into his eyes, hoping for some sort of confirmation, some glimpse of triumph or recognition, but all she saw was fear.

She well understood he risked a great deal by their involvement, and she next to nothing; what he needed was reassurance.

She had always been an impulsive witch. Once a Gryffindor always a Gryffindor, after all. She let the words fly from her mouth; not only were they the ones she knew he longed to hear, they were also scrupulously true.

"You know I fancy you," she whispered in his ear.
The next thirty seconds or so were rather muddled. Severus Snape went even more still, if such a thing were possible, then struggled with the mad twists of bedding and clothes, threw Hermione to the floor with a resounding thump and retreated to the far corner of the room clutching a greying sheet to his body.

Sitting on the floor amidst the uncleared filth, it took Hermione a few moments to realise two things: firstly, the balled sheet of notebook paper in Snape's singular hand appeared to have an oddly medieval-looking illustration of cellular respiration, and, secondly, somehow in the tussle, he had ejaculated all over the front of her blouse.

"And now my humiliation is complete," Snape snarled.

"Severus," Hermione said, dusting herself off as she rose from the floor. "It's fine. Why don't you let me...?"

"Get out," Snape said imperiously. "Leave this room at once."

"This is no way to resolve..." Hermione said, coming closer.

"I said get out," he screamed. Here was her old school master, red faced and in a mindless rage, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory once again.

"Severus," she said, moving near enough to touch him. With all the care she knew how to take, she laid her hand on his stubbled face. She drew her thumb over his soft lips and high hard cheekbones. He shuddered in response. "I'm not upset with you, Severus, I'm certain we could...." she said.

"It's every witch's fondest dream, to find an ill-favoured, penniless wizard, to ejaculate on her clothing." Severus said with quiet menace. "I told you to get out. In my life I have made it a rule not to strike females but at the moment I find myself tempted to make an exception."

Hermione knew full well he would die before he would raise his hand to her.

The thought came to her again that this was the Severus Snape who had taught her for six years, this miserable terrified creature. It simply took an adult's eye to see.

Hermione started to speak, explain that none of this was necessary, she was just as willing to be his lover as ever. If anything, this new tangle in his web had ensnared her more firmly.

He had taught her. Now she could teach him, not that she'd lay it out like that; she was well acquainted enough with his ego to never frame it in those terms, but...

"Exit this room, now, Miss Granger, while I still have some scant shred of dignity," he said stonily. He drew himself up to his full height and suddenly it was almost as if he were clothed in invisible professorial robes. Composure unwrinkled his brow and narrowed his black eyes.

"I don't want to humiliate you," she said.

"Too late for that, I'm afraid," he said smoothly, "please go."

Hermione didn't know what to do other than comply.

She thought perhaps he would come round on his own, eventually. She fully expected it when he avoided her for the rest of the day.

Monday morning, he drove her to class in silence.
Tuesday and Wednesday, as well. It came to simply be the way of things; Severus Snape did not speak to her.

If he was intent on fouling things up, he certainly was going about it the right way. Sitting in class barely listening to the lecture, Hermione determined then and there, this time the sod was not going to have his way.

It was Halloween when Hermione finally dropped her penny; though it might be more accurate to say she hurled said penny at Severus Snape's head.

The air smelled of sweaty human bodies, cigarettes, and alcohol as Hermione entered through the doors of Severus' place of employment and was seized by an uncontrollable fit of sneezing.

Severus, to his credit, flinched only minutely at her unexpected appearance before leaning across the bar and asking with a frown, "Are you coming down with something?"

"No," she answered, rubbing her eyes with her fists, "it's just the ‘eau de bar'."

"Firstly, this is not a bar, it is a musical venue. Secondly, you must realise eau de bar translates literally as bar water..." he said, waspish as ever. And he called her pedantic.

"I was drawing a comparison between this aroma and that of a cheap perfume," Hermione answered him. "And would you or would you not say your so-called venue generates more revenue through ticket sales, or alcohol?"

"Alcohol. However..." Snape said.

"However, nothing. An establishment whose primary source of income is alcohol sales is, by definition, a bar," she leapt in, before he could finish his sentence.

"As I've said more than once, by that argument Old Trafford is an open-air blouse shop," Snape said, sneering but not looking her quite in the eye.

Bar, musical venue, or therapeutic centre, Hermione had decided The Gypsy Tea Room was the ideal location for confronting Snape, though technically they weren't in the Gypsy Tea Room but its larger sister, one street over, The Gypsy Ballroom. It was all the same difference to Hermione; Severus couldn't very run away if he was working, and he was more likely to keep his tenuous grasp on his temper if there were strangers watching.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, leaning across the bar in that boneless way of his. "Besides buggering the clear and precise use of language?"

He couldn't make anything easy, could he?

"I'd like to talk," she said, holding level despite her rapidly deflating sense of purpose. The entire business was already going poorly.

"About?" he asked archly, drawing the word out long.

Her answer was derailed by a young man stepping behind the bar beside Severus. He had dark hair, sheared close to his skull, and rippling muscles making a show of themselves under his tight black t-shirt. What would have been a perfect imagine of masculine pulchritude was marred by a pair of ears that stuck out like jug handles.

"Hey, Steve, this your old lady?" he asked, showing off a complete set of perfect white teeth.
Seriously, Hermione was sure she could see every tooth in his mouth when he smiled, and she
wouldn't be surprised if he had extras.

Severus looked at him, one eyebrow drawn upwards and a crooked frown.

"This is my wife," he drawled. "Dear, this is my fellow slave, Carl."

"Well, the boss is watchin' you two jaw while customers wait," the bartender known as Carl said,
wiping his hands on his half apron.

Snape's eyes flitted to a portion in the rear of the club and back again, but Hermione was unable to
pick out their destination.

"May I resume my occupation, dear?" he said sarcastically.

"Don't mind me," she answered him breezily.

In fact she preferred it.

And so she waited, waited and watched, as he poured drinks all evening and looked at her through
slitted eyes.

It wasn't nearly as dull as it sounded. She was more amused than she should have been by the
number of Muggles dressed as witches for the holiday.

From time to time, he pushed drinks, exactly the kind she preferred, fruity ones with lots of alcohol
and little paper umbrellas, toward her. More than that, watching him pour, mix and stir, was like
watching the pale shadow of the potions maker. His long hands were graceful with the bottles and
the multi-coloured liquids glittered in the dim light of the club. Hermione wondered if his magic
subtly, or not so subtly, affected the drinks he poured. After all, Millie's cakes were like something
elves baked, and Draco's roses grew and bloomed more in three months than Muggle tended
flowers did in three years.

Objectively, she'd never had a better tasting mixed drink than the ones served to her by Severus
Snape. Magical power like his had to come out somehow.

Or perhaps he was simply good at mixing things?

University seemed mundane in comparison. Nonetheless, she enjoyed it.

Besides, it gave her something to talk to Severus about, back when he used to speak to her.

Suddenly despondent, she laid her chin atop her fist propped up on the table and sighed heavily.
She was drunk, and she had every suspicion the bastard had liquored her up on purpose.

"I'm quite on the brink of falling in love with you, you know," she said to his back. The club was
loud, and she doubted he heard.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, turning around.

"I seem to be falling in love with you, contrary to my best judgment," she shouted, cupping her
hands to form a primitive megaphone.

Severus looked rather unsettled, which made her feel a bit better. Stephen, though, she needed to
remember he was Stephen Liston at work. And she was Jane. If she had a pen she would have
written their names together inside a heart on her frayed wet napkin.
What had he done to her drink?

She turned it over in her head; it wasn't really feasible of him to really do something to her drink. He didn't have any proper potions ingredients that she knew of, and even if he did, it would be highly unlikely he had stashed them away at the bar, just in case she turned up. Besides all that was the fact that no one despised love potions like Severus Snape, though he was by no means above a drop of Veritaserum in a captive's tea from time to time. Not to mention it would be a stupid mistake to do outright magic; they could get caught.

Severus Snape was many things, but stupid wasn't on the list. On consideration, she couldn't quite remember precisely how many drinks she'd had. She was simply drunk, then. She wasn't sure whether that was a relief or not.

Whatever thoughts may have occurred to her after that were lost. Hermione might have passed out directly after her protestations of impending love, or drifted off later but either way she regained consciousness well after closing time in the back seat of Severus' car.

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" the voice of the single worst driver she knew echoed back at her. It wasn't a question.

Hermione could see him in the rear view mirror, watching her right herself and wipe the drool from her chin with the back of her arm. She hoped he found it charming.

"Where? It's got to be..." she asked.

"Four thirty, a.m. which limits our choices to Denny's or the International House of Pancakes," he said. "Despite the inedible quality of the fare, I find either preferable to subjecting myself to the ministrations of Mrs. Bertolli. I would prefer Bellatrix Lestrange to Mrs. Bertolli, were the truth known; at least with dear Bella, one can always hope for death," he said lightly.

"You're chatty," Hermione said, feeling inane as she rubbed her eyes. Frankly, she was too preoccupied with trying to decide whether she hung over or still drunk to bother walking on eggshells.

"Fortunately for both of us, I was able to reach a rare state of equilibrium while you were embracing Morpheus. I have a sufficient amount of drink taken to ease any undue anxiety that might incidentally arise, while retaining full command of my self-possession," he said.

"Sounds lovely," Hermione said. The Severus Snape she knew didn't "retain full command of his self-possession" even when he was stone sober. He was more piss drunk than she was if he thought he was in control.

There was a rather pathetic pumpkin sitting on their table, its small flame sputtering.

Hermione neatly, if blearily, lifted the little sodden bag from her stained mug. It was already stronger than she liked her tea. The shabby little chain restaurant was reasonably clean and busier than she imagined.

Across from her, Severus was ripping his tea bag open and allowing the leaves to float freely around the cup.

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he asked as though he were her potions master once more, administering an examination. "What, in your esteemed opinion, constitutes, I believe your phrase was ‘falling in love'. Yes, I believe that was it. What does ‘falling in love’ mean to you?"
She couldn't complain that he was being indirect.

Hermione blinked. "In my defense, I was very drunk when I said that. I may still be somewhat pissed."

Snape's usual frown deepened. "So you rescind the statement?"

"No," she said, annoyed. "I was merely attempting to explain myself. For the sake of complete clarity, I believe my exact statement was that I am ‘on the brink of falling in love'."

"Which means what, Miss Granger?" Snape said, pursing his thin lips.

Hermione took a gulp of tea, her head swimming. He was probably constitutionally incapable of making anything easy for her.

"People," he pronounced it as though referring to some form of vermin, "use that word to convey a variety of meanings. It interests me to know precisely what you mean when you say you are ‘on the brink of falling in love', ‘in love with me' specifically. I would like very much to know what you meant when you said those words in that order."

"I meant that I fancy you quite a bit, and I could do quite a bit more than that given the opportunity." She pushed her hair out of her face as she said it.

"So, by ‘fall in love', you mean that you desire congress," he said sourly.

"No, I mean I find you appealing on many levels, and you're a bloody tease..." she said tiredly.

"Miss Granger," he said, taking her to task.

"Oh come off it," she said "Stop playing school master. Or is that what this is about?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, suddenly on the defensive.

"I think I have every right to inquire exactly when you developed a rather untoward interest in a student in your care," Hermione said, calmly bringing her mug to rest on the table.

"I despised you from the first minute you set foot in the great hall," Snape said.

"Oh really," Hermione said, smiling serenely.

"Yes, really. After a certain number of years with children, it becomes possible to look beyond the trappings of age and see the adult they will become. I knew from the moment I saw you..." Snape stopped short, perhaps it was that much vaunted self-possession in action.

"What did you know from the minute you saw me?" she asked.

"What sort of witch you would become," he said, so quietly she had to strain to hear him.

"And what sort of witch is that?" she asked.

His answer was a raised eyebrow.

"You didn't answer me. What sort of witch am I?" she asked. "Never mind, you don't have to answer, because I have another question. First, would you like to be loved, specifically, by me and second, what do you believe love is?"
"You answer first," he said.

"Happily," Hermione said. "I think, I might quite like being loved by you depending how you define the word. I've given the matter some thought..."

"Do tell," Snape said snidely.

"And I have come to the conclusion," she went on undeterred "that love, for me, would require that a man engage me on all levels, emotionally, intellectually, physically."

"What you're looking for is entertainment," he said.

"Don't be insulting," she said. 

"What if a man were to fail to meet your expectations? Say he failed to meet your sexual requirements, what then? You'd throw him over for the next shiny object to catch your eye for the high crime of being inadequate in the bedroom?" he said.

"Honestly, I think the sexual aspect would be the easiest to remedy," she said, taking a drink of her tea.

"You do?" he asked. "Your thinking is?"

"It seems obvious to me," she said, warming to the topic, "that if a wizard, if anyone really, is lacking, erotically, if he doesn't have the ability to make love to a witch adequately, it is simply because no one has ever given him a fulfilling sexual experience. Think about it. It is impossible to touch without being touched in return."

Hermione was a bit surprised to see a tinge of pink in Severus' cheeks and waved the approaching waitress toward them.

"Would you care for something to eat?" she asked him. "I am starved."

"The food is horrid."

"You've been here before?"

"I am something of a regular," he said sheepishly.

"What would you recommend?"

"I recommend not eating," he said. "If you choose to ignore my advice, the chips are nearly edible."

"I would like two orders of French fries, and two side orders of toast, please. Oh, and more tea," Hermione said, enunciating clearly to the waitress, then smiling for her to go away.

"Two?" Severus asked.

"One is for you. How would you define love?" she asked.

"I think your interpretation of the word is a perfect example of childish and puerile emotionalism," he said.

"So, you'd prefer to be yoked to someone with whom you had nothing in common whatsoever?" Hermione replied.
Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course not, but I believe that such commonalities are the very beginning of love, not the be all and end all."

"Go on," Hermione said.

"I believe love is a question of a mingling of fates," he said, tension rising.

"I don't believe in fate," Hermione said briskly.

"I'm not talking about Sybill Trelawney's claptrap. What I refer to is a merging of concerns. To find a suitable companion and make their welfare necessary to one's own, to further oneself and to further one's companion being one in the same in such a case, that is love," he said, his eyes fairly glowing with intensity.

"By that definition, you've been in love with me for some time," Hermione said, wondering vaguely where the waitress had got to, she was going to need more tea if she was going to make it through this conversation. "I'm not quite certain what I could do to show similar resolve."

"And why should you?" he said with a strange, dangerous flatness of tone.

Hermione blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The reasons for your appeal are self-evident. What remains to be resolved is an explanation of why a witch such as yourself would give so much as a second glance to a wizard such as myself." He took a drink of his strong, dark tea.

"Well, to start with you saved my life," she said, "which most women tend to find endearing."

Snape waved his hand dismissively.

"You like me," she said.

"Obviously," he said in exasperation.

"Most people don't," she said. "If I hadn't fought that troll in the girl's loo alongside Harry and Ron during first year, my only friend at Hogwarts would have been Neville Longbottom. I thought it would be better when I left school. I mean...I don't know what I mean." Hermione sighed. "Could I get some more tea, please?" she called to the waitress refilling salt at another table a few feet away.

Snape simply stared.

"Before everything that happened," she said, trying to find a way to put it, "in my other life, you know, it always fell flat with wizards when I reached the point of having to have some sort of prolonged conversation. I enjoy talking to you when you'll lower yourself to speak to me."

"And that matters exactly how much?" Snape said, not meeting her eyes but instead toying with a frayed bit of leather at the edge of his sleeve.

"You know what I'm saying. Don't play coy," Hermione said waiving her hand in mimicry of him. "Beside all that, you're brilliant when you aren't busy being nasty. Not just intellectually, I'm referring to magic, grace: a perfect synthesis of power and understanding. You are absolutely glorious when you don't spoil it by being a cunt. I suppose the simplest way to put it is that I like you."

She didn't know when she'd seen Snape look so very uncomfortable, though she wasn't sure if it
was from the insult or the compliment.

"So," she said, watching the waitress approach with their order, "I've taken a small step toward marrying our fortunes; I've ordered for you in a restaurant. The next question is whether you are really so uninterested in sex."

Snape blanched visibly, but said nothing.

"You said you weren't a virgin, I'm willing to assume you were telling the truth," Hermione said, as the waitress shoved the steaming plates onto their table.

Snape looked from the waitress to Hermione and back again.

The waitress looked so bored as to be practically inanimate. Hermione busied herself for a moment piling her chips atop one of her slices of toast then dousing the entire business with a generous pouring of catsup before carefully lowering the top slice of bread.

"Catsup? No one on the continent seems to have the faintest notion what MP sauce might be, so needs," she offered. "I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable, but I think we should discuss this. I am more than willing, I am eager to commit to forming a serious, long-term alliance, but you have to make concessions as well. Discussing uncomfortable subjects is at the top of the list."

"Are you interested in anything other than sex?" he said, sullen.

"As a matter of fact I am," she said. "I would also expect you to talk to me about your past and, occasionally, your feelings."

"Do you require that I enjoy these discussions?" he said, tearing a piece of toast in half.

"That is entirely up to you," she said cheerfully.

"Anything else? Would you like me to juggle as well?" he said, shoving a piece of bread into his mouth and chewing with a great show of annoyance.

"Can you juggle?" she asked.

"Under duress," he said. "Do you really think I'm magnificent?"

"If I didn't, would I go through this much trouble on your account? You are quite a pain in the arse," she said, biting into her food.

"Point taken," Snape nodded. "Turn about being fair play, may I ask you uncomfortable questions from time to time?"

"Absolutely," she said swallowing a mouthful of tea. "For the record, before you torture yourself wondering, I have slept with a grand total of 22 wizards since fourth year, but none of them excite me half as much as you do."

"I have had six women," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

"All Muggles?" she asked, his curt nod confirming her suspicion.

"Any of them more than once?" she asked and was rewarded with an unambiguous shake of the head. She could well imagine how these encounters must have gone. He would have been magnetic, and perhaps even suave, until it came to the act itself, leaving some poor Muggle to wonder what sort of train wreck she'd been a party to.
She looked across the table. His eyes hadn't left his plate in some time, and by the look of him, he was doing some sort of deep breathing exercise. She took the opportunity to look him over. He blended quite seamlessly into the Muggle world, but Muggle or Wizard there was an inherent feeling of intensity that radiated from him. She knew he was not exactly the happy-go-lucky sort, and it gave her a certain amount of both thrill and trepidation, not unlike the day she'd received her Hogwarts letter. Whatever else he might be, there was no way a romance with Severus Snape could help but be a great adventure.

"We're agreed, I will do my best to meet your definition of love, and you..." she said.

"By your definition, I have been smitten since Pomfrey fixed your teeth fourth year," Snape said, not looking up.

Hermione had no idea how she was supposed to respond to that. Her best solution was to extend her hand to him across the table. She wasn't sure he even saw it until he locked it quickly between both of his. Looking up at her suddenly, he caught her in that black-eyed gaze of his. How could Muggles not believe in the existence of magic when it poured off Severus Snape like smoke?

"Under the circumstances, I do not believe it would be unreasonable of me to ask for a kiss," he said. It could have been light but no, he hissed the words as if he still expected to be rejected, or worse, mocked.

Hermione was taken aback by the simplicity of the request.

"Not here, of course," he added hastily, "later, in the car."

Then it was Hermione's turn to nod.

As it turned out, after a few awkward moments and minor adjustments, snogging Snape in a parked car wasn't half-bad.
In a Mercury Grand Marquis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a Mercury Grand Marquis

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Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise

--Percy Bysshe Shelley

--An Exhortation

It turned out to be rather more than a single kiss.

In a car with cracked upholstery, the sun rising like a spectre over the city, Severus Snape had Hermione Granger in his arms. Her shrewish and unstoppable little tongue had insinuated itself into his mouth. He lost himself in her brown bramble of curls. He was intimately aware of her soft hands with their close bitten nails as she held him to her. As if he had any intention of getting away. No witch, no woman, no person, had a right to such soft supple skin. He inhaled her smell as she kissed him, not only the smell of good clean soap tinged with sweat but the unmistakable smell of aroused female.

Her cunt.

He could smell her cunt getting wet as they kissed. Every sensory nerve in his body sprawled open and hungry, wallowing in the feast of her. There was nothing else in the world to him for that time but Hermione Granger.

He was drowned in her and drunk on her, full of her, yet hungering for her all the more.

He would dream of this when he lay rotting in his grave. Her little moans of pleasure were like exquisite daggers in his heart, any more and his very being would break open.

One last melting endless kiss and...

He shoved her off him and onto her side of the car.

"Wha..? Severus, you've got to stop doing that," she said.

"It was wise," he said, blinking.

"It was rude," she said, straightening her clothes.

Severus inhaled sharply, feeling for his bearings. "Had I not put a stop to the proceedings, they would have ended soon enough, quite of their own accord."

"I see," Hermione said in that maddeningly arch way of hers. "You could make an effort to be less abrupt."

"I suppose," he said with a frown, unwilling at that moment to detail the vagaries of his sexual response.
Unsure what to say, he scowled.

Hermione scowled back, and something in his gut plummeted. He was grinding his back teeth and searching for scathing words when Hermione's lips broke into something that was not quite a smile.

"I'm not angry," she said. "I do wish you'd stop shoving me. All you have to do is ask me to stop."

"Indeed," he said uncomfortably. He was fairly certain there was a suitable course of action given the situation; he simply could not, despite a feverishly searching brain, reason out what it was.

Hermione only gave him that curious stare of hers. It took him a moment to catch the gleam of mischief at the heart of her gaze.

"If you have any doubt, why don't we try it? I'll kiss you, then you tell me to stop and if I don't do as you say, you're allowed to push me across the front seat again, fair enough?" she said.

Without awaiting his response, she bestowed on him a kiss so gentle, so clinging, so sweet, so tenderly lingering that a diet of them would have been enough to sustain him.

"Now tell me to stop," she whispered into his ear.

Relaxing into her lips, he complied. "Stop," he murmured, reaching inside her top and rubbing the flat of his palm against the hard nipple of her right breast.

She released him with obvious reluctance.

"Shall we try again?" she said, raising a playful eyebrow at his hand still inside her clothing. "To be certain?"

He pulled her back onto him, his free hand in the snarl of her hair. It was a bad idea, getting worse.

"We must, in all seriousness, curtail this activity before it ends badly," he muttered into her neck.

"Right, then," she answered softly, but instead of extricating herself, she simply went limp atop him.

"You realize too much pleasure can, at a certain point, become uncomfortable," he said, suddenly inexplicably hoarse, trying to shift her away, though his erection was of the opinion that she should stay precisely as she was.

"Only if left unresolved," she said seductively, stroking his side.

By sheer dint of will Severus Snape kept himself from whimpering, but his hands reflexively balled into fists. He shut his eyes tight against whatever she was going to say. "I can't... I... it won't... possibly..." He struggled against his own loathsome, stuttering mouth. "I am far... far too... aroused." The last word came out a rushed whisper. He was caught between the ache settling into his testicles and a frantic voice in rear of his brain screaming dignity, maintain some iota of dignity at all cost.

"Me first," Hermione said, allowing just enough space between their bodies for her purpose.

Severus had yet to open his eyes, the option of complete annihilation still too close, so he was a bit surprised when he felt her lead his hand into her knickers. His fingers in the damp narrow space, a place of cotton cloth and tightly coiled pubic hair; this was, without question, the best day of his
Lucky, lucky, lucky, echoed in his head. Don't make a fool of yourself - came on its heels - one wrong move and she'll mock you forever, or worse, laugh behind your back.

He tried to slip his finger into the viscous slit, but she held him fast, circling and stroking the clitoris. He assumed that's what she was doing; his head was too muddled to be sure of much. After a moment, he was able to stop his thoughts racing sufficiently to pay attention to the way she was moving his hand and flutter his fingers appropriately. He earned a moan of pleasure from her.

"Don't stop," she ordered in a voice he had never heard her use before. He opened his eyes to see Hermione, her eyes heavy lidded, pupils dilated, breathing hard, hips rocking against his fingers. He increased the speed and intensity of his fingers against the seat of her pleasure and watched, fascinated, as her face contorted in ecstasy.

This was easier than he'd imagined, the key was simply to gauge her arousal and respond in a similar rhythm and pressure. He won some small internal victory when her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Harder," she said, fairly crushing his hand between them.

In a moment of inspiration, he slid his hand down a bit, his fingers curving into the mouth of her sex and his palm grinding the clitoris.

In the split second it took him to achieve the manoeuvre, she began to convulse, shoulders and head thrown back, lips parted. He understood, objectively, that she was reaching her climax, but it was strange to him, and he had to remind himself not to stop as she thrust madly against him.

The part of him that called for dignity licked its lips. He had successfully induced a female to orgasm. It wasn't so very difficult after all. He wondered vaguely if he had failed with others because they were Muggles. The other part of himself, the one that whinged and manipulated and cheated in a desperate ploy to get what he had coming, wondered if he could get her to suck him. It wasn't outside the realm of the possible.

Absolutely not! Dignity forbade it. He'd ejaculate as soon as she wrapped his lips around him. Cunning agreed that, on closer consideration, when fellatio did occur he didn't want the proceedings cut short.

She collapsed in the crook of his arm like a winded racehorse, her pretty face obscured by her wild tangle of hair. Was she satisfied? He couldn't see.

Carefully he parted her mane, half expecting thorns to prick his finger. She was exquisite in her languor.

"You are a lovely girl," he said, his own reverence surprising him.

She smiled at him. It was a curious sensation and a curious position, a satiated witch grinning up at him and his cock reaching levels of turgid discomfort he hadn't known existed. Like a contented cat, she all but purred as she stretched, gliding her body over his. Bloody exquisite and bloody hellish simultaneously.

"Tell me what you'd like," she whispered, running her tongue along the rim of his ear.

What would he like? It seemed he had been wondering that himself, but now it was going all muddled again. His brain was hard pressed to come up with more than single words; she was going
to have to fuck him or kill him soon, he didn't care which, the two were practically interchangeable.

"I don't know," he murmured, perhaps the most honest words he had ever spoken in his life. Her hands cupped his face.

"I could bring you to ejaculation manually," she said, sounding like the most erotic text book he had ever read, "but I do have condoms in my purse. I bought them before I came to the club last night."

Severus breathed deeply as both terror and delight seared his senses

"Condoms?" he repeated dumbly, then cursed himself.

This was the true power of witches, Severus thought, not only to destroy, to suck the power out of you, but the power to make you want it, crave your own loss above all things.

They said it was just a little death.

"Don't expect..." Severus began, but Hermione hushed him.

"I understand," she replied.

"If it's any consolation, the second time should be somewhat longer," he muttered, wringing language from his brain like blood from a stone.

"Severus," she chided, touching his face.

"May I have the condom?" he asked trying not to sound strangled, but he was, he was tangled up in her as sure as if she were devil's snare.

After a moment's rummaging in her handbag, the thing was in his hand.

"The directions seem simple, but I've never used one," she said uncomfortably. What did she have to be nervous about?

"I have," he said, tearing the foil with his teeth and inhaling the acrid smell of latex. He unbuttoned his trousers with one hand.

For her own reasons, Hermione flinched a bit.

There was a moment of adjustment, Severus lying back as best he could in the close quarters of the car, and Hermione struggling to strip off her own clothes, the bottoms at least.

With attentive study, he pinched the air out the tip and unrolled the thin skin of plastic knowing full well she was watching him. It was a bit tight.

Then, so slowly he thought perhaps she seemed a bit afraid, though that was highly unlikely, imagine Granger being afraid, she climbed on top of him. He watched, mesmerized, as she lowered herself onto his prick, the slippery squeeze of her beyond reckoning. He should have averted his eyes; it was too much. He wanted to wail in terror or in triumph, he didn't know which.

Hermione Sodding Granger was riding his cock.

She barely touched him except for the place where they were joined, barely moved, but instead balanced precariously, steadying herself with one hand on the dash board. He was grateful. Had she kissed him, he would have ejaculated before insertion was complete.
Now what?

On impulse he reached out and grasped her hands, lacing her fingers with his.

She looked him in the eyes. Palm to palm, gazing into her face, that was all it took. His cause was lost and the spasms overtook him. In its entirety, their union could not have lasted much more than thirty seconds.

Severus weakly searched his mind for some way to cut her low, lower than him, before slinking away to bind his wounds. They were not yet separated.

Then she kissed him, even more thoroughly than she had kissed him before.

Hermione broke the kiss, pulling back to get a good look at Severus Snape and feeling him slide out of her, slack and wet.

He looked pale and shaken. Notably more pale and shaken than was usual.

An internal surge even more powerful than she was used to after sex coursed through her body.

She had never taken a wizard of Severus Snape's calibre to bed before.

Well, not bed exactly. Prone in a car.

She felt utterly awash in conflicting emotions. On the one hand, she felt unreservedly brilliant. On the other, she had never known she was siphoning off wizards' magic during sex before. The notion of associating guilt and sex was completely new to her.

Prior to this she'd had splendidly healthy relations with wizards and, generally speaking, didn't care one whit whether she ever saw them again when she had her fill of them. Her unions were acrobatic and cheerful, with the emotional repercussions of a handshake.

Not that she didn't like the wizards she'd had sex with; they simply failed to move her in any way that didn't involve her clitoris. It was as though as each well-mannered and well-groomed young wizard brought her to multiple orgasms, her heart leaned against the doorjamb like Severus Snape, smoking a cigarette and tapping the ash on the carpet, turning up the collar on its leather jacket.

Tonight, or this morning rather, having what she knew objectively was fairly pedestrian sex with Severus Snape had, without question, been the most thrilling fuck of her life.

Why? Because he was such an undeniably powerful wizard? No doubt that was part of it, but there was a great deal more to her feelings than that. The very knowledge that it was Severus Snape looking at her, in turns anxious, elated, and adoring was heady. What sort of witch wouldn't feel it like a lightning bolt to have a wizard of his intelligence and power looking up at her, eager to please?

Her heart raced from more than the sex when he took her hands. It was strange, but she felt she'd never been so intimate with anyone as that instant, his large hands pressed against hers, every emotion laid bare on his face.

And it all took place in an old beater of a car, secreted away in a forgotten alley of Muggle city far from home.

It was both seedy and enchanting, which considering the wizard involved, she ought to have expected. She was starting to develop an appreciation for seedy. You never knew what sort of
complicated secrets it hid.

He continued to look unhealthily pale even as he pulled himself into place behind the steering wheel, tossing something melodramatically out the window. Oh. The condom. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse than carrying it home in his pocket.

She was looking forward to getting him properly undressed in a proper bed and having a proper leisurely shag, once he had a chance to recuperate, of course. She had the strange sense that she was only now, for the first time, getting a glimpse of Severus Snape as he was rather than as he appeared.

The idea of having him laid out totally naked before her was enthralling.

Hermione reached out and touched his surprisingly broad shoulder.

"Are you well enough to drive home?" she said.

He snorted. "No, you've drained me so utterly you're going to have to carry me into the house as well drive the car. If I persevere, I may barely be able to turn the wheel; perhaps I should sit on your lap so you can work the pedals."

Hermione rolled her eyes heavenward. She should have foreseen this sort of a response to a show of concern on her part. She began to take him to task but stopped herself. It never went well, the argument always escalated in ways both rapid and asinine and she was left with the vaguely unclean feeling she sounded like a young, childless Molly Weasley. What was a viable alternative? Agree with him? It was worth a try.

"And once you're safely indoors, shall I put you to bed with hot tea and extra blankets?" she said with a grin.

Miraculously, Snape smirked back, which made her ridiculously pleased with her own cleverness.

"Don't forget the chocolate biscuits. My weakened state requires chocolate biscuits, the ones with the jam in the middle, as well as," he paused dramatically, turning the ignition and bringing the engine roaring to life, "a foot massage."

"Absolutely, I'll have Draco give you one; it's not as if he has anything useful to do; he has such nice strong hands," Hermione answered.

She was even more pleasantly surprised when Severus Snape turned round and kissed her. She noted his technique had already improved markedly.

"Shit!" she said as soon as he released her mouth.

"How encouraging," he said, stepping on the gas and moving the car jerkily out of the alley.

"No, I wasn't talking about you. Shit! What time is it? I have an early class," she said. "Have you seen my watch?"

"You want to go to school?" he said blankly.

"I'll have to shower first," she said, diving into the floorboards to retrieve a glint of metal she felt reasonably certain was her watch.

Severus turned on the radio. Too loud, it hardly needed to be said.
"Perfect," she said, checking the time, "seven o'clock, that gives me two hours until class. We'll both have time for a quick wash."

Severus was still twiddling the knob and looking dour.

"You're not expecting me to skive, are you?" she asked.

"Don't be foolish, I am not yet so giddy with romance that I have mistaken you for the sort of witch who would choose sleep over calculus," he said, pulling a decidedly bedraggled cigarette out of his jacket pocket. They must have rolled over them at some point.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd want me if I was the sort of witch who feels free to neglect her education simply because she'd rather be in bed," she said.

"I see," he said, and in a moment of prescience to rival Sybil Trelawney, Hermione saw a sulk coming on.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger's daughter was made of sterner stuff than that; she had no interest in allowing herself to be coerced and manipulated by the moods of Severus Snape.

"On second thought, you're right; I should skive off. Perhaps I should leave school altogether, then you could quit your job and you and I could spend all our time in bed," she said cheerfully. "We most likely wouldn't even notice we were living on stale crusts of bread, with no electricity."

Severus Snape brought the car to a somewhat bumpy halt at a stoplight.

"Indeed," he said. "Point taken."

"So Severus," she said with continuing cheer, "it occurs to me how much you know about me and how little I know about you."

Severus took a deep draw from his cigarette. "You've lived with me for three months. You doubtless know a great deal more than you realize."

"I know how you take your tea. I know it's best not to speak to you for a good hour after you wake," she said.

"Both very pertinent details," he said, tapping his ash out the window.

"What's your middle name?" she asked "You clearly know mine."

"I had the advantage of being privy to your official documents," he said. "My middle name is fairly uninteresting."

"As uninteresting as Jane?" she asked.

"Nearly," he snorted. "Liston. Draco showed a singular lack of imagination when it came to devising our new identities."

"Is it a family name?" she asked.

"Hardly," he said.

She waited for more but nothing came.

"Care to elaborate?" she asked.
"No," he said, tossing the butt of his cigarette out the window.

"May I ask why?" she said with naked curiosity.

"Certainly," he answered and cleared his throat. "This morning is coming perilously close to good; I refuse to mar it with a discussion of the naming practices of the wretched beings from whose ill advised union I sprang."

"Fair enough," Hermione said, and it was true, it seemed like perfectly reasonable position on his part, which nonetheless made her all the more curious. He behaved as though he'd been named after a family pet or as the result of a wager in a pub.

Still silence stretched as tense as a rubber band.

"Have you done your homework?" Snape asked uncomfortably.

She knew he was grasping for conversation, but it was both insulting and silly; spurred on by her earlier triumph at defeating Severus' urge to start a row, Hermione answered him in kind.

"Four days ago, Professor," she said, folding her hands in her lap primly.

He chuckled, and in a gesture that seemed to take place in slow motion, he stiffly extended one long arm toward her. She didn't quite grasp what he was doing until the appendage wrapped itself around her shoulders and drew her to him. He put his arm around her.

After the initial shock, she found it pleasant. She had never been seized by the urge to cuddle a wizard and no one in their right mind would describe Severus Snape as cuddly, but under the circumstances she gave in to her desire to nuzzle his chest.

In reply, he made a low moan of pleasure Hermione had previously assumed he reserved specifically for top-notch sweeties and the first cigarette of the day.

She settled smugly into the crook of his arm, going through her coming calculus lesson in her head.

They drove home that way. Severus sang along with the radio. The song was one she didn't recognize.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Appropriation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Appropriation

Disclaimer: The principle characters in this story belong to Mrs. Rowling; she may want to have them dry cleaned when I'm through with them

"You wanna marry somebody?"

"No, I just want a wife."

"Good idea."

"You know any?"

"I know one wife," Rhett said. "But she's married."

"All the wives I ever heard of are married."

"I could use one myself."

"Really? You don't look like it."

"That's what the wives say."

I considered that a minute, and then I said, "We may have to find us some unmarried ones."

"Would they still be wives?"

"Not unless we really screwed up."

--- A Guide to Western Civilization or My Story

By Joe Bob Briggs

Draco didn't crawl out of bed until well after Millie had made her bustling way to work. It was Draco's firmly held opinion that the only excuse for being awake at such an unsanctified hour was that one hadn't been to bed yet. That didn't keep Mrs. Malfoy, or rather Mrs. Black as she was now known, from rising at a wretched, dark hour whether she worked or not. She usually sat up after he'd fallen asleep as well. Millie'd always had the constitution of a force of nature, so he supposed it was like expecting the driving rain to spend a solid eight hours in bed.

Draco, for one, needed his beauty sleep. It was annoyingly difficult though, living with other people, coming and going as their schedules dictated, to stay sleeping past seven. It was horribly unfair, if you asked him. It wasn't as if he had any reason to get up before ten. Yet Millie never made any effort to take his needs into account when she was rattling around, dressing and having her tea in the mornings, and Snape took even less care when he came in.

Draco gave up sleep as a lost cause when the sound of the shower woke him yet again.

It had to be Granger in the shower. Snape preferred to bathe in the afternoon before picking
Granger up from class. It was pathetic really, a wizard like his godfather pine after a Mudblood, even one as tolerable as Granger.

Draco wasn’t sure how he felt about Granger. She was better now that she was culled from the greater herd of Gryffindors, but something intangible was lacking if she wasn’t interested in Severus. It offended his sense of rightness for Severus Snape to walk around sullen and unrequited.

Draco pondered the conundrum as he found his dressing gown and made his way to the kitchen. It stood to reason if Granger was in the shower, Severus was in the kitchen, having or making a cup of tea, which would save Draco the trouble of making his own.

As if he'd foreseen it in a crystal ball, there was Severus, and there was the kettle on the fire. Something was off about Severus though; he was leaning backwards against the icebox with his eyes closed. On closer inspection, he had a look on his face Draco would have called serene if he'd seen it on anyone else.

On Severus it was unnerving, and most likely a sign of the final stages of despair. As if he were practicing for his death mask. The far corners of his lips curved upward almost imperceptibly.

"Mudblood got you down? She doesn't deserve you if you ask me," Draco asked, hoping to cheer the poor bastard.

Perhaps he should have chosen his words more carefully, because the next thing he knew, Severus' eyes flew open and he advanced on him in that way of his that made him hard pressed to keep his bladder under control.

If Draco whimpered, it was only because he was afraid for his life. He knew, realistically, they were more or less the same size, but he couldn't help feeling like a particularly clueless firstie who'd offended a seventh year in some heinous way. Severus Snape could grind Draco Malfoy to dust, with or without magic, and they both knew it.

Unsuccessfully making himself small as Severus loomed over him, Draco opened his mouth to apologize quickly and sincerely, when his intimidator plunged his forefinger into Draco's mouth.

That was unexpected.

It took Draco a moment to get over the shock and realize the finger in question had a decidedly tangy flavour. He wanted to blink, but for some reason found himself unable to break eye contact with the wizard standing over him.

A shiver ran through Draco when Severus smiled, broadly this time.

"Does that taste muddy to you? Because I had it in her cunt not half an hour ago," he said in a pleasant voice that chilled Draco to the marrow of his bones. "Call her Mudblood again and next time I'll stick it in her arse before I give you a taste."

Draco heard a small frightened animal noise he would later be ashamed to admit came from his lips.

"Have I made myself clear or do I need to carve it in the side of your skull?"

Severus said quietly, which was all the more frightening.

Draco had never been so relieved in his life as he was when he heard Granger call to Snape from across the house.
"Severus," Hermione called, sticking her head as far she dared out the bathroom door without dripping shampoo onto the hallway floor.

She didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her to invite Severus to join her in the shower until her head was covered with shampoo.

"Yes?" he said expectantly, leaning in, one arm braced against the doorframe.

"Would you care to join me?" she asked.

Snape tilted his head, birdlike, as if not sure what she was asking him.

"You do need to wash either way, and I'd like to see you naked," she said brightly; she hoped it was brightly, at any rate. This was going to be her new tactic, ask for exactly what she wanted as soon as it occurred to her she wanted it.

Snape threw a pointed look over his shoulder at Draco and stepped into the bathroom.

Later she wouldn't recall the fact that he had blocked the showerhead, nor would she dwell on the uncomfortable moments that stretched as he undressed.

What did stay with her was how graceful his body looked, long limbed and pale skinned, that first time he stripped bare before her. The muscles of his back and shoulders and the backs of his thighs, the small paunch of his gut were fascinating to her. He reminded her of nothing so much as a certain crucifixion painting she had seen at the British Museum when she was small.

She wasn't the sort of person who normally obsessed over paintings but it had held a place in her memory because her mother had covered her eyes, on account of the gore, she supposed. For that reason alone, Hermione had struggled to peer through her mother's fingers, studying the painting with all her pre-school powers of observation. The blood had disturbed her less than an anvil on a cartoon character. What stayed in her mind was the soft muscularity, the long white arms and legs.

Only the figure in the painting had worn some sort of loincloth. Had Hermione been the subject of a religious sort of upbringing, she might have thought it vaguely blasphemous, but what Severus Snape had between his legs never would have fitted behind a loin cloth, not without either peeking out the bottom or spoiling the artistic drape of the fabric.

His cock was every bit as oversized as it had felt inside her. It matched his aggressively broken and rebroken nose.

Nothing about him was the least bit ideal, and yet he reached some sort of perfect gestalt of Snapehood that made Hermione's knees feel perilously close to buckling.

Reminding herself that she had a class to get to, Hermione forced herself to take up the soap in one hand, her washcloth in the other. Without thinking, she began soaping Severus' stomach, surprising both of them.

He started a bit, then held her hand as it was.

She knew, first of all, it was too soon to have sex again. She would be taking advantage of his desire and weakening him. Secondly, she didn't want to be late for class. None of that stopped her from wanting him a great deal.

Not sure what else to do, she continued soaping the fronts of his thighs. She had time for that, certainly, and she had asked him to join her.
His long black eyelashes, probably the most objectively attractive thing about him, fluttered.

Looking him over, she caught sight of a thick scar running up the side of his leg.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, running one finger along the jagged white line.

"Three headed dog," he grunted.

Fluffy.

She remembered hearing about that from Harry. "And this one?" she said, tracing a line that wrapped around his right side.

"Are you purposefully attempting to make me feel like a piece of meat being inspected for public consumption?" he said, opening one eye.

"I'm sorry." She grimaced. "There's just so much I'd like to learn about you."

The fingers of her left hand walked gently up his sternum.

"Granger," he growled in a way that seemed to encompass endearment, frustration, and amusement all at once, a lopsided grin coming over his face she would have called silly on anyone else.

She put her arms round him then, keeping her touch purposefully light and gentle.

"I have desired this for so long," he whispered into her ear, remaining as he was, still and passive except for the fact that his cock was prodding her belly.

She turned a bit to look him in the eye.

"You are everything I knew you would become," he said, lifting a hand to touch her face, "and more. All I have desired for so long."

"How long, Severus?" she asked, the question that was both repellent and fascinating. "How long have you wanted me?"

His expression was both embarrassed and flirtatious. "I believe the proper answer to your question is... I never had a Miss Granger inspired wank until after your bubbies came in."

"So 13?" she said skeptically; she could not help the fact that she was not quite as amused as he was.

"Fifteen, actually," he chuckled. "Before that, they were rather too much like a set of radio knobs to be appealing."

He was rather fond of tuning the station to be so dismissive, still Hermione felt driven to follow the conversation along its logical path. "So, had I come to you when I was 15 and made you an offer..."

"I would have shown your delectable young backside the door and then assigned a detention with Mr. Filch," he said. "At least, I prefer to believe that would have been my course of action."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief at his answer.

"The headmaster would have had my guts for garters for playing slap and tickle with a student." He sighed sadly. "And the other one, my other master, would have been rather more harsh if I allowed
myself to be distracted by the pleasures of the flesh. It would have been a glorious thing to get away with, though."

That last part was more than a little unnerving.

"The water's going cold, and you still have shampoo in your hair," he said.

"Perhaps you'd better..."

"Yes, I'd better," she said.

A few minutes later, as she dried and dressed herself, she watched as he held his cock under the stream of cold water until it hung limp, but still long, between his legs.

When they came to the university, he parked rather than let her out in front of the building where her mathematics course met.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Parking the car," he said.

"Excuse me, why are you parking the car?" she asked.

"I thought perhaps I would escort you to class," he said, narrowing his eyes as an accusatory tone crept into his voice. "Unless you'd rather I didn't."

There was something going on in his maze of a mind that she couldn't quite grasp hold of.

"I imagined you'd want to be home and in bed as soon as possible," she said, picking up the pencil that had rolled off the top of her textbook.

"Not alone," he said, turning round to face her in a way that seemed to be looking for argument. "I rather thought I'd wait for you here."

"Severus," she said, "you do realize I won't be out of class until after noon."

"I'm well aware of that," he said.

"Suit yourself," she said. "It's going to be a long wait."

"Are you certain your concern is my rest?" he said, rolling out his words like oil.

"What else would it be?" she asked.

"Are you certain you aren't reluctant to be seen, in public, with me?" he said, hissing.

"Why would I be ashamed of you?" she asked, startled.

"Apart from my being ugly as sin and old enough to be your father?" He smiled a smile she'd seen right before heads rolled in the potions classroom.

"I'll have you know both my parents are a good twelve years older than you," she said, unlocking her door. "Besides which, you're hardly less attractive than Viktor Krum and dating him put me on the cover of the Daily Prophet."

Snape snorted.
"Well, get a move on or I'm going to be late for class," she said.

"Heaven forfend," he said, rolling his eyes and following her into the building.

It was odd walking beside him, his hands in his pockets, looking more shy than she had ever seen him; odder still the uncomfortable goodbye at the classroom door. She was not entirely surprised that he was no longer waiting in the corridor when her class was over.

Severus Snape was well acquainted with feeling a fair fool. He wondered what possessed him to hang about the door for twenty minutes like a lovesick schoolboy.

Ten points from Slytherin and detention for Severus Snape for embarrassing stupidity.

No, there was an answer to this, an answer that wouldn't make him feel like an adolescent... or an idiot.

When the realization struck, he felt like an imbecile for not coming up with it sooner.

Hermione was relieved to see Severus pull up in the car at his usual time in more or less his usual location.

Some dark, itchy part of her brain had put forth the idea that he was more than capable of haring off and never being seen again as the result of improper handling. She breathed a sigh of relief to see him smoking, making wide turns, squealing tires and screeching brakes, throwing obscene gestures at other drivers as he approached, and generally using the car as a surrogate swirling black cape.

Yet, as he drew near, cigarette dangling from his lip, something was different, but she failed somehow to lay her finger on it.

"Get in the car," he called, loudly enough that she could hear him clearly from her bench in front of the History Department. "I've something for you."

Once she was inside the car, two things happened simultaneously; she noticed what she'd failed to see before, namely that Severus was wearing a ring on his third finger, and he unceremoniously tossed its mate into her lap.

She examined it in her open palm. It was fairly shoddy; plain and thin, but it was gold; she doubted Severus could afford better without borrowing money from Draco. There was meaning to a ring he'd paid for himself. Especially since the day, some weeks ago, Draco had casually mentioned the beautiful black robes Severus had worn during Hermione's Hogwarts days had been a gift from Draco's father. On consideration, if he'd bought the ring, it was something of a first as far as she knew. She hadn't seen him pay in a Muggle shop since they'd come to America. The only thing he hadn't tried to get around, through magic or some sort of Slytherin chicanery, were Hermione's University fees and books. They were expensive enough, that he likely didn't have much to spare.

"Thank you," she said, not knowing what else to say.

Severus studiously avoided her eyes, pulling on his cigarette instead.

"You're welcome." He glanced at her quickly, then returned to some semblance of minding the road.

"Did you steal it?" she asked.
"No," he sneered. "I didn't steal it."

"It was a fair question," she said defensively.

"Perhaps, so... Will you?" He waved the accusation off like an annoying mosquito.

"We already are married in the eyes of bureaucracy," she said, holding the ring between her thumb and forefinger. She knew it wasn't precisely an answer, but then she didn't know precisely what he wanted.

"But are you willing to say the words?" he said stonily.

"You mean to say you want a wedding?" she asked, utterly befuddled by the enigma that was Severus Snape. "We had a long talk last night, and I thought we had reached an agreement..."

"We appeared at least to reach an agreement. Logically, a formal declaration should follow," he said, taking a deep drag on his cigarette. "If you aren't willing to say the bleeding words, you might as well have the common courtesy to put an end to it now and release me from my misery."

Hermione, it might be noted at this point, had just made her way through a very long and trying day. "Exactly what sort of misery are you in?" she asked.

"The misery of... you," he said tossing his cigarette out the window and immediately lighting another.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione said, wide eyed and clutching his ring in her fist.

"The misery of making a complete fool of myself every time I open my mouth to speak in your presence. The misery of wondering every second 'have I said something wrong?' 'Have I done something wrong?' 'Is this it?' 'Is this the moment when she decides to tell me I'm just not bloody worth the trouble and she's in the floo to Addis Ababa?" His hands waved never touching the steering wheel as he spoke and spit flew as the decibel level rose.

Hermione stared, agog. Yes, he was screaming, but he was screaming about his feelings, which was something quite new in her experience with Severus Snape.

He finally grabbed the steering wheel and jerked the car out of position over the centreline.

"What have you got in mind?" she asked, trying not to encourage his fit of temper by noting it.

Instead of answering, he cut across four lanes of traffic and pulled in to the parking lot of a nearby petrol station.

For his next act, he turned off the engine and studied the TEXACO sign for several moments.

"If you mean to do right by me, you will say the words with me, here and now," he said tightly.

"You wouldn't rather have a witness?" she asked.

"Your conscience is witness enough; unless, of course, you believe it insufficient for the matter at hand," he said in that touchy way of his.

"Right, then," she said. "Give me your ring."

She turned toward him as best she could on the bench seat with her books stacked between them. He twisted himself round to face her, still smoking.
"Put out your cigarette," she said, "and give me your hand."

Severus sneered but complied.

"With this ring I thee..." she began, only to be interrupted.

"Nonononono," he said clearly disgusted, enunciating each negative, "start at the beginning, the rings come after. Haven't you ever been to a Muggle wedding?"

"Two," she said, perturbed, "both before the age of eleven. I don't know why you expect me remember the vows."

"It is part of the culture you were born to, basic social literacy includes..." he said, but she was not prepared to sit through a lecture on Muggles from Severus Snape.

Hermione emitted a groan of disgust. "As much as I'd simply adore a rehashing of my third year Muggle Studies class, I was under the impression we were exchanging vows."

"I will begin, since you obviously need instruction," he said, taking both her hand and the ring brusquely.

"I, Severus Snape, take you, Hermione Granger, to be my lawfully wedded wife." At this, his grip on her hand softened a bit. "From this day forward, to have and to hold, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live."

Hermione was not at all certain Severus' version was exactly the Church of England standard, but it hardly seemed worth the quibble; she wasn't sure what the point was except that Severus wanted it. It didn't offend her; at worst it seemed funny of him. There was nothing he had ever done in the time she'd known him to lead her to the conclusion he was secure. Still he wanted to trust her, clearly, and just as clearly he needed some sort of promise that he deemed worthy. Really, it was sweet in an utterly demented and depraved way.

"I, Hermione Granger," she began, "take you, Severus Snape, to be my lawfully wedded husband, from this day forward, to have and to hold, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live."

Severus cleared his throat before going on, that rich intoxicating voice of his sounding like that of a mere mortal for the first time she could recall. "With this ring, I thee wed, with my body, I thee worship, with all my worldly goods I thee endow."

He slipped the ring on her finger; it was a good fit.

A chill ran up Hermione's spine. He was right; a promise was a promise. This meant something to her precisely because it meant something to him.

Whether anyone was there to witness it or not, her promise not to hurt or abandon him was serious, whether she made it in a Cathedral or a petrol station parking lot.

She knew he meant it.

His word was as good as hers, and she knew it. If he'd been a little more his own man and a little less either Dumbledore's or He-Who's, they wouldn't be here now. It made her feel a bit like a Dark Lord herself, receiving his pledge like the rest.
She, at least, had his best interest at heart. As Hermione took his hand in hers and slipped the ring on his finger, she swore another pledge, a pledge to herself, to do right by Severus Snape, even if she had to put him in leg irons to do it.

"With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, with all my worldly goods I thee endow," she said, surprised by her own fierceness.

She pulled him to her for a long hard kiss, her textbooks pressed uncomfortably between them.

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Millie took the long way walking home.

She frequently walked miles out of her way exploring the city, because she could, and because, fond as she was of all the people living in her house, she had always been accustomed to time alone. She’d long ago realized she was incapable of having long drawn out thinks when people were in the same room, breathing at her.

Walking was nice: she could think, and she could explore Muggledom. It was almost as good as work. Nothing gave Millie flashes of bright ideas like being in dough up to her elbows. Mostly she came up with ideas about how the Muggle world was different and similar to the magical one at the same time.

Or, now that she had something to compare each to, how both might be improved.

Millie liked improvements.

She enjoyed discussing her thinks with Granger at the end of the day.

Sometimes, if it might affect Draco, he would join in. On his days off, Snape couldn't stay out of it either.

She also thought about things to do in bed with Draco, which was fun, because he was up for any suggestion she made.

Lately, she thought quite a bit about the baby as well. About holding it in her arms and suckling it. About laying it on her belly and the two of them laughing together. About it becoming a grown up witch some day. She knew in her bones it was a baby witch and not a little wizard, though she wasn't sure if it was a matter of magic or wishful thinking. The visions, of a wavy headed grey-eyed witch that came to her in the midst of zesting oranges, were becoming an almost daily occurrence.

It didn't matter. She'd know for certain when it came out. Dreams and visions were for shit beside hard reality and she’d rather not get herself set on them.

Fucking spectacular, now her ears were at it as well.

She could hear a baby crying, in a strange muffled way. She stopped walking in spite of herself and looked down at her belly.

No, it wasn't coming from there. She listened, carefully, it was quiet but definite and somewhere to the right. The alley?

The alley.
It was an odd place to hear a baby cry, a tiny baby at that. Sounded like a newborn. There was nothing for quite a stretch but businesses, pawnshops, liquor stores, bars, and often no one on the street but prostitutes and drug addicts.

It was the sort of area Snape would give her what for, if he knew she liked to walk through there. Too bad, it was none of his business; he wasn't her head of house any longer.

She was a grown witch, and the granddaughter of Black Alice.

It was coming from the alley.

"Fuck me!" she whispered, surprised when the lid of one of the bins, the big metal ones Mrs. Bertolli called "dumpsters", blew itself open magically.

Sure enough, under some sheets of newspaper, in with all the rubbish, was a baby.

She knew Muggles were mad from pretending half the world didn't exist, but throwing away a baby? What sort of stupid cow went through nine months of carrying a baby only to toss it in the end? What a waste of effort. Oh well, Millie had found it so it belonged to her now; finders keepers.

She climbed in carefully beside it. On inspection, "it" turned out to be "he".

Never mind, it wasn't the person from her visions, that was probably the baby in her belly then.

It didn't smell right, not like fresh clean blood the way a newborn was supposed to. Even under the rubbish smell, it didn't smell right. It didn't look right either, its colour was bad and its eyes were too big, and it had no fat anywhere. Millie sniffed again.

It was some kind of drugs. She couldn't tell which one, but she was reasonably sure Snape could. Without a doubt, he could make a potion to counteract it as well. If he couldn't brew at the house without risk, there were plenty of abandoned buildings around town where he COULD do it. Uncle Severus could fix baby right up.

Then it occurred to her, she hadn't magicked the dumpster open. The baby must have done it. Witches didn't sell fanny on Harry Hines. Not any way Millie could figure it. So this was a Muggleborn, like Granger. The little fella had saved his own life by throwing open the lid when she came close. Clever little bugger.

Quickly, Millie wrapped the naked baby inside her cardigan and climbed out of the bin. She raced home with a spring in her stride. Any day was a lucky day when you found a free baby in the rubbish.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora
Muddling Through

They'll look up- she with her brown
Innocent eyes as if
She'd just awakened from a kind of sleep
Him with a shaking back of his hair
(laughing soul of Satan mirroring his eyes)

-- The Lovers- Raymond Souster- intentionally misquoted

The last time Severus Snape had shared a bed with another person, it had been his fifth year winter hols, and Toby had been in the nick. Not exactly an unheard of occurrence. The only thing at all remarkable about the series of events was the dreary fact that one of his parents - he wasn't sure which, because each blamed the other - had sold his bed while he was away at Hogwarts.

Toby had been gone, not to be released until someone came up with the necessary funds. The floor had been cold.

They'd gone to his granny first. Liz Snape, not Mrs. Prince. The Princes wouldn't have pissed on Toby Snape had he been on fire, much less paid to get him out of lock up. As an adolescent, young Severus didn't have the common sense to understand that their disdain extended to the child of Toby Snape as well.

At any rate, Severus and Eileen asked Liz for bail. She swore she would have given it to them, honest, but she was getting long in the tooth, and she wasn't making ends meet as it was. In her profession, women her age just didn't see as much trade as the young ones. After they left, Eileen said she thought Liz was losing on the horses again.

He had to whinge, and call Eileen "Mummy", but she relented and let him into Toby's spot in the bed for a few nights, until she managed to squeeze a few bob out of a motley assortment of the old man's mates and scrape up the rest from fuck-knows-where to spring Toby. Then it was back to the cold floor for little Severus.

It was the story of his life really.

And now, now he was on a soft bed, with clean sheets, with his arms round a beautiful witch. Not simply a beautiful witch. The talented and lovely Hermione Granger, the sort of witch people assumed was utterly beyond his reach. Not only was she stunning and powerful, she was kind. Sometimes it surprised him that little birds didn't light on her finger while she was taking the rubbish to the curb.

He enjoyed talking to her about her schooling, so much so that, when he wasn't driven to distraction by the femaleness of her, he anticipated poring over her textbooks and seeing what sort of dialogue it would provoke between the two of them.
She was pretty. From her shapely legs to her heart shaped face. Nice to look at in a way that didn't have the telltale signs of some sort of a glamour.

Then too was the simple fact that all the people who had looked down on him in his life would be scandalized by the notion of her bestowing her favour on him. As if he were so lowly, his very touch would contaminate her. Or perhaps worse, as if he were some sort of lower form, some sort of beast, unnatural for even desiring the Gryffindor princess. Well, this particular princess seemed quite pleased to have a fuck with one Severus Snape. He almost wished Sirius Black were alive at times like this, so he could see him in bed with Granger. Stripped down to her knickers, in a single bed, asleep with her arms locked tight about him, his ring on her finger. Inwardly, Severus made a list of all the people he wished could see him now.

Oh, McGonagall would shit herself. He almost laughed aloud imagining the look on her face.

He stopped thinking and traced the curve of Hermione's breast with one finger, careful not to wake her.

Lupin.

Hermione was nearly half the reason he'd let it slip in the common room about the werewolf business. He recognized the way Lupin looked at her, because he did it himself. He'd be buggered if he let the werewolf bend her tender pity to his advantage, particularly since he wasn't at all certain whether Lupin had the same sort of scruples Severus himself had about letting a few more candles make their way on her birthday cake before he made his move. It wouldn't do. He had to be got rid of.

Lupin deserved to see Severus fuck her, just for the torment. He'd give it to her from behind, in the fashion of animals, to rub the werewolf's nose in it even more.

"Mine," he would say, "all mine and there's not a fucking thing you can do about it."


Dumbledore.

The notion tripped him up for an instant, and he was afraid to think it.

Defiantly, he closed his eyes and pictured Dumbledore, chewing on the corner of his beard, the way he did when he was playing at being fatherly and concerned. Then he pictured Hermione, stroking his face the way she had a dozen different times since the night before, eyes wide, lips parted.

See, old man. I can be loved. I deserve it.

I deserve to be loved by someone who is beautiful and good and cares, truly sodding cares for me.

Severus drifted off with these thoughts on his mind.

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Hermione awoke to the strange sensation of having her hand held in her sleep. Honestly, she wasn't accustomed to having her hand held at all. She was surprised at the contented feelings it gave her.

Her eyes still closed, she inhaled deeply. Severus smelled, aside from cigarettes, like a thing she could only describe in terms of what it was not. It was not unpleasant, or even very strong, but it
was male and definite and musky. At the moment, she had the silly thought she'd like to rub it on her wrists and dab it behind her ears. Slowly, she lifted her eyelids.

Yes, he still had the profile of a buzzard, but it seemed the profile of a very dear buzzard at present.

Unbidden, she felt herself smiling foolishly at him. It embarrased her a bit, and her grin widened at her relief that he wasn't awake to see her. He'd probably say something rude.

She closed her eyes again and reveled in the simple fact that he was here in her bed, that the two of them were speaking again, well, considerably more than speaking. She had bearded the lion in his den and emerged victorious.

Good God, he was sublime. Sublimely brilliant and sublimely stupid. Even asleep, lying beside him made her heart race.

Unexpectedly, he stretched, pulling her to him. In less than an instant, he shifted, rolled on top of her and held her hands over her head. He was smiling that crocodile smile down at her.

Never smile at a crocodile. That was the saying.

She couldn't help herself, she felt utterly young and foolish, but she giggled when he kissed the ring on her finger.

She didn't think she'd ever giggled before in her life. She stopped laughing when he brought their locked fingers down into her knickers. He was going to hurt himself if they had sex whenever the desire overtook them. Or rather she was going to hurt him.

Goodness, but it felt divine. If he'd only been with women six times before yesterday, that meant she'd already increased his experience by close to fifteen percent. People said all sorts of things about Severus Snape, but no one ever accused him of being a slow learner. He had that look, that look on his face that denoted nothing so much as academic fascination. He let her hand go and rubbed his thumb against her clitoris in a way that made the top of her head vibrate. Then a bit harder. Then altogether too hard.

"Too much, that's too much," she hissed.

"How is this?" he purred; his touch was like a hummingbird's wing beating and the singing in her head started up again.

"Good god," Hermione whimpered.

"I do have some experience with manual stimulation," he chuckled, "my own primarily." Hermione thought she was going to die. The image he'd placed in her mind of his hand around his cock made her whimper again.

"Have you any more condoms?" he asked breathily, his hair falling over his face.

She looked up at him, a bit worse for lack of sleep and drunk on sensation. He looked solemn and nearly handsome.

"You need a chance to recover," she said dumbly, trying to be noble.

"I am a grown wizard," he hissed, suddenly ugly and sneering again. "I killed Albus Dumbledore. Do you honestly think your cunt poses a threat to me?"
Hermione pulled away, pushing herself up on her elbows, now it was her turn to sneer.

"Weren't those Merlin's last words as well?"

How was it the two of them could go from giddy to snarling in a heartbeat?

A look close to fear licked across his face but then vanished. His lip curled.

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Severus, at that moment, was caught in a life and death struggle between his perceived sense of dignity and the need in his gut. Ironically, they both wanted, above all things, sex with Hermione. The conflict lay in how to achieve that aim. While the cowardly reason that powered his gut was ready to crawl on his belly in order to get his way, dignity called for something less jelly-spined.

Unfortunately, shouting at her was probably not an effective method of seduction or Severus would have had rather more luck with witches over the years. Indecision reigned.

"Fine, I'll take your word for it," she said in that stroppy way of hers, glaring daggers. "Now decide, would you rather bicker or fuck?"

Yet another reason she held him enthralled; Granger had a singular ability to cut to the heart of any matter.

"I'd prefer sex if it's all the same to you," he said with a sigh he didn't intend to add.

"As would I," she added archly, or as archly as anyone could who was wriggling out of her knickers.

"May I inquire as to the location of the condoms?" he asked.

"Bureau, top drawer, beside the socks," she said. "I prefer not to feel as though I am taking advantage."

"Then don't," he said quickly, moving to rummage through her drawers. "It's been close to twelve hours since our last union, not over strenuous for a wizard of my power. I dare speculate I've accrued enough magic in my loveless life that twice in one day will hardly kill me." As subtly as he was able, he made a quick visual assessment of the prophylactics; it reassured him to know all were accounted for, though he did not fully examine the fear behind his need to inventory.

"Good," Hermione said, an odd little sad smile on her face, "because I do rather want you."

"We are in agreement, then," he said, brandishing the condom at her as he neared the bed.

Then Severus hesitated, looking about Hermione's pristinely ordered room, the bright light; Merlin, a bed.

He'd done it in automobiles, front and back seat both, and public loos. Oh and yes, the first time against the wall of that club.

But he'd never had sex in a bed before. Or naked for that matter.

Now that the heat of the moment and the fuzzy head of first waking were past, everything around him seemed uncomfortably light and clean. He was at something of a loss as to what to do next.

It occurred to him he was painfully sober as well, which was also unique.
Hermione was looking at him with a rather curious expression on her face. He looked from her face to her tits, which were staring straight at him as well. And then it occurred to him how closely her current pose resembled that of a woman in the magazines he might or might not keep between his mattress and box springs. She was his own private pornography, lying there. That was definitely a sort of sex he had experience with, if years of wanking over pictures could be called sex.

She looked into his eyes as though she were looking into his very soul; he had the passing instinct to Occlude, but words tumbled out of his mouth before he realized he was speaking them.

"I should like to look at you," he said.

How asinine. Here she was, uncovered before him under bright light. I should like to look at you, indeed. What sort of moron said a thing like that? Severus Snape, apparently.

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Hermione Granger was a bit taken aback.

She had been penetrated in all of the pleasanter ways, and, for the sake of experience, she had also attempted a few that proved somewhat uncomfortable.

How was it then that Snape had the power to make her feel filthy, in an altogether exciting and, dare she say, fun way without laying a finger on her?

"Absolutely," she answered him, because he did seem to be awaiting some kind of reply.

Severus' black eyes were hooded, and his expression one she would have called vacant but for the fact that it wasn't. He came closer, and his eyes seemed to grow larger the closer he came. Being stared at by an open-mouthed, wide-eyed Snape sent a heady shot of adrenaline through her.

"Now touch your tits," he commanded in that classroom voice of his, the words incongruous beside the tone in which they were spoken; too bad her fingers had already gone, quite reasonably, to her clitoris.

She smirked as he made a little choking noise.

"That's acceptable as well," he said, sounding ever so slightly strangled.

"Care to have a better look?" she said as he stood at the foot of the bed staring, just staring as if there were words printed between her legs.

Decisively, she spread her wet labia. It seemed the next obvious step.

Severus Snape made a noise she could only interpret as a whimper.

Hermione grinned, feeling as though she had never been appreciated, never been admired, intellectually or physically, simply for herself as when she was by Severus Snape.

"Now you touch me," she commanded him.

"Here?" he said, leaning forward to slip one long finger inside her.

"Rub my clitoris, the way you were earlier," she said.
"Good god, you're stroppy," he muttered, following her directions, albeit with less finess than he had used earlier.

"Part of my charm," Hermione managed to squeak out as his redirected touch sent pleasure like electric jolts through her body.

It took precious little to send her over the edge to orgasm, as bright as the sun, like a kiss to every nerve in her body at once.

When she could speak again she asked him, "What do you want to do now?"

In the blink of an eye, he was on top of her, with all the weight and sensitivity of a machine press, his fingers inside her again.

"I want to put my cock in you. I want to penetrate you, here," he said pressing harder for emphasis. She was surprised when he pulled his fingers out of her vagina and pressed them to her sternum, "and here," then her temple, "and here."

Then she realized he'd been holding the condom clutched in his other fist this whole time.

"Lie back," he said imperiously. "I wish to see what I am doing."

She watched as he tore the wrapper with his teeth and unrolled the latex sheath onto his penis. He remained sitting up, watching, as he slowly brought his sex to meet with hers.

She had never been penetrated so deliberately; Snape's sensitive fingers parted her labia as if he were folding back the pages of a new book, his cock following in a way she could only describe as shy, which was for the best considering the size of him and the fact that she was still sore from earlier.

She wasn't accustomed to being sore, and she didn't care for the sensation.

She listened as he breathed in sharply through his gritted teeth. His sensitive forefinger went back to her clitoris.

"Is that acceptable?" he asked stiffly.

"It's good," she said, her voice strained. "It's very good."

He nodded, slowly pulling out of her completely only to enter her again, just as slowly as before, filling and stretching her millimetre by millimetre. A third, and then a fourth time, the same thing, just as slow, just as deliberate. His eyes seemingly fixed on his cock moving in and out of her. If she had to guess, she would say he enjoyed the sight as much as the sensation, perhaps more. Or perhaps he was taking in each moment of pleasure to the fullest. At this point, she hardly cared.

Severus Snape was the world's biggest tease. She was ready for him to fall on her and fuck her hard despite his size. She couldn't bear to be tantalised any longer.

Then she became aware of a strange sound like scraping metal, repeating itself.

She blinked.

Severus slid out of her, limp, and looked around in abject confusion and horror.

"Why the fuck do I hear an infant?" he bellowed.
She barely had time to throw on her robe before he stalked out into the lounge, her pink sheet wrapped round his waist and thrown jauntily over one shoulder.

There, in the Draco's arms, was a baby. An awful looking baby at that. To say Draco looked ill at ease would be comparable to saying the Venus de Milo had a hangnail.

"Where did that come from?" Severus said as though it was a flying saucer or an elephant's foot umbrella stand.

Hermione looked the baby over from a safe distance. Its eyes were too big. It had a funny sort of a nose for a baby, very pointed on the end. And it was very, very small.

"Millie found it in a rubbish bin on the way home from work," Draco said, wrinkling his nose.

"It's got to go," Severus said, holding his arms across his chest; somehow, without the black swirling robes, the effect was more petulant than intimidating.

"She needs to alert the authorities," Hermione said. "We need to alert the authorities."

That's what a person did when they found an abandoned infant or a lost dog; call the police. She made her way to the seldom-used phone.

Severus followed her, unplugging the cord at the base.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"The day I make contact with law enforcement officers of my own volition is the day..." he said as Millie walked in with a tray from the kitchen.

"What are you lot on about? Did Draco show you what I found in the rubbish?" she said happily. Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen Millie look quite like that before.

"Millie," Draco whinged. "I don't see how this is going to work. I can't take care of a baby. People take care of me, not the other way round."

"You can't keep it. It already has a mother somewhere, Millicent," Hermione said, trying to be reasonable.

"It doesn't look right," Severus said, curling his lip with disgust.

Hermione watched, as Millie somehow seemed to regress into the scary girl she'd avoided during her first train ride to Hogwarts. She was stony and implacable as she raised one finger at Draco.

"You're going to have another in six months time, so you'd better get used to not being the centre of the universe now, Draco Malfoy," she said, before turning to Hermione. "You said you'd help me if I wanted a baby."

"I meant your own baby, Millie, this..." Hermione tried to find words to sum up her misgivings about the ugly, screaming red thing in Draco's hands but was interrupted.

"This? This is a Muggle-born like you, and some stupid cow tossed it in a rubbish bin," Millie said, setting down the tea and taking the baby from Draco, it quieted down almost instantly. "Because she couldn't be bothered. Well I found him; he's mine now. My little wizard."

"How do you know it... he, I mean... How do you know he is a wizard?"
Hermione asked. She didn't much like it, but she had to admit that changed her feelings immediately. Turning a Muggle child over to the authorities made perfect sense to her, but magical child was something else entirely.

"I was walking down Harry Hines when I heard somethin'," Millie said, and the other three traded glances; they were familiar with Millie's freakish hearing.

"When I came close, this one here threw the lid off the bin. And not a little one... the big metal bins in the alley. Once upon a time, the villagers used to leave the Muggle-born at the mouth of my Gran's cave and tell each other she ate 'em. This isn't much different than that. I claim him. He's mine," she said fiercely.

Hermione scrutinized the horrible little thing. Something was definitely not right about it; Severus was correct. She gave Millie a good hard stare. She'd be very surprised if Millie needed her help with this, but under the circumstances she certainly wasn't going to oppose her.

"All things considered, you did the right thing," Hermione said.

Millie nodded sharply.

"And you, Snape!" Millie said, turning to the figure shaking his head across the room. "Something's wrong with him, and you can fix him, and don't tell me you can't. I know you've got a place, some abandoned Muggle place where you're doin' magic nobody knows about. Don't get on my wick by denyin' it."

Hermione turned to Severus, who had closed his eyes in what appeared to be embarrassment. "Each day I congratulate myself on my forethought in turning Black Alice down when she offered me your hand in marriage."

Millie rolled her eyes. "You turned her down 'cause I was ten."

Hermione watched Severus as he scowled. "It is a personal peculiarity of mine that I have no interest in bedding anyone whose nappies I've changed," he said, with a look that straddled boredom and annoyance. "Give it here."

In Severus' hands the baby began to cry again, quite a bit louder than he had with Draco. As far as Hermione could tell, Severus was smelling the baby, which she supposed made some sense for a diagnosing Mediwizard, which Severus Snape, she noted, was not.

"Congratulations, Millicent, this infant has been exposed to large amounts of cocaine," he said. "You're the adoptive mother of a crack baby. Prunie would be so proud."

"Why would Muggles give cocaine to a baby?" Draco asked, baffled.

"He received the cocaine in utero," Hermione felt compelled to explain to Draco.

"Yes, he was whelped by a Muggle drug addict," Severus said with that nasty smile Hermione was starting to suspect he wore when he was fighting the urge to scream. "It seems to me if your wife had allowed herself a minute or two of indecision before she dug him out of the rubbish, the point would have become academic."

"But you can fix him," Millie insisted.

"Yes, I can fix him; unfortunately I don't know of any potion that will do much about his looks. He will remain a very ugly baby; after which, he will grow into an equally ugly child," Snape said,
handed him back to Millie. He quieted right away.

"Look who's talking." Millie snorted. "Now that's settled, I need you two to put on your trousers."

"May I ask why?" Severus refolded his arms across his bare chest.

"Because I need you to drive me to Denton, and I imagine Granger would like to come as well," Millie said, rocking the baby in her arms.

"And you need to go to Denton because?" Hermione ventured.

"We've got to buy a goat. Draco's got the address written down," she said, as if they traded in livestock on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

"Why, pray, do we require a goat?" Severus voiced what Hermione saw as a fairly obvious question.

"To feed baby until my milk comes in," Millie said gesturing to her breasts as if Severus were an idiot for asking. "Then we either roast it in the back garden or keep it as a pet, depends on its disposition. I'd be very grateful I was born a wizard if I was you, Snape."

Then Millie seemed to truly notice the two of them for the first time. "Granger, were you two having a fuck?" she asked with a hint of wonder.

"We would have if we hadn't been interrupted," Severus said, morose as Hermione had ever heard him. "And you," he said, shaking his finger at Millie just as she'd shook hers at him, "are forbidden to walk anywhere in the vicinity Harry Hines Boulevard again. Millicent, you are to come straight home after work or I will... I will take you over my knee. You're not too old for a good thrashing."

Hermione tried to picture him making good on the threat. Laughable was rather an understatement. Hermione was torn between amusement and gratitude Millie didn't have a wand. If Severus continued to vex Millie, she wasn't sure lack of a wand would be much of an impediment.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
An Armadillo, A Goat, and You

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature.... Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

--Helen Keller

In the dim car, streetlights and restaurants whizzing past, Severus reached out and laid his hand on Hermione's thigh. Draco watched him by the dashboard light.

It was not a long way to Denton. An hour, perhaps. So about as far as it was to Maison Malfoy from London by broom, but it was longer than he was accustomed to spending in an automobile. Longer than he was accustomed to spending with anyone younger than the average firstie. After a period of silence, Draco finally spoke.

"You're really going to have a baby, Millie?" he asked.

"Shhhhhhhhh, he's almost asleep," Millie said, in a way that was annoyed without actually being angry. "I've already got a baby, right here," she whispered, "but I am going to have another in a few months."

"How many? How long? I mean, how many months, Mill?" Draco asked, still wrapping his brain around the idea.

"Six months, I reckon, and this little fella'll have a sister," she said, brushing the top of the baby's bald, but pointy, head with her hand.

"How did it happen?" Draco asked in bewilderment; they hadn't fucked any more or less or in a position that was any different than they ever had.

"It's sad that you need to ask," Millie said, humour clear, though she was still whispering and frowning.

"No, I..." Draco wasn't in the mood for teasing, particularly if he was the butt.

"Allow me to clear this up for you, Draco. As your head of house, I would have seen to your education years ago had I known your father was so remiss. When a wizard is particularly fond of a witch, sometimes he feels the need to express that fondness in a physical way..." Severus paused in dramatic mockery.

"So he buys a goat." Granger jumped in and joined the fun.

"Very funny," Draco said, not laughing; though he was the only one. He expected a certain amount of this sort of thing from Severus and Millie, but Granger usually stayed out of the Slytherin sport of ridicule. She abstained when Severus was the butt as well, but Draco didn't expect that was changing any time in the near future.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Granger said, still chuckling.
"My granny put a contraceptus in when she plaited my pubes; you mucked it up when you unraveled it," Millie said with a shrug.

"Did you have to say that in front of me? Are the two of you compelled to make me privy to every detail of your couplings?" Severus roared.

The baby started to cry almost instantly, and Millie poked Severus in the back of his head.

"What did you do that for?" she growled.

"If you would refrain from..." he growled back at her.

"I was telling the truth; it's no call to wake the baby," Millie snapped, interrupting him.

Everyone was quiet for a bit; everyone, that was, except for the baby, but Millie got him back to sleep in a few minutes.

Draco watched mesmerized as Millie fluttered her fingers lightly over the baby's closed eyelids and he began to snore softly. She ought to do that for him sometime, but then he never had any difficulty sleeping.

The baby was still ugly when he slept, but without the screaming he was easier to like, or think about liking at least.

"Do you think once Severus makes him his elixir he'll be quieter?" Draco asked, fingering the edge of the strange Muggle paper-and-plastic nappy he'd managed to locate at the store near the house.

"He won't be in pain; his withdrawal will be over," Severus said, keeping his voice low. "The drug's damage should be reversed as well, if administered in the next few days. More than that, I cannot promise."

"How many is a few?" Millie asked.

"Three, at most; should one prefer to err on the side of caution, I advise the elixir be administered within 48 hours. Unfortunately, I do have work to attend to," Severus said, and Draco watched as a silent sigh pulled at Snape's shoulders.

"You'll call in to work," Granger said, and Draco was relieved she made the suggestion instead of either he or Millie.

"I will not," Severus said. "I cannot. Not unless one of my co-workers can be coerced into taking my shifts. Still, I will need to begin brewing tonight to meet the deadline."

"Then ask them," Granger said, and Draco watched Millie's shoulder's hunch in a way that made him nervous.

"This may come as a shock, but I am not universally beloved among my fellow workers. We are currently short staffed, and I doubt any of them would choose to forego their days off on my account," Severus said, as if the entire thing was hopeless.

"Fascinate one," Granger said simply.

"Is this Hermione 'stop using magic to take advantage of Muggles' Granger I hear?" he said, his lip curled.

"I believe that's Hermione Snape, thank you," she said, and Draco wondered exactly what brought
"A child's health is rather more pressing than you not wanting to cough up two dollars for a packet of cigarettes," Granger went on.

"That's a splendid idea. Whoever I chose would be even more bloody unbearable to work with upon my return," Snape said, his tone softening. If she'd spent as many years with him as her head of house as Draco had, she'd know she had already won.

"Ask nicely first, if that doesn't get you anywhere, use magic. Which of the other bartenders dislikes you least?" Granger said, suddenly prim.

"Shakeleg, most likely; Albert Shakeleg," Severus said petulantly.

"Then we'll call Mr. Shakeleg as soon as we're home," Granger said.

"Is he a Muggle? That sounds like one of us to me," Draco said.

"Hardly," Snape snorted. "Albert is a Red Indian. I understand the name was originally Shake-Testicle, but it was altered by government agents."

"What for?" Millie asked suddenly piping up.

"Muggles used to be rather more... anxious about sexual matters than magic folk," Hermione said.

"Muggles certainly are queer, aren't they?" Millie said, tracing the baby's lips with a fingertip. Draco had never seen her so distracted.

"I'm not adding my own blood to the elixir. I refuse to forge yet another blood tie against my will. So one of you will have to do it. I am not," Severus hissed out, as though that little speech had been building up steam since he first saw the baby.

Of course, it would require that sort of a potion to repair the sort of damage that a drug would do to a developing baby.

Draco wasn't stupid, far from it; he was not, however, generally one for long soul searching thoughts. He wasn't accustomed to them, for one thing, having never found extended thought necessary before the age of seventeen. Staring at the horrible ugly baby, he had a thought come unbidden like a bellyache.

Draco had been bored for most of his life. Oh, there had been amusements: food, and games and diversions of all sort, but still, except for rare moments of Quidditch and the unfortunate Dumbledore business, he'd been bored to tears and hadn't even known it.

At the time, he only knew he was irritated and vaguely listless, and he'd thought it was simply part of his personality.

The truth was, pleasing Millie had been the first thing he'd actually applied himself to in his life.

Everything he'd ever laid his hand to before Millie had been carefully controlled and set up by one or both of his parents so that there was no chance of failure.

He was sure they hadn't meant it that way, but it cast an inconsequential light on all his endeavours. Winning hardly counts as winning, once losing has been taken off the table. As a Malfoy, it was almost as if the name guaranteed the results.
While learning Millie was hard, and it made his blood sing in his veins with excitement to please her, being in her Gran's wood was easy. Everything he might want or need was provided, and there were older witches and wizards looking out for him.

To be perfectly honest, living in Texas under the name of Nigel Black was the best thing that had ever happened to young Draco.

The closest thing he had to a parent in Texas was Snape, and Snape was no parent. His style could best be summed up by his old method of monitoring the corridors at Hogwarts.

The rule was no running in the corridors. Other teachers would shout, deduct house points, and try different charms to keep the students from tearing down the halls.

Snape, on the other hand, would rig invisible lines at changing intervals to trip the unwary.

No one ran in the dungeons.

In Texas, Draco started out with a house that was essentially a pile of rubbish.

He'd cleaned and painted and sorted, stripped and scrubbed; he threw out fifty-year-old periodicals and rubbed wax into mahogany.

He planted roses, mainly because Maison de Malfoy had rose gardens where he and his mother and father used to dine al fresco when he was small.

It had done something to him to watch the bare spiky stumps from the garden shop grow and twist and bloom for no other reason than him. He had felt the green life, quick and sharp, and he had called to it, drawn it out with something that was subtler than a spell and simpler than water. Like called to like. It had done something to him as well to breathe in the heavy air that in his back garden, thick as it was with rich verdant life, even smelled green. Just as it had done something to him to break Millie's disapproving glare into a grin.

Away from the complicated web of pureblood family, rankings, and ties, both blood and magical, there seemed so much more room to breathe instead of weighing every move looking for the mutual obligation. He doubted he was alone in the feeling. Still, it would be nice to have a bigger circle. A wizard needed some other magical folk about, or they wound up forgetting what was real and what wasn't. As far as he knew, sooner or later a wizard went utterly mad alone.

Had it only been the two of them, only he and Millie, they would have been too small an island and never would have remained as they were now, surrounded by Muggles but not mixing more than necessary; among Muggles, but by no means with them.

He found himself staring deep into the face of the awful baby. He felt, without trying, the life and magic rising like sap in the baby. That was one thing about living away from magic and unnecessary spells, it made you more aware of magic when you saw it.

He would be the father. Draco repeated the idea to himself; he would be the father. Millie would be the mother.

It would be like the roses. He would grow his children into something fine. He found the baby had opened his eyes and was staring but not crying. His eyes were huge and round. A tiny thin blue hand, not unlike a little translucent spider, grasped at his finger not quite able to grip onto him.

Draco suddenly recalled how weak and lost he'd felt when his father was taken away to prison.
I'll be your father, little wizard, he thought, looking at the little face. You don't have to be a Mudblood any longer.

"I'll do it, Severus, untwist your knickers," Draco said, right before Millie grasped him by the back of his head and kissed him like she'd never kissed him before. Draco felt as though a tiny sun was exploding somewhere behind his eyes.

Purchasing the goat was a straightforward affair and afforded Draco and Millie the opportunity to get a look inside a mobile home.

The consensus was, the inside was quite like the outside: a plastic and aluminium box.

"Arrrreeegggggg," Severus growled through gritted teeth.


"What is it now?" Draco asked plaintively.

"I missed the fucking turn off, that's sodding 'what now'; the bleeding wretch in the white Suburban wouldn't deign to let me in," he said between clenched teeth.

Hermione was trying not to mind the smell and pondering the peculiarity of riding home with a goat in her lap out of friendship for Millie when something bizarre streaked across the road in front of them. It looked like a cross between a rat and a dinosaur.

"Fucking shit!" Severus bellowed as the car swerved.

Hermione may or may not have had a similar response not only to the sudden sideways motion of the car but also the not inconsiderable issue of a cloven hoof suddenly pressed sharply into her sternum. The goat was caught somehow between climbing up her and clinging to her. It also seemed to be attached to her head somehow.

"What was that?" Draco said.

"Shit! This goat is eating my hair," Hermione wailed. One was, she was quite certain, allowed to wail when a goat was eating one's hair.

"Well, make it stop," Severus yelled, turning sharply onto a narrow gravel access road. "That, I believe, was an armadillo, a live armadillo, which is extremely fortuitous considering we have need of just such an animal for your son's elixir."

The car made a lurch into an open field, and the doors flew open, dislodging the goat from the side of Hermione's head. Not one to be left behind, Hermione made quick work of tying the rope about the animal's neck to the steering wheel and tearing off behind the others.

She had no idea Millie could move so fast. She must have taken the baby out of his carrier while Hermione was tying up the goat, because she was holding him close to her chest with both arms as she helped Severus and Draco corral the armadillo like some mad wizarding version of Rugby.

Unfortunately, each time either Severus or Draco attempted to make a grab for the thing it escaped,
necessitating another mad dash.

Hermione, being herself, had an idea.

"Severus, toss me your shirt," she called, slowly closing on in the most unguarded side of the triangle.

Severus looked incredulous, but he complied.

Taking his black t-shirt in her hands, she ripped the neck open that she might tie it back together more securely.

"What are you doing?" he shouted.

"Making a sack," she answered, "now drive it toward me."

Draco and Severus moved fast and the animal charged her, as expected, diving headfirst into her improvised trap. What was not expected was the strength of the thing; it was only through sheer tenacity that Hermione managed to keep her hold on the creature in the bag.

"How in the Hell are we going to bring this thing home?" Hermione said. Millie answered her with a look as puzzled as her own, so she looked hard at Severus and Draco. "And don't either of you dare suggest I hold it between my knees."

"This vehicle does come equipped with a boot," Severus said.

"The key to which we do not have," she reminded him.

"We are, however, miles from our home, in an open field, in a city with a sizable magical population," Severus said, archly. "The local Aurors are no more able to identify the performer of a given spell than those in England."

Now Hermione knew from her reading that wandless magic was possible, but she'd never known anyone who could do it with controlled and reliable results.

She made no pretence at not being impressed when the next words from Severus' lips were a lazy... "Alohamora."

With a sharp pop, the boot flew open accompanied by the most horrid stench she'd ever smelled in her life outside a potions class. The armadillo went still.

"Gah." Mille, who pregnant or not, had never been unwell a day in her life to Hermione's knowledge, turned a distinctly green colour.

There, in the boot of Severus' car, was a putrescent corpse. The smell everyone had supposed to be cat pee was, in fact, a variation on human death. And ammonia. There were two jugs of ammonia beside the semi-liquid corpse.

"Fuck me," Draco whispered.

Severus sighed; Hermione watched his face shift from surprise to disgust, which was practically his normal expression.

"The three of you get out of the way," Severus said with a wave of his hand.

"Four," corrected Millie, moving some ten meters to the east. "You forgot the baby."
"We're five if you count the armadillo," Hermione felt compelled to add, following Millie.

"Draco, get the goat," Severus said tightly. "Hermione, whatever you do, do not let go of the armadillo."

Hermione watched as he scanned the field for witnesses and accounted for each and every member of their little party. Then for a moment Severus stood taller and was in that second, shirtless under his leather jacket and hair at its greasy worst, transformed; the glorious epitome of every storybook wizard brimming with power.

He raised his arms dramatically and tiny sparks were evident from the tips of his fingers. Slowly, the body and its accompanying goo rose from the boot hovering mid-air; there was a brilliant yellow flash accompanied by an even worse, if such a thing were possible, burnt smell and a sprinkle of ash drifted across the field like grey snow flakes.

Hermione was sure she had never seen anything quite so splendid in her life as Severus Snape.

He strode to her, and she first thought he was going to embrace her, until he reached her side and relieved her of the armadillo, who struggled anew.

And just when she realized she'd never wanted to kiss Severus so much before.

"You do realize you've destroyed evidence of a murder?" she said, taking the goat's rope from Draco.

"Scourgify," he enunciated, pointing one long finger at the car as he held the squirming armadillo to his chest in a pose not unlike Millie's, "and now I've finished the job."

She knew he was right, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Quick as a wink he shoved the armadillo into the boot and shut the lid.

"Impressive," Hermione said, but she regretted it as soon as she saw the self-satisfied smirk on his lips. She wondered exactly how much of his display had been necessary and how much had been entirely for her benefit. He was so sodding theatrical.

"So I hear," Severus said smugly. "Had you spent slightly less time with your books and more on magical practicums..."

"I didn't realize you knew any cleaning spells," Hermione said pleasantly.

And Severus scowled and brought the car back to the access road.

"How do you intend we open the boot once we're home?" Hermione asked.

"Coat hanger," Severus asked. "Are you saying you weren't the least bit awed by my performance?"

"I never said that," Hermione answered him. "Of course I was impressed, but no one likes a show off. How many times did you tell me that when I was at school?"

Severus was quiet.

"It was wonderful, you were wonderful," Hermione said, only slightly muffled by the goat on her lap.
Once they were home, Millie cut Hermione's hair to match the place where it had been chewed by the goat. Relieved of length and weight, Hermione's once bushy tresses resembled nothing so much as a dandelion gone to seed.

Millie paused to curiously pull one tight corkscrewed ringlet; it ought to have made a sound the way it instantly bounced back into place.

Personally, Millie didn't use the telephone, but it fascinated her to watch other people do it. She could hear Severus in the hall, his voice echoing off everything, the way it did. Either he had gone mad and was talking to no one or he was using the telephone.

Draco held the sleeping baby.

Severus walked in and stood expectantly in the kitchen doorway.

"Do you hate it?" Hermione said, sounding strangely unsure of herself.

"It is hair," Severus said with a shrug. "I'm not overly concerned one way or the other. Had she hacked off a similar portion of your arse, I might have some objection."

Granger dusted a curl or two off her shoulder and snorted. "Thank you for your honesty."

"You're welcome," Severus said automatically. "I spoke to Albert Shakeleg."

"And?" Hermione said.

"I did not have to fascinate him," Severus said sourly.

"Lovely," Hermione said.

"However, he refused to cover my shifts unless I bring my charming wife to his home for dinner, Thursday after next," Severus said it as though it was some sort of prison sentence.

"That's wonderful, Severus; do you realize what it means? I think you've made a friend," Hermione said brightly.

"Wonderful," Severus repeated with a frown.

"No one ever invited me for dinner when I worked at the ministry," Hermione said.

"Their loss," Snape said, reaching his arm round Hermione's waist.

Despite the madness, Millie had the unreasonable feeling everything was going to be quite all right.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora
A Teacup Full of Goats Milk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Teacup Full of Goats Milk

All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer.

--Robert Owen

After a round of tea and jam on old bread accompanied by tinned sardines and somewhat past their prime oranges, courtesy of Severus while Millie tended the baby, Draco and Severus left to concoct the baby's elixir.

Draco was disgusted to see his Uncle Severus' hidden laboratory was in a port-a-loo in a sprawling suburban area. The charm suggesting no one wanted to go anywhere near the place was completely unnecessary as far as Draco was concerned.

Once he saw beyond the tip that was his godfather's laboratory he wished he hadn't. Inside was hardly better than outside. It was large enough, Draco granted, but the smell and the clutter made him shudder.

At the centre, connected by bright copper wires were ten tiny beating hearts, dove or pigeon, he guessed by the size of them. Gears and strange shiny metal shapes turned, and spun, and hummed. Wires ran into beakers improvised from old Muggle jars and filled with sparkling, smoking, bubbling, and sometimes seemingly frozen liquids. The same wires connected to strange unnameable things, to twisted puzzle shapes of stone and metal clicking together ominously. A ram's horn. A cuckoo clock. A discarded child's doll grinned maniacally inside a trap of springs. Together, it made a half-living machine. He rubbed his eyes to make certain what he saw before him was not a product of his imagination and poor lighting. It was still there when he opened his eyes.

There before him lay something so reckless, so powerful, so forbidden, he didn't know whether it was brilliant or the stupidest thing he'd been party to in his life.

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Closer to the city's centre, the two witches, one very small wizard and a pacing cat occupied a jewel box of a house, where wooden floors gleamed and perfumed cushions graced antique furniture.

"This has been a very strange day," Granger said thoughtfully, chewing the flesh on the side of her thumb the way she did when she was particularly absorbed in thought.

Millie had been thinking the same thing since Snape had opened the boot of the car but knew enough to keep her mouth shut while he and Draco were about for fear of alarming them.

"More coincidences," she said with a short nod, "than is coincidental, if you know what I mean."

"Precisely my point," Granger said holding out one finger. "One: Severus and I finally break the stalemate and... mate as it were."

"Not stale was it?" Millie couldn't help but say.
"Not in the least." Granger shook her head, and raised a second finger.

"Happening number two: You find a baby, not a Muggle baby, but an abandoned wizard in a rubbish bin."

Millie nodded. "Muggles do seem to like to throw things away, but that's excessive."

"Agreed." Hermione counted off a third finger "While we were buying a milk goat for the baby, we happened upon exactly the potions ingredient Severus needed to heal him."

"More than lucky, that," Millie said, then reconsidered out loud. "Still, it's not as if we don't see them lying dead on the road on a regular basis."

"But those, as you point out, are dead," Granger countered. "Severus needed a live specimen for the elixir; have you ever seen a live armadillo before today? I haven't."

Millie had to admit Granger was right.

"Besides all that, it was because of the armadillo that Severus opened the boot," Granger went on.

Millie wrinkled her nose to recall it. "I think it might be sympathetic magic influencing the course of events."

"The entire basis for Arithmancy is that, theoretically, it is supposed that the unused power of magical beings can affect happenings around them,"

Granger said, all but sticking her thumb in her mouth.

"Does he look 'supposed' to you?" Millie said, gesturing to baby. "It seems pretty clear to me that somehow, magically, me being pregnant made me more likely to find him. Perhaps if I hadn't had a 'like' body in my body, I would have turned left instead of right, and he would have wound up crushed in the rubbish truck. Do you know every other animal I see these days has a big belly full of kittens or puppies or baby mice or what have you? What's the proper name for baby mice?"

"I'm not sure. mm kit or pups I believe, But logically, the corpse in Severus' car? If we asked him..." Granger said.

"If we asked him, he would say he chose it because it was black," Millie said, and she couldn't help snorting.

"But your theory suggests he chose a car with a corpse in the boot because we had recently left a battleground," Granger said, and Millie could see a thin stream of blood trickling down her thumb. She watched fascinated as Granger sucked the side of her thumb, staunching the flow with her lips.

"How many dead do you figure there were?" Millie asked; she knew the subject of the battle made Granger uncomfortable, but she could tough it out this once. "That many witches and wizards dead at once, violently, has to have magical repercussions. Seems to me, we carried them with us."

"When you're eleven, it all seems so simple, wave a wand and this turns into that, say the magic words and it goes back again, but it's not simple, is it? Everything affects everything else," Granger said, bitter. "There's no way we can calculate the effects of everything we do with the amount of unused power between us."

"Nothing is simple," Millie agreed.
"What are we to do?" Granger said, her eyes fixed on some point in the distance.

"What can we do?" Millie answered. "If we do too much magic, we'll be caught out."

"How do we control the sympathetic magic we're producing?" Granger asked.

"I don't think we should tell the fellas," Millie said warily. "...they'd muck it up if they knew."

"It does seem the sort of thing that would peck away at Severus' nerves," Granger said. "You and I should try to attract the right sort of sympathetic magic. It may prove impossible to foresee all the ramifications, but if we work at it in a general way..."

"It's not as if we were actually hiding something from them," Millie said, knowing it was what Granger wanted to hear. "We haven't any proof. All we have is conjecture."

"It would be wrong, really, to upset them without solid evidence," Granger said, nodding to herself.

"That's right," Millie agreed, but she watched as the shadow over Granger's features darkened.

"What do you think affected Severus and I?" Granger blurted.

"Pardon?" Millie asked, quite taken aback.

"Do you think your romance with Draco precipitated Severus and I in some way?" Granger said miserably.

Millie cocked her head, Granger swallowed hard.

"I don't think it goes that far. I think, what it effects is the things that are otherwise random, you know? You two are a good solid match." Millie said, thinking "But let's test it. Get my handbag out of the kitchen."

Granger practically ran.

"Here you go," Granger said, thrusting the bag at her.

"My hands are full. You open it. Inside there's a box. It's got words on little magnets. We have some on the refrigerator at the Tea Shop. I like to muck about with them while I'm baking so Mrs. Bertolli got me some to play with at home. She's not bad, really, just a bit mad," Millie said in a rush, thinking Granger might find her silly if she admitted her employer was growing on her, despite her manias.

"Right," Granger nodded retrieving the box and regarding it casually, as if she were well acquainted with magnetic letters for the icebox; perhaps she was.

"Now close your eyes and take out some words," Millie instructed.

"How many?" Granger asked.

"I don't know, how about seven? Seven is a good number," Millie said.

"Seven it is then," Granger closed her eyes and brought out the magnets with careful fingers. "One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven."

"What are you waiting for? Open your eyes and read them," Millie said.
"You. Have. Found. True. If. Problematic. Love." Granger started laughing and Millie couldn't help but join her. Granger, though, continued on long after Millie was finished, hiding her face behind her palms. Millie didn't say anything, but she suspected there were a few tears in the mix.

Millie, meanwhile, fed the baby goat milk from a teacup.

"How is he doing that?" Granger asked wiping her eyes between sips of tea.

"It's not magic is it?"

Millie snorted softly. "He does it the same way you do it."

"I haven't any experience with babies," said Granger, taking another sip of tea and ripping a section from her orange.

The corner of Millie's mouth wrinkled at how odd that was. "Your mum never borrowed her mates' sprog so you could learn how it's done?"

"Most of my mother's friends don't have children," Hermione said. "My parents were more concerned that I distinguish myself academically."

Millie let that thought percolate through for a moment while Granger and the baby sipped from their china cups.

"When I went away to Hogwarts, my parents warned me not to let on I knew too much. Not to attract attention, you know, keep my head down," Millie said, mulling it over. "They'd've been right cheesed off if I pulled down good marks. But babies, that's practical, liking flyin' or makin' cheese or building a house out of whatever's at hand."

"Did Severus really change your nappies?" Granger asked.

"He was my granny's apprentice," Millie said, figuring that ought to be explanation enough.

Granger looked at her expectantly.

"So he had to do her bidding, didn't he? And part of the bidding was to mind the baby on Friday nights so my mum and dad could have an uninterrupted shag," Millie said, mulling it over. "You think perhaps you might be willing to watch baby here every so often so I could get mine off with Draco? I turn into a complete cow if I don't get at least one good fuck a week."

Granger looked sympathetic, if uncertain.

"Once he's well, I mean," Millie went on.

"To tell the truth the idea of caring for an infant makes me slightly uncomfortable," Granger said.

"What for?" Millie asked, puzzled.

"They're so small and they can't... communicate," Granger said, displaying the aforementioned discomfort.

"Sure they do, if you know how to read 'em," Millie explained.

Granger raised an eyebrow at her, looking fairly Snapish.

"A baby," Millie said "is like a beast; all they want is to be comfortable and safe. Feed them,
change their nappies, cuddle them up and that's all they want."

"You make it sound simple," Granger said skeptically.

"It is simple. Pretend you're in Care of Magical Beasts; witches and wizards are magical beasts after all, same as a Blast-Ended Skrewt," Millie said.

Granger nodded, "Go on."

"Young," Millie said, "any sort of young that expects to be looked after by its mother comes with instinctive ability to read her feelings; not Legilimency or anything difficult like that, but they put all the little things together without thinkin'."

"What do you mean? Give me an example of the little things," Granger said.

"The little things like skin temperature, or the how tense your muscles are when you hold 'em, how long you look in a baby's eyes, they can put all that together and tell if you like them or if somethin's gettin' up your nose. They come out knowin' how to do it, same as any other beast. Then when they start to talk, lots of times what people say is the opposite of what their body says, so they learn to stop listenin' to anything else. Other than that, babies want to be comfortable, same as anyone. It's not that difficult to keep 'em healthy or there wouldn't be any."

Granger looked at her. "It still sounds like a complex skill to me."

"Taking care of a baby is as simple and as complicated as fucking," Millie said, staring in the baby's eyes wondering what colour they'd turn.

"So is Severus any good with infants?" Granger asked, worry in her voice.

"Nah, I mean, he's better with babies than he is with actual children, but you know Severus..." she shrugged. "He'll keep 'em safe and fed, but he's too high strung to make regular work of it. I wouldn't be too worried about him getting a wild notion he wants one of his own if I was you. He's too interested in being the baby, himself, to like 'em. Too bad he's too big to fit in the cot."

Granger looked to be pondering that for a bit as she finished her orange and got herself more tea.

"What Severus said earlier, about putting you across his knee, got me to wondering at Hogwarts," she asked, flattening her lips together as if she'd been thinking on it for some time. "Did Severus ever whip you?"

"Me? Not me personally; he threatened all the time, but you know how he talks to hear the sound of his own voice. I think he might have given a couple of boys the strap for playing fast and loose with dangerous magic, something a bit more stupid than usual, but a female in Slytherin could commit bloody mayhem in the common room and get out of it with nothing but a good talking to. How was McGonagall? I always thought she'd be handy with a switch," Millie said conversationally.

"We hardly ever saw her outside class and meals. The worst anyone got that I knew was detention well... except Fred and George Weasley, and I might have been tempted to strike those two myself," Granger said.

Millie chuckled, she couldn't disagree with Granger on that, not that she would have kicked them out of bed back at Hogwarts, but they had a talent for annoying the shit out of a person.

"Would you do me a favour, Granger?" Millie asked.
"That depends on what it is," Granger said, between swallows of tea.

"Call Mrs. Bertolli for me? Tell her I have Hinkypunk fever or something, and I'll be covered with pustulant boils for the next three days,"

"Muggles don't get Hinkypunk fever; they don't even know what it is," Granger said.

"Ebola, then," Millie said, "that's Muggle, I heard it on the radio."

"I'll say you have stomach flu," Granger answered.

"We'll call you a taxi so you don't have to spend half the morning walking to your University," Millie said then paused, waiting for her real question, the underlying request. "Do you reckon, now that you've taken on Snape, as a husband, he'll be moving into your room."

Granger choked a bit on her tea.

"Am I off? Did I get it wrong? You called yourself Snape while we were in the car and you've got a ring. D'you know Americans wear it on the other side? Mrs. Bertolli told me," Millie said, watching as baby shut his fluttering eyes again. "Look, the truth is, I want Severus' room for a nursery."

"In for a penny, in for a pound, I suppose," Hermione said "It does seem backwards to marry him first and then quibble about sharing a bedroom."

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If Severus had been secretive about what he had been up to in the hours he'd stolen away to the magical interior of a port-a-loo in the suburb of Richardson, it had been with good reason. If he'd partly used it as a refuge from his desire for Granger and partly as a last ditch attempt at righting things, it was no one's concern but his own.

While Draco could be won over, he couldn't imagine either Granger or Millicent taking his pursuit in their stride. He may not have exactly quailed at the thought of opposing both those witches at once, but he wasn't foolhardy enough to fly in their faces either. He wasn't certain he'd lose, but he was certain he would never get into Hermione Granger's knickers if she knew he was trying to build a time machine.

Not that it mattered in the end, he thought, feeling a bit ambivalent. It hadn't worked, and now that Granger was his own he was frankly relieved that all remained unchanged.

He'd been so certain it would function properly as he laboured away on it. But he'd completed the damn thing, written a detailed message to Dumbledore, detailed yet containing one important omission: nowhere in the note was mentioned the fact that Granger has escaped Voldemort's followers, nor even that such a witch as Hermione Granger might ever attend Hogwarts or be of consequence.

He'd sent his vital message off in the time machine, aimed its eye at Hogwarts, specifically the Headmaster's Office on the morning before Harry Potter was to arrive as a tender eleven-year-old... and not a damn thing changed. He hadn't saved wizarding Britain, yet again.

He'd probably missed something obvious. It drove him mad all week, checking and rechecking his notes and work, though he found he didn't care quite so much now that Granger had taken him on. He counted himself fortunate if setting all to rights would consign him to spend the rest of his days alone, in a dungeon, teaching imbeciles, taking what solace he could in liquor and his own fist. It
was to his benefit that the machine had done a fat lot of nothing.

Still, he found it inherently off-putting to be wrong. He might be wrong about people from time to time because people were inherently stupid and irrational- how the hell was expected he to predict irrational behaviour?- but Severus Snape was never wrong about things, much less magical things.

He shot Draco a look that suggested the building of a time machine in a porta-loo was nothing remarkable.

"It will be a few hours before I require your life's blood. Make yourself useful and take that down," he instructed Draco.

"Does it work?" Draco asked, the impertinent arse.

"That is a singularly stupid question," Severus said.

Draco shrugged.

"Were I in possession of a functioning time machine, I would hardly have spent my evening riding through the greater Dallas area with a goat, chasing an armadillo, and disposing of a corpse," he said wearily.

"Never thought of that," Draco said "What about you and mmm... Miss Granger?" he stuttered, apparently catching himself at the last moment.

Severus gave him a long hard look to remind him that while he might be lenient for the sake of affection, the boy should not make a habit of straining good will. Beyond that he wasn't sure what to say, so he kept quiet and set to brewing while he dredged up some sort of reply.

"What of it?" he said, finally, quite dull of him, really, but it was only Draco.

"Is it everything you wanted? Is she treating you... well... considerately? You're not disappointed in any way?" Draco asked with what seemed genuine concern.

Severus kept on at his work, not sure how to answer. He did not wish to sound like a simpering idiot, nor did he wish to convey the notion that anything about his new relationship with Granger was less than ideal.

"I love her," he said the words without intending; they had been more of a thought than anything else.

Draco gave a little jump at the declaration, bumping his elbow quite into the time machine.

"For fuck's sake, boy, remove the hearts from the main spring, then release the torque, that should slow the gears before you cause a tragic accident," Severus said.

"I'm twenty years old, Severus, and I'm a father, must you speak to me as if I was eleven?" Draco whinged, imploring him with wide grey eyes.

Severus couldn't help but snort. "Then for fuck's sake, MAN, remove the beating hearts from the main spring, then release the torque, that should slow the gears before you destroy half the city."
Curiosity wouldn't allow Hermione to let Millie clear out Severus' room on her own.

As Millie put it, leaving the job to Severus meant more emotionalism than the task warranted and most likely an extended wait.

Amid the half-eaten apples, sea of scrawling scraps of paper, cigarette packets both empty and half-full, and dried month old ends of sandwiches, they found rather more pornographic magazines than Hermione had expected.

A few months before she'd entered Hogwarts, Hermione had accidentally stumbled onto a small stash of pornographic magazines in her parents' garden shed, her father's presumably. The women in those had been air brushed and filmed through a hazy filter, legs demurely closed and only their balloon like breasts displayed.

The women in Severus' magazines looked as if they were giving demonstrations in human anatomy. There were no exotic sets behind them.

The ones with the most loose and dog eared pages appeared to her to be those compiled of pictures of everyday looking women, "amateur photos" taken by lovers, she presumed. Disarmingly ordinary.

It seemed at once more innocent and altogether more obscene. Like Severus himself.

In his dresser were, as she had half expected, six shirts and four trousers, all identical. White cotton socks. White cotton underwear. And then folded neatly and alone in the bottom drawer sat one set of wizarding robes: the one from her childhood with a hundred tiny buttons. Paperback books lay scattered about the room, ranging in topic from physics to human evolution to a narrow volume of poetry titled "The Wasteland". It sounded vaguely familiar.

There was little else in the room.

Still she felt strange moving his things in with hers. It followed logically from the vows they'd taken in the car and she had no doubt he'd be pleased once he did his requisite grumbling.

She looked at her ring, unsure how much of her excitement was mixed with fear.

Except for half an hour around dawn spent chasing the blasted armadillo, the rest of Severus and Draco's labour was without incident.

Two days later, they returned to the house with the elixir.

They put the baby on Millie and Draco's bed, stripped of his nappy, as per Severus' advice: "He's going to shit his little intestines out once I give him the elixir, that nappy will only get in the way." Lying in the midst of a blanket Draco decided he would simply toss out after the nastier effects of the potion were over, the baby looked worse than ever.

His head was too big and his body was too small. He was yellow and veiny and he trembled.

Atop Draco's bureau, Whack switched her tail violently.

Hermione watched with trepidation as Severus swirled the glittery red liquid in the jam jar that served as a vial.

"How does it work?" she asked.
"The most essential ingredient in the Sangremorphus potion is the blood of a wizard, freely given. The other elements serve only to remove the tainted and malformed portions of the drinker's mind and body and replace them with ones patterned after that of the wizard from whom the blood was received,"

Severus said.

"So it's like Muggle gene therapy?" Hermione asked.

"Except the Sangremorphus potions is a reality, not theory," Severus said.

"What do you think he weighs, Millie?"

"Five pounds and a bit," Millie said.

"A bit?" Severus asked. "Is that more or less than an ounce? I should have known better than to ask you; you have to take off your shoes to count above ten."

Millie stuck out her tongue.

"Draco, what does your son weigh?" Severus asked in the classroom voice that indicated the time for banter was passed.

Draco lifted the baby, who began to fuss, and closed his eyes in concentration.

"Four pounds fourteen point five ounces, I'd say," Draco answered.

"Granger, double check," Severus ordered.

Hermione lifted the baby in her palms, one hand under his wrinkled little bum and one under his pointy head. She settled her mind and felt gravity's pull on the little body. It was definitely less than five pounds. Less than four pounds fifteen ounces. More than four fourteen. More than four fourteen point four.

"I say he's right," Hermione said, setting the baby back down on the blanket.

Severus looked from her to Draco. "If the two of you agree, I feel obliged to see for myself. Hold this," he said, handing her the liquid; though the elixir was fluid, it seemed to have facets which caught the light.

"Little... whatever-you're-going-to-call-him weighs four fourteen point six," he said, supporting the screaming baby with one large wide spread hand.

"We're going to call him Severus," Draco said looking from Millie to Snape and back again.

"Call him Severus and I withhold the elixir," Severus said still holding the baby.

"You have to be joking," Draco said.

"Try me. It's a wretched name, and he'll never be able to make his way among Muggles as long as he answers to it," Severus said, his lips pinched "Call him after your father-in-law. Phillip is perfectly inconspicuous name among Muggles and Wizards alike."

"Fine! We'll call him Phil," Millie said, "just give him the bloody elixir."

With a gentle flourish, Severus laid the newly named Phillipus Malfoy aka Phillip Black back on
the bed and took a small square of white cloth from the pocket of his leather jacket. With the measured eye of a scientist, he soaked and squeezed the knotted centre of the fabric until he deemed the dosage was correct.

Hermione watched as Severus somehow managed to be both tender and grandiose as he brought the potion soaked material to the baby's wailing mouth.

"Live, boy, live and be whole," he commanded.

It surprised her, in that it didn't surprise her at all, that the baby suckled at the elixir quietly and obediently.

As for Severus, he hardly could have been more pleased that Granger had installed him in her quarters while he was away. She meant it. She had every intention of being a wife to him.

In the days that followed Hermione learned a great many things, only some of them academic. She learned Severus had four distinct smiles; the most common a small subtle curling at the corners of his mouth easily missed by the casual observer, the second a nervous sort of lips pressed together that meant he was making a concerted effort not to smile, the third a lopsided grin that he only wore on one side of his face at a time in some sort of Severus Snape emotional economy, the last and rarest of all was a smile as silly and broad as anything that had ever graced a human face, it wasn't the sort of expression she'd even imagined he could make. At first she'd mistakenly attributed it to menace. It was maddening how many things he did were easily misinterpreted. The broad grin was rare though and usually seemed to appear in a sexual context, so it was fairly safe to say there was little irony to it.

Sex, interestingly, made him happy like nothing else; perhaps that was why he'd been so dismissive of it at first.

Hermione herself had always looked at sex as its own realm. Like food, it was necessary and nuanced and more or less what you made of it, but Severus seemed to simply be pleased by the fact that it existed. That she existed. That he could combine the two. In some ways, he was as simplistic in his desires as Ron Weasley; though he would have flown into a world class snit had she been foolish enough to tell him so.

Now that she knew what was happening, it didn't take long before she became aware of the magic as it shot out of him and into her, like a shower of subtle stars. Afterwards she felt a bit guilty in a way that correlated directly to how much she enjoyed the sex. While she was reasonably certain it was a cause and effect relationship, she wasn't at all sure which was cause and which was the effect.

His technique improved, and if he was slightly awkward from time to time in the course of execution, it only stood to make things more piquant when he displayed the sexual inventiveness of someone who regularly spent long hours thinking of what could be done to whom and what particulars would make it most pleasant. Above all else, she was aware when the two of them were alone together that Severus Snape was an astoundingly powerful wizard. Due to obvious circumstances, they were constrained to limit their magic to sporadic use outside the house and even then mostly small and circumspect spells; it was the one time she could feel they were both wholly themselves. The magic at the core of his self was muscular and sly, and she could feel it even when she kissed him, like a spark on his lips.

She also became aware of something else. She became aware that while she tended to spend a great deal of time thinking, Severus spent more time in his own imagination than he did any place else. She understood it; she was a lonely in a crowded room sort, too, but sometimes, sometimes, she
would have given anything to climb inside that ponderous brain of his and have a good long look round.

She could spend a lifetime occupied by him. He was that interesting, and there were that many things about him she didn't understand at all. It was the first time in her experience that a wizard had been more exciting after a month's worth of sex than he was before it.

She understood precisely what she got out of it. It felt good and her orgasms were delicious, and afterwards she felt amazingly strong; sometimes she half believed she could fly without a broom. He was electric and exquisite in his way; there was some quality peculiar to Severus Snape himself that thrilled and interested her. All this and more were what she had to gain.

While she did her best to make sure Severus' experience was as pleasurable as hers, it was difficult to comprehend the silly grin on his face as he lay pale and languid beside her. It was odd to think sex had as much to do with the massive organ between Severus' ears as it did with the one between his legs.

None of that, of course, meant he stopped being Severus Snape. His hair was every bit as awful and greasy regardless of how thoroughly he shampooed.

His teeth remained crooked and cigarette stained. The nose, oh god, his nose remained every bit as long and hooked and crooked to boot, very nearly baroque, though it was dear to her in its imperfection. He drank straight from the bottle and smoked foul smelling cigarettes. He was still quick to take offence and slow to grant forgiveness. It was a strange perk, of sorts, that he made her feel vivacious and carefree in comparison, which weren't words anyone had ever used to describe her, to the best of her knowledge.

His penchant for sarcasm took on a different light once she understood his rudeness was in part a buffer between the world and what seemed a nearly egg-like fragility. He fretted about everything, misunderstood people's meanings and intentions, all without, of course, ever letting on. Socially, he was at an utter loss much of the time not because he was stupid but because he attributed to others a complexity of thought and emotion that, in Hermione's experience, usually wasn't there. One reason things worked out so well between them was that Hermione said plainly and precisely whatever flitted through her head and had no difficulty explaining herself.

While Harry and Ron had always found this frightfully tedious of her, having things explained to him in precisely this manner seemed to settle Severus' nerves quite a bit. Had Hermione been like Ginny Weasley, or even Severus himself, and expected to have her feelings understood and anticipated, they would have been sunk from the outset.

She also learned that she had to badger him into explaining himself.

When she'd tried that tactic with Harry and Ron, they'd rolled their eyes and run off to play Quidditch. She had a sneaking feeling Severus liked being badgered if it meant he had her attention, quite apart from the fact that he needed her guidance.

A thousand incidents, both pleasant and unpleasant, proved learning experiences for both of them.

Once, while driving her to class, he spat out the car window.

"Severus Snape, you did not just spit in public," she said, cringing.

He looked at her, puzzled, as he scratched the back of his neck. "So. What." It wasn't a question but rather a statement.
"It is rude. It is unhygienic. And it is embarrassing," she said consciously feeling herself pale. What would her mother say?

Severus stared as if he had never heard an objection to spitting in his life. "It wasn't as though I spat on Draco's Persian carpet."

"It's disgusting," Hermione countered. "No matter where you do it."

"It's out of doors. It is perfectly permissible to remove a bit of phlegm from one's throat by spitting if one is out of doors," he insisted. "Do you expect me to swallow it?"

"Either that or carry a handkerchief, because spitting in public is horrid. No one wants to be subjected to other people's bodily fluids," Hermione said incensed.

"How telling," Snape squinted at her. "You do not wish to be subjected to my bodily fluids, you mean to say."

"Oh... you... you know what I mean and that wasn't it. Don't twist my words round," she said. "You're trying to start a row and..."

"You started it," he said accusatorily. "You think I am beneath you; grotty old Snape."

"Spitting is... grotty, by definition, this isn't something I made up. It's a socially agreed upon norm," she said wondering at the apologetic tone in her voice, she hadn't been the transgressor.

"Admit it, I disgust you," he said.

"When you spit, yes," she said. "Because it's a disgusting habit."

"I am attempting to delve into the deeper meaning behind your outburst, examining the subtext if you will," he said glaring. "Do you wish to give back my ring."

"What?" she said. He was mad; she was involved with a mad man.

"If I disgust you, it follows logically you would not wish to be wed to such a person," he said.

"First of all it's the spitting that disgusts me; unless spitting is integral to your very being I don't see how..." she said before he cut her off.

"Perhaps it is," he said with a frown.

"Stop being..." she said.

"Being what?" he said.

"Wilfully obtuse and hyper-sensitive. Stop reading in meaning that isn't there," she said briskly. "I like you. I don't like spitting; it's bad manners. The two are not inseparable."

"There's always subtext," he said.

"No, there isn't. I'm terribly dull that way. I also dislike smoking, stealing, and being rude simply because one can," she said.

"Is there anything about me you do like?" he asked, tossing his burning cigarette out the car window.
"Quite a few things actually, You are honourable, unless there are crisps or cigarettes involved, brave, frightfully intelligent, curious, you take care of the people you love," she was interrupted by a loud snort.

"What a load of sentimental nonsense," he said, lighting another cigarette, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Nothing you could say would ever convince me that you do not love Draco and Millie like a father," she said.

Severus Snape had no protestation to make to that. He smoked. Stepped on the gas when the light turned green.

"I will not give up my fags; you can't make me," he said, sounding childish.

Hermione supposed this meant, in light of his comment about subtext, that he would refrain from spitting.

"I'm sure I have habits you find unpleasant," she said experimentally, hoping to leave the door open to his thoughts. Encouraging him in the criticism he seemed to enjoy so was a gesture of good will on her part.

"No, you're quite perfect," he said, sullen.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Thanksgiving

Pity has no part in it-
Loosed to take its course, love
is the master- and the variable
certainty in the crosses of
uncertainty-

--William Carlos Williams- A Crystal Maze 1931

The smoke was a decidedly unnerving bile colour and smelled, not of sulphur as one might expect, but rather more like the fine aroma of burning lorry tires.

The thunder-like crack that preceded the smoke pouring into Albus Dumbledore's office was indeed portentous and not only for the way it knocked him out of his chair and onto his notably pointed behind with his beard over his head.

He was forced to struggle with his facial hair until he burrowed a hole large enough to see through. A thick black horizontal line could be observed hovering once the smoke cleared, like a cosmic hyphen, and from that line descended a sheet of paper, like the post sliding through a slit in a door that wasn't there.

It was almost time to leave for the welcoming feast. He had best move quickly.

The handwriting was known to the headmaster. He chewed on the edge of his beard that had worked its way into his mouth in the struggle. It was worrying; Severus wasn't the sort one expected to build a time machine. And if this wasn't the work of an illicit time machine he'd eat his beard; although it looked like he was doing that already. But Severus?

It wasn't that it was beyond him, quite the contrary, if anyone Albus knew was capable of building a time machine it was Severus Snape. No, the reason Albus was taken aback was that the situation had to be fairly desperate for Severus Snape to summon up the courage to take a risk of this magnitude.

He read carefully, the squirrel in his head that powered most of his decision making process running furiously on its wheel.

He would have to change his plans. Enough to bring about success but not so much that Severus failed to send the note in some alternate future that would spring from his change of plans. The squirrel got a leg cramp.

He suddenly felt inexplicably misty-eyed about sharing a fate with the Potter boy; truth be told, he was more than a bit sorry for both of them.

Minerva McGonagall turned away from the passage leading to the headmaster's office. She had intended to make certain their illustrious head didn't arrive late for the sorting but decided to speak
to the house elves about removing cabbage from the school menu instead. She might be a Gryffindor, but she wasn't foolhardy enough to try and reckon with that stench unaided.

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Some ten years in the future, Severus Snape awoke flailing in disoriented terror, his sheets damp with sweat, a puddle of spittle in the corner of his mouth. For some inexplicable reason, he was reassured when his hand grasped a quaint wooden headboard. His eyes fairly rattled in his skull as he tried to figure out where in the bowels of Hell he was, that light should stream in through his window in such a diabolically cheerful way.

It was then that he noted Hermione Granger snoring beside him. He stared at her, nausea and cold chills replacing his earlier wild terror.

What was Granger doing in his bed? Or, worse yet, had he somehow managed to invade her chamber?

He inhaled, trying to slow his breathing before he hyperventilated. The whole place smelled of sex. He'd fucked Granger, then? He shut his eyes and some rather vivid images painted themselves inside his eyelids. She'd fucked him rather?

It seemed like a vivid hallucination but sifting through the contents of his memory now that his brain was congealing into something like a waking state, his recollection did indeed confirm that he was involved in some sort of liaison with Granger.

Married? He double-checked the ring on his finger with the one on hers. He ground his back teeth as he puzzled over it and tried to sort out memory from years of fantasy.

Yes, he was married to Granger. He spent some time waiting for it to turn to shit but that hadn't happened yet. Not that he was guaranteed happiness; it merely meant he was fairly unmiserable for the time being. He'd be up to his nostrils in shit in no time at all, or his name wasn't Severus Snape.

The muddle was gone. He and Granger were hiding from The Dark Lord and posing as Muggles in America. Being a shiftless freeloading git, Severus had brought his bride to share a house with Malfoy the younger and family. Malfoy and his dark little hag had one babe in arms and another on the way.

He felt peculiar to have lost track of his life somehow in his sleep, but it wasn't the first time. It used to happen fairly often when he was an adolescent; still, he wondered if this most recent occurrence could be blamed on either too much drink or too little.

Granger turned in her sleep and her hard nipple brushed against his arm. He turned his eyes to her face. Careful not to wake her, he caressed her cheek.

As long as his unusual run of luck held, he would not walk away.

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Hermione never thought she'd ascribe motives to people who couldn't control their own bowels but she was sure Baby Phil didn't like her. He straddled his mother's lap, a hank of her shiny black hair in his now fat little fist, and out of the corner of his eye he shot Hermione a disdainful look worthy of Lucius Malfoy. The fact that Malfoy blood now pumped through his little veins was apparent every waking moment of Phil's life. Snape was right, though, he was never going to be anything but unattractive. Still he was unattractive in a Malfoy sort of a way. He wrinkled his nose the same way Draco's mother had at Quidditch Cup the one time Hermione had seen her. Most of his little infantile mannerisms seemed to mirror Draco's. She couldn't decide whether it was a result of
spending half the day alone with his father or the potion Severus had given him.

Hermione had precious little first-hand exposure to actual babies before Phil, so she could hardly say whether it was normal for an infant to be so seemingly adult in its expressions or not. Millie didn't seem to think it was noteworthy, so it was probably fine.

He was likely giving her that nasty look because she'd walked him over to the zoo with a bag full of nappies and bottles so his parents could have sex the day before. He tended to hold a grudge. The first time she'd changed his nappy, she'd accidentally pricked him with the pin - it turned out the disposable kind broke him out in a ghastly rash - and he'd screamed bloody murder every time she got within a yard of him for the better part of a week.

Which explained why she didn't watch Phil without Severus unless it couldn't possibly be avoided. Whenever she held him, he seemed to teeter on the brink of screaming.

The rhinoceros saved her yesterday. For reasons known only to himself, Phil was mesmerised by the cow-like grass chewing of the animal in his enclosure.

Not sure what else to do, Hermione proceeded to tell him everything she knew about rhinoceroses. When they returned to the house and he caught sight of Millie, he suddenly remembered to resent Hermione for not being his mother and burst out screaming until he was safely in Millie's arms.

The thing was, he was perfectly pleasant as long as he was with one of his parents.

He'd be holy terror in a crèche. Somehow Hermione couldn't see either Drano or Millie signing him up for one. All for the best really.

"Whose baby are you?" Millie said, holding him out so she could look into his eyes. Hermione noted she said this several times a day, as if teaching him by rote. "Who do you belong to? That's right, you belong to me. You're Mummy and Daddy's baby, aren't you? You are Philip Black, and you belong to me, and you're the most precious baby in the whole wide world, aren't you, Philipus Rex?"

Millie ended this display of sentiment with a kiss to Phil's forehead, only it didn't end there, her lips fell peppery from his eyelids to his chin and then, for good measure, behind his ears, where she made what Hermione could only describe as yummy noises. Then she moved on to his little fingers. The thing was Millie did this several times a day and so did Draco. Hermione was almost used to it.

Any of their mutual classmates from Hogwarts would have thought Hermione mad if she described it to them. Or perhaps not.

She wondered if perhaps this was the very beginning of the difference between Purebloods and Muggle-born cultures. Culture being essentially everything humans do, or have, aside from basic biological functions; world view, ego development, social order; none of it was innate, in her opinion.

While Hermione was sure her parents loved her, their idea of love was more on the order of preparing her to live her own life on her own two feet. Millie and Draco's idea of loving Phil meant weaving him inextricably into a web of Pureblood relations even if they were an ocean away and he would never meet them.

It was bound to give a person a different point of view on a good many things.

Hermione watched Millie lift Phil's foot to kiss his tiny sole, the last bit of exposed skin she could
"You belong to Mummy and Granny Prune and Uncle Eye and Granddad Phil, you're named for him, and Black Alice would feed you marrow bones if she saw you 'cause you belong to Black Alice, too, and your Granny Narcissa, if she saw you she'd wrap you up in furs and give you nappy pins with rubies in 'em," Millie went on, content to stroke Phil as he curled, almost like a puppy, on her chest. "And they'd all say you were the best boy in the whole wide world, because you are."

Hermione tried to imagine herself in Phil's place, growing up surrounded by an invisible web of relatives. It was times like this when the discussions she and Millie had about cultural differences between Purebloods and Muggle-born made themselves crystal clear.

"What do you plan on doing once he's school age?" Hermione asked, suddenly thinking of it for the first time, and wondering if they would be able to perpetrate such a long-term ruse.

Draco turned away from whatever he was doing with the roses. He often seemed to simply stand among them, stroking their leaves and humming under his breath, but apparently the mention of school was enough to disturb his oneness with the vegetation.

"The Academie Laveau has the best grounding in Esoteric Arts on the continent as far as I know, but the Esqueila Azul de Brujo de Talpa is more geared toward Pureblood ways," Draco said, walking towards them to address the matter.

"Not even considering Salem, then?" Severus interjected. He was seated at the patio table, cigarette in one hand, newspaper in the other. Whack rubbed herself aggressively against the toe of his boot. The goat grazed passively on the petunias, tethered as he was to the leg of Severus' chair.

"I was talking about Muggle school," Hermione said.

"That's easy; he's not going," Draco said leaning down to stroke Phil's head protectively.

Millie, so far, said nothing but rather followed the conversation with her eyes slitted. Hermione could tell something was churning inside her head but couldn't predict the exact conclusion she was reaching.

Draco lifted Phil into his arms. "Want to smell the roses?" he said to the baby.

Hermione found it odd the way Draco and Millie addressed Phil as though they expected an answer. As far as she could tell, they had better chance of an answer from Whack.

The aforementioned cat took that moment to leap onto Severus' lap, knocking his paper to the ground. Goat capered forward, hastily chomping at the paper before Severus could reach it.

"Eat the paper; it was utter shit anyway," he said taking a drag of his cigarette.

"Your children will attend school or the state will send a truant officer... to the house," he added dramatically.

For a moment the three of them stared at one another and pondered the intrusion of an agent of the Muggle government into their lives. Millie lay back with her eyes shut.

"What if I hex them?" Millie asked, opening one eye.

"And all these years I imagined you weren't a complete moron. Hex, Obliviate, or Confundus a truant officer and our chance of being discovered will increase exponentially. Granger and I both
managed to survive Muggle schooling to the age of eleven, your children will do the same," Severus said with a finality that effectively ended all debate on the matter.

"You don't think it will make them all... Mugglish?" Millie said leaning towards Severus.

"I dare say the effect will be quite the opposite," Severus said, pausing to take a drag on his cigarette and look with disdain on Goat, who had just finished off the last of his paper. "They will learn to dislike Muggles with more vitriol than they ever could have gained at their Great Aunty Bella's knee. A few years thrown in with the general Muggle rabble and I dare say the entire Weasley clan would have turned to the Dark Lord's side."

Hermione's curiosity got the better of her. "Why did you go to Muggle school, Severus, your mother was a witch?"

"I don't know," Severus said sharply. "Perhaps she wanted to be rid of me."

Millie screwed up her face for a split instant before settling back to her pretense of sleep. Draco's back was turned, apparently teaching Philip to communicate with flowers, but Hermione saw him stiffen for a minute just the same.

What was she supposed to say after something like that? Severus revealed far more about his childhood than she'd thought he would, but somehow, instead of being a festering scab she could pick at to relieve the poison, he seemed to use it as a kind of trump card. Severus Snape had endured a terrible childhood, a miserable adolescence, and an inconsolable adulthood and managed to use it to his advantage in every argument. With Millie and Draco, at least, all he had to do was lay one ugly memory on the table and all disagreements were withdrawn. Wanker. It was a good thing this time he'd used it to argue her side or she would have given him what for.

She might have still given him what for, but he was leering at her. He might be a wanker, but he was her wanker, and she found herself growing fonder of him all the time. Not just romantically, not just his gut wrenching sexual magnetism, heaven help her, but on a day to day, drab prosaic basis she liked Severus Snape.

She liked her life and her household. Here in exile she was happier than she'd ever been in her "real" life. It was ironic in a way that made her feel more than slightly guilty. It sounded foolish, but she'd never had a friend like Millie and, after the rhinoceros, she thought she and Phil might have reached an understanding.

It shocked Hermione to admit that Draco was likeable too, now that he had a baby on his hip and a no-nonsense witch to keep him in line. Until Phil had come along, he had been arrogant and shallow and, worst of all, needlessly cruel. Now she wondered exactly how she was supposed to expect herself to continue thinking of him as the same twit who'd called her "Mudblood" when she watched him carefully hold Baby Phil up so that he could smell the roses blooming in the back garden, blossoms half as big as his face, and rub his velvety cheeks against the equally soft petals.

He changed nappies without batting an eye. As far as that skill went, she would gladly admit his innate superiority.

She felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle as Severus stepped up behind her, drawing one finger along her arm as he whispered in her ear.

"Are you quite certain we can't phone and tell Shakeleg you've come down with shingles?" he whispered seductively.
"Very much so," she said. "First off it would be a lie; second, it would be ungrateful after he
covered for you, and thirdly, it was very kind of him to invite us to celebrate a holiday with his
family. I'm looking forward to it."

Severus looked away, as sullen as sullen could be.

Hermione looked down at her watch and then across to Millie, asleep on a lawn chair. She wasn't
visibly pregnant yet; as far as Hermione could tell, the only change in her at all was a newfound
tendency to fall asleep at the drop of a hat. Well, that and the way she seemed to avoid poultry.

She checked her watch again.

"Millie," she said. "Millie... Your program is going to be on in a few minutes.

You asked me to remind you."

"I think your mummy fancies Fox Mulder," Draco said sotto voce, presumably to Baby Phil. "Do
you think we should tell her he's just a Muggle play-actor? It might break her ickle black heart."

"Buzz off, you knob," Millie groaned affectionately, one arm thrown over her eyes.

Draco closed in until he was posed, towering dramatically over grumbling Millie.

"Still he does wear his clothes well. I wonder where he gets them. You think something like that
might suit me?" he said, looking down at Millie, Phil clinging to his neck.

Millie squinted as if weighing his relative powers of attraction.

Hermione chewed her lip to keep from laughing as Draco began, under Millie's cool appraising
stare, to literally pose, lifting his chin haughtily and giving her his bedroom eyes as well as
puckered lips.

Severus sniggered.

"I don't know, Millie," Hermione said in mock earnestness. "Fox Mulder is top totty, Muggle actor
or not. I'm not sure Draco could manage it."

Millie's lip trembled for an instant, then twisted up at the corner.

Draco snorted and turned round to Hermione granting her his best look of disdain. "No vote for
you. Shagging gingers automatically calls your judgement under suspicion."

Hermione could have answered with any number of retorts, most of them involving Pansy
Parkinson, but it hardly seemed worth the effort, instead she turned to look at Severus behind her.

"I wouldn't say my judgement is suspect, would you?" she asked Severus, darting her eyes toward
him.

"From my vantage point your taste seems quite superb," Severus said archly, bringing an index
finger to his lips.

Draco squinted, his cheeks going ever so slightly pink.

Severus visibly suppressed a laugh, and Hermione traded a puzzled look with Millie.
Sometimes Shakeleg reminded Severus of Lucius. It neither dismayed Severus nor warmed the cockles of his reputedly impenetrable heart; it simply was what it was.

Had he been born a Wizard...

No, Severus had to amend that. Had Shakeleg been born a Wizard in the UK, he most certainly would have been a Slytherin. Or perhaps Severus was imagining things, projecting, because he did not dislike him. Still it remained that he wasn't like most of their other co-workers. And it could in fact be the case that Severus liked him precisely because there was something to Shakeleg that had more in common with a pureblood Wizard than might be surmised from plaited hair and a t-shirt emblazoned with the legend "Too Drunk to Fuck."

Stepping on the gas as the light turned green and giving Hermione a sideways glance, he considered the question, finally settling on the fact that Shakeleg's every word was shaded by his habit of leaving three or four unspoken.

Case in point, he'd invited them to "come around in a couple of Thursdays," as though it were a vague open-ended invitation, when in fact it turned out to be a rather specific invitation to a rather large holiday with family.

And now they were following Shakeleg from Millie's beloved Central Market, not to Shakeleg's home, but rather to the home of his grandmother, Maison du Shakeleg if you will. The whole thing made Severus slightly more tense than usual, in much the same way Whack-the-Cat would be more tense than usual were she to be stuffed in the industrial blender he used at the bar.

He could see Shakeleg looking in his own rear-view mirror and laughing. The sadistic shit.

Severus mouthed the words FUCK YOU clearly, making certain Shakeleg saw him.

Shakeleg laughed even harder.

Hermione patted his thigh and gave him a hopeful smile.

"I'm sure it will be perfectly pleasant," she said, squeezing his knee. "He is your friend."

"So you insist on saying; the only reason I agreed to this is your ceaseless nagging," he said.

Granger's smile took a turn for the worst. "I reminded you that if you did not accept his offer you might be obliged to fill in for him some time in the future."

"Hence my use of the word 'nagging'," he said, keeping his eyes on Shakeleg's green Chrysler Imperial.

"I said it once. Not even you can construe me saying something once as a form of coercion. Not credibly at least," Granger said, still squeezing his knee, though a bit harder than before.

"That and the prospect of a free meal," Severus admitted.

"All right, Diogenes," she said with a smirk.

"Do you think me a cynic?" he asked, turning his head, suddenly.
"Do you think I'm female?" Granger said.

"I know you are female, having had some first hand exploration of the area in question," he said.

"Much the same way I arrived at knowledge of your cynicism," Granger said, opening the glove box. He hated it when she did that; it was a bugger to shut again.

Undeterred she removed his torch and flicked the switch with her thumb. "Now you can go looking for an honest man," she said, shining a circle of light on the fabric that hung slack on the roof of the car.

"You're a very silly person, Granger," Severus said, turning sharply, unsure whether or not he wanted to let on that he enjoyed her silliness. A little.

"No one, in my entire life, has ever accused me of being silly," she said in a way that reminded him of Minerva a bit.

"They obviously weren't paying attention," he said, raising his brow at her in the way he had come to realize had a certain effect on her.

Instead, she sighed loudly and rested her forehead against the dashboard; beneath her dandelion mop of hair, he heard a muffled, "I s'pose you're right."

Bugger. He'd said something wrong. He ground his back teeth wondering how long she was going to be cross with him, as well as exactly how he'd transgressed.

Friendly bickering was one thing, but he'd rather not have an altercation with his wife in front of Shakeleg's family.

She didn't say anything else until they arrived in the outlying patch of dirt known as Midlothian. Shakeleg's grandmother could not rightly be described as easily located. First Shakeleg led him off the highway onto a series of twisting gravel roads followed by muddy ruts in an unmown field.

Shakeleg's granny lived in a largish Airstream trailer. Maison de Malfoy it was not.

His own Gran, Lizzie, had stayed in a fairly dilapidated Airstream trailer before she got her council tenancy. Seeing it made him feel inexplicably better, warmer, more welcome, than all the ancestral manses Abraxas Malfoy's new money could buy.

Granger, on the other hand, looked a bit stunned.
"The game," he said, "is never lost till won." -- Gretna Green by George Crabbe

Hermione did not turn toward Severus; rather she addressed him staring out the window.

"You might possibly be the first person in my life who's taken the trouble to notice anything about me beyond my brain," she said, feeling slightly pathetic.

Severus blinked several times, but his expression remained flat as he fished a half-smoked cigarette out of the ashtray.

"You're welcome," he said, squeezing her knee a bit harder than she expected.

She would have kissed him if Mr. Shakeleg hadn't been watching. Speaking of Mr. Shakeleg, he was out of the car and waving them towards the trailer.

To be honest, his appearance took her aback somewhat. Hermione Granger liked to pride herself on preparation, proper behaviour, and knowledge. The problem was that the world was fairly huge once one moved outside the insular world of magical England. At times, the sheer size of her life made it difficult to be prepared for all eventualities. And in this instance, she knew next to nothing. She wondered, for a flickering instant, why they were referred to as "Red Indians" when Mr. Shakeleg's skin was less than a shade off true black.

That aside, she supposed he looked more Asian than anything else, but an odd sort of Asian she hadn't seen before. Everything about his face was pronounced: large, round cheeks, prominent brow ridge, a large, round nose that seemed to be as dissimilar from Severus' as a nose could be and yet remained miraculously large, and peculiarly delicate feminine lips. To top it off, he habitually wore long dangly silver earrings and kept his hair in two plaits, not unlike Millie's.

Mr Shakeleg was large, as tall as Severus and more than half again as wide.

Despite the weight Severus had gained over the last few years, he looked weedy beside Mr. Shakeleg. But Mr. Shakeleg was oddly proportioned, his broad shoulders and expansive gut sat over decidedly short, thin, bowed legs.

She simply hadn't met anyone like him before and looks were only the beginning. The times she had seen him working alongside Severus at the Gypsy Ballroom, they hardly seemed to say more than six words at a stretch to one another. And yet he had a knack for making Severus laugh that, well, frankly she envied. Two words, sometimes just a knowing look, and her husband was chuckling.

Mr. Shakeleg was also singularly taciturn but not in a way that she was accustomed to. It seemed to her he was more aggressive in his silence than other people were when they spoke. She had only
once made the apparent mistake of mentioning she had read up on his tribe. The look he gave her was disdain so pure one drop of it could have turned the entire Atlantic Ocean to concrete in embarrassment.

Not that he ever spoke an impolite word to her. Actually, his interactions were quite a bit more politely formal than any other American she'd met since she set foot in the country in July. She called him "Mr. Shakeleg"; he called her "Ma'am."

Had he been a touch icier, she'd have sworn he was French. But somehow he and Severus were like old chums.

And he was waving her into the second trailer of her life. In a field that looked like the automobile equivalent of an elephant graveyard. To her less-than-experienced eye, only one vehicle parked about the field appeared to be in what one might call working order: a sports car of some sort. Two of the others had unnervingly low tires. One had a plastic bag taped in the place of a missing window. Several were dented in ways that Hermione assumed would preclude drivability. Perhaps Shakeleg's grandmother operated a junkyard. A fairly thin junkyard with no sign.

She noted, as she and Severus followed Mr. Shakeleg, that rather than bringing them inside, he seemed to be leading them round to the other side of the trailer.

There, under a great green and white striped awning and laid out on a long collapsible table, was the meal, and there, also under the awning, were a hundred or so people. It reminded her that the wizarding convention of the insides of things often being bigger than the outside wasn't the case for Muggles. There was no way Hermione could imagine more than three people eating comfortably inside the trailer, so sensibly the Shakeleg family were all eating outside.

"Grandma," Shakeleg called out and took the hands of an elderly lady who looked to be about to kiss him but instead blew loudly "brrraap" on his cheek.

Oh yes, Hermione knew about that. Kissing was one of those things, like honeybees and earthworms, that Europeans brought to North America. And while the Shakeleg family were as modern as she and Severus, or perhaps it might be argued more so, and most certainly had adopted the relatively new, at least in the historical sense, practice, some older customs remained.

Shakeleg looked slightly embarrassed.

"Grandma, this is my friend, Stephen Liston," Shakeleg said, still holding her hands. The "grandma" in question was small and somewhat humped over, and wearing an improbable purple tracksuit.

The Grandma then frowned and skilfully avoided Severus' extended hand, taking Hermione's instead. "Not him, you first."

Hermione shook her hand; it was small and wrinkled and unbelievably soft.

"Thank you for inviting us. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Shakeleg; I'm Jane Liston."

"Thank you, dear, but my name is Rhodes, Norma Rhodes," she said, then turned her eye to Severus. "And now you."

Severus shook her hand in silence, his head bowed.

Albert seemed to breathe a sigh of relief at that, and he and Mrs. Rhodes led them around and introduced them, one by one, to every adult present. There was a great deal of hand shaking, and
she always preceded Severus.

During the introductions Hermione noted several things, first they seemed to have a short supply of first names. The names Norma and Norman, Albert and Alberta, as well as Robert and Roberta, were repeated more than once, as were Louis, Harry, Jerry, Terry (for either gender) and, for some reason, Geneva. There was also one Bonnie and one Meech, although she had no idea whether that was an Indian name or some strange derivative. There were also three women of various ages called "Bootsie". Several men were introduced as "June" short for "Junior" as well, although Junior what was never specified.

Second of all, while complexions ran the gamut from very dark to as pale and sallow as Severus, some family features were universal. Namely earlobes.

They all had huge dangly earlobes the likes of which she'd only before seen on Buddhas in Chinese restaurants. Also, while some family members were thin and some notably unthin, they all possessed a similar delicacy of limb.

Shakeleg's family was, as a group, fairly squinty of eye as well.

In due course they were issued their own folding chairs, constructed of a woven seat over metal tubing, and enamelled metal plates.

The food was mostly unremarkable, but it was plentiful. Boiled greens. Haricot Vert boiled until they were the colour of an old mac. Boiled meat. A brisket of mammoth proportions. Reconstituted corn of some type topped with nuts?

Fried dough of some variety. Bowls of tinned fruit. A very dry turkey. A ham covered with cloves, pineapple, and cherries, which looked strangely out of place beside the other more greyish looking food. The food filled every available surface on the table.

After that was picked clean, women seemed to mill about for a minute, then quick as a wink the entire surface was covered with pies. An old electric samovar sat on the ground, its long cord reaching into the trailer.

The pie was much better. So much better than the tough but over plentiful meat that Hermione ate five pieces. Somehow in the midst of pie, a television was carried outside. There was sport by way of an American football game, which bored her as much as the regular sort of football, and Severus seemed to find mildly interesting.

Hermione was bewildered and slightly embarrassed to realize she had fallen asleep in her chair when she was awakened by a dull roar from the telly; someone had won the match.

Then an odd thing happened.

She didn't know if it was coincidence or if the fact that Severus was staring so hard at the telly affected it somehow, but as Albert's teenaged cousin/nephew/something or other stood to change the channel, there, on the screen, appeared a commercial for a cricket match.

"You know I tried to watch one of those one time, but I could never figure out the rules for that shit," Albert said, turning to Severus, along with every other person there, it seemed.

Severus leaned back, something about his posture recalling the first day of class when he slouched against his lectern and spoke of the art of potions as though it were a mirage they would never quite reach.
"I suppose I could show you. Have you got a bat?" Severus said slowly, silkily.

Albert's nephew, June, ran into the house and came out with a long polished steel cylinder.

"That," Severus said with a grimace, "is all wrong. What is necessary is something flatter, more like..."

"There's the paddle I use when I wash hides," Norma Rhodes said.

"Show it to me," Severus said, Severus-like, and one or two people hhmphed at his tone.

June jumped up, but Norma held up her hand. "Bootsie, you know where my hide tanning stuff is. Go get my washing paddle."

Bootsie, a heavyset girl in her twenties, set aside her coffee and got the paddle, presenting it to Severus.

Severus peered at the paddle so intently Hermione had to check twice to make certain he didn't have a jeweler's loupe.

"It will suffice," he pronounced. "Now for a ball."

The Shakelegs seemed to be growing more interested by the minute.

"We shall need something roughly this big," Severus said, indicating with his cupped hand. "It's a hard ball, not the sort of thing that bounces easily."

"Can we make one?" Bootsie asked, straightening her glasses. "I can sew pretty fast."

The adolescent June meanwhile raced out to one of the cars and back.

"Will this work?" June said, extending a smallish white ball to Severus.

Severus took it in his hand. The look as he held it in his hand seemed to reveal an unknotting in Severus' soul.

Hermione unconsciously wrinkled her brow as she studied him, a bit befuddled; perhaps it was all that pie, but he seemed so Muggle at the moment. Her father loved cricket. Personally, Hermione didn't feel any differently about cricket or football than she did about Quidditch. It all made her sleepy.

"It would be better were it red; however, it is not ridiculously unsuitable for demonstration purposes," Severus said.

Severus stepped out of his chair and spoke in what Hermione could only adequately describe as his professorial voice. "The next step is to construct wickets and a pitch, as well as demarcate the boundaries of the cricket field, for which I shall require some assistance."

"All right," Bootsie said, with a sharp short nod.

The adolescent June, two Alberts and three Terrys stepped forward to volunteer along with Mr. Shakeleg or rather the third Albert. Hermione was surprised at how quickly it was constructed and that Severus wasn't particularly rude. It was fairly remarkable.

It wasn't long before Severus stood, as judicious as the sorting hat, dividing the Shakelegs into two teams.
"Are you with me or in the opposition?" he said, looking at her squarely.

"Consider me a conscientious objector," she said and was surprised to meet with something she never imagined existed: a beseeching look on Severus' face.

He said nothing.

"No, really," she said struggling to keep the whine out of her voice, "I've had too much pie, and I am positively awful at sport. Can't I simply admire your manly form from here?"

Apparently, if there were a correct way to bow out of a game that was it, because Severus flashed her the briefest of curling smiles in the corner of his mouth and went on divvying up the Shakelegs into teams. It was to be noted that Mrs. Rhodes enlisted. She was being shown up by an octogenarian.

"Albert, where are you going?" Severus asked.

Mr. Shakeleg waved a cassette tape in the air, not bothering to turn around.

"Tunes, bro."

It was most certainly an alternate universe, or at least a different country, in which anyone dared refer to Severus Snape as "bro".

In less than a minute, Mr. Shakeleg was flinging the doors of his Imperial wide, and Severus' beloved Black Sabbath was blasting across the field.

On the improvised pitch, Severus, cigarette dangling from his lip, demonstrated batting with a washing paddle. She was surprised at Severus' bowling. He was good. She wished her father was there to see him.

She hadn't thought of her parents much until now. She'd grown used to seeing them in June and December when she was at school and, once set, the precedent had gone unbroken.

She wondered if they even knew she was missing. She hoped not. She settled her mind on the notion of sending her parents a letter suggesting on a meeting in one of the nicer vacation spots where she would tell them about the whole Voldemort business she'd left vague since she'd entered the magical world. Somehow she had trouble shaking the thought that Severus would be the most difficult thing to explain to her parents.

It wasn't the fact that he had been her teacher at Hogwarts; she long understood her father was more than a bit older than her mother. And it wasn't that he was bordering on being a Dark Wizard. Her parents tended to turn a bit patronizing whenever the topic of good and evil in the magical world came up, as if they'd caught her telling fairy stories. No, her parents would be disturbed, she realized, watching Severus bowl with more pleasure than she'd ever imagined she could gain from sport, because Severus Snape was markedly working class.

Half Blood Prince her arse.

Then having had the thought, she revised it. Now that she considered it, working class boys did not learn auto theft at their father's knee. Most likely even the faux Burberry set shunned the Snapes as trouble.

She would carefully arrange to meet her parents at some ski resort in Vermont or Colorado, and they would look at Severus as if she had eloped with some lesser-known Kray cousin.
Severus smelled disdain even where none existed, so that would be perfect.

Especially since he was particularly at ease in awkward social situations, she thought sarcastically.

She felt a strange wave of sadness whose root she couldn't quite identify, as Severus bowled a fairly difficult looking ball that, amazingly, one of the Shakelegs -- Robert, she was able to identify after a moment by his sparse but long moustache like the faux Chinese villain in an old Dr. Who episode -- hit the ball, sending it flying.

The physical grace she'd taken for granted when he'd glided across the stone floors of Hogwarts like an academic spectre took on a new, markedly sexual aspect, as she watched him preparing for the next ball. He stretched his long arms, rolling his shoulders, then took her aback by sprinting toward her.

"Will you hold my jacket?" he asked, peering seductively through his lashes. "I can't bowl properly... My range of motion is impeded... The leather is somewhat stiff."

"Absolutely," she said making a point of smiling at him. She'd given it a good deal of thought and decided the thing he needed more than any other was encouragement when he behaved well and to have a firm hand when he didn't.

Despite a current diet swimming in cream and butter, the cutting, chopping, grinding muscles that were the result of twenty years of potions work were still apparent. He glanced over his shoulder at her an instant before he started his run up. Good god. There was something piquantly divine about his brand of masculine charms. Especially when he had that ghost of a grin in the corner of his mouth; it was as though he was saving a kiss just for her.

Want radiated off of him in waves, in a way that made simple sexual desire seem weak and pallid in comparison. Yes, he did have lust in his heart. She knew that for certain. But more than that, he wanted her time, her attention.

It was an unnerving day when she realized he'd adjusted all the mirrors in their bedroom so that every one reflected her as she sat at her desk studying.

When she'd been involved with Ron, he'd seemed to forget she existed on a regular basis. There were likely laws against some aspects of Severus' husbandly devotion. Was it necessarily an obsession if he waited all these years for her? Could it be anything else under the circumstances? Was it unhealthy of her to enjoy it?

Hermione Granger's skin prickled with arousal as she continued watching him and he continued to work hard at pretending he didn't notice. She caught him glancing her way, mock careless.

There were objective reasons to find him appealing; namely she was attracted to him and she genuinely liked him. He was intelligent. He was also reliable in a way that only a man nursing an obsessive interest could be. Somehow the fact that he found her worth making such effort intensified her natural reaction to his smouldering looks.

The moonlight tracing his crooked profile against the night did not grant his looks any favours. Still, her heart beat a bit faster simply seeing him illuminated so. Severus Snape as he was.

She wasn't sure why it seemed so asinine when Ron tried to show off on her account on the Quidditch field, and yet Severus Snape flirting with her like a schoolboy over a makeshift Cricket pitch with Ozzy Osborne ringing out across the field was almost unbearably... Well, the word her University classmates would use was "hot".
Her fists clenched on his leather jacket, and she found herself raising it to her face. It smelt of cigarettes, and while she still disapproved of smoking and thought it was a disgusting habit, she now associated the smell with Severus, specifically affection from Severus, which did not disgust her. The most intensely emotional sex of her life now was accompanied by the lingering smell of cigarette smoke, so her reaction to the odour was getting a bit muddled. The jacket also smelt of leather and, she inhaled deeply, Severus' sweat. She wanted to laugh because her first reaction to the aroma was just short of swooning. How silly. She managed to hold in her laughter, but she did smile.

She looked up only to see Severus staring, staring at her sniffing his jacket with a silly grin on her face. She blushed, hoping he couldn't tell from where he stood.

His next ball was a thing of beauty, but it paled beside the way the muscles in his shoulders flexed with the motion.

It was past 2 a.m. when they burned the stumps. Hermione could safely say she'd never watched a game of cricket so intently in her life. For his part, Severus... Well, Hermione had never seen him so happy. The Shakelegs seemed to like him, which was notable in itself. Her husband was generally an acquired taste.

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Severus Snape was having such a good time that his mood did not disappear even as he wound his way through the roads connecting Midlothian with the greater metropolis. He could not speak for all Red Indians, or even the majority, but the Shakelegs, at least those he'd acquainted himself with today, were fairly tolerable; a pronouncement he hadn't made upon any group since Avery et. al. said they were willing to overlook his paternity in light of his more sterling qualities.

Hermione was smiling sweetly at him from the passenger seat, he could feel it even in the dark, but he wondered what she would have to say on the topic of his friends. She had met them in battle, obviously, but that was hardly the same as an evening at the pub. She and Millie were thick as thieves these days so perhaps, unlike Evans, she would have got on with his crowd, had circumstances been other than what they were.

It was her similarity to Evans as a child that had initially attracted him, more than her intelligence and beauty; it was the way she took pity on the impoverished in both body and spirit, from mangy cross-eyed cats to boys who couldn't make it through potions class without having their hand held.

Even as a grown witch, she shared that special indefinable quality with Evans, whatever it was that made every wizard want her, every witch want to be her, and as far as he knew every dog want to hump her leg. Somehow, though, Granger had changed direction after he left the school, diverting sharply from Evans' path. Instead of settling down with a Quidditch trophy of a wizard and popping out brats, post-haste, Granger had done her best to get a sample of all the available wizards in England while sharpening her skills as an Auror.

It was almost as though she waited for him. Waiting to become the Lady Bountiful to his HMS Bounty, he added the sour thought.

She was different in other ways as well, more decisive, more focused. More something else he hesitated to lay a name on. The quality that delighted him most also unnerved him to a degree.

It was Evans' modus operandi to come and go like a will-o-the-wisp. She appeared when it pleased
her, whether it was twenty minutes before the agreed upon meeting or three hours after. She extended her friendship exactly as her mood dictated and not a drop more.

Granger was different from Evans. For one thing, Granger seemed to like him more.

His stomach turned vigorously to admit it. It was a strange, traitorous thought.

He had always imagined that Evans' place of primacy would remain inviolate, but he lately surprised himself by finding fault when he compared her memory to Granger.

Granger treated him with equity. She asked nothing that she was not prepared to return in kind. She even went so far as to give some indication she thought of him when he was not directly in front of her face.

Because she would not take things from Muggle shops, a silly attitude if you asked him, though no one did, he did his best to keep her supplied with money enough that she could at least have a sodding soda between classes.

He might not be a Malfoy, but he could manage that much.

He wasn't sure what to say when she spent her week's crisps and soda allowance buying him a book.

It may have been that moment when she'd forever toppled Evans from her place in his heart. As if sensing his warm thoughts, Granger laced her fingers with those of his free hand. Only his Granny Liz, Eileen, and Lucius had ever given him gifts before. He had not had a present of any sort in years. He pressed his lips to the back of her hand.

At that moment his heart felt full, like a bird ready to take flight.

A goosefleshed shiver ran through her; he could feel the shift as the fine hairs on her arm stood on end and her very skin seemed to tighten, and the sensation passed through him until he had to shake his shoulders in an attempt to rid himself of it. More money and oral sex were all that was lacking to make his happiness complete. The world at large seemed bent on denying him more than what was necessary to keep body and soul together, but Granger had it in her power to supply the other.

Perhaps it was the disorientation of the moment that loosened his armour and subliminally encouraged Granger to ask her question.

"Severus, have you ever wondered what you might have done with your life if you hadn't been born a wizard?" she asked curiously.

The lights of the city were becoming thicker as they drove closer to home and heart of Fort Worth. He'd recently discovered that while he worked in Dallas, at least technically they resided in Fort Worth. He felt vaguely embarrassed that it had taken him months to realize it.

"I am not in the habit of idle speculation. It is not something I do," he said, "historically speaking." This was, of course, a bald faced lie. He could not turn left without agonising over what would have occurred had he turned right, but he felt no need to share this with Granger. She was a bright girl; she'd come to realise it on her own sooner or later. Let it be later.

"Have I offended you?" she asked; she tried to let go his hand, but he was not willing to release her.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I was merely startled."
It was true. He had not given that particular question thought in some years.

That did not mean he did not have an answer for her; it simply meant he was unsure whether he cared to share it.

"Then answer the question," she said.

"In all likelihood I would be on the dole," he said finally, "that, or the nick.

Dependent of the state, in any case."

"Severus Snape, that's not what I meant and you know it. Besides, you didn't answer my question. What would you have liked to do?" she pried, or he felt she was prying and fought it off as awkward.

"It's a rather intimate question, isn't it?" he said.

"We are intimate, at least in my estimation. Most of my past relations were what one might accurately describe as impersonal. But you and I are intimate," she said, gesturing to her ring.

"And?" he went on; the landmarks all suddenly familiar. He would not say their relations were impersonal, but there was a certain amount of rejection in the way she didn't ever seem to consider putting his cock in her mouth.

He vacillated between wonder at what she gave him and consternation at what she didn't.

"And I would like to know what your hopes and dreams were before it all turned into dressing like the boogie man on weeknights and committing acts of vandalism," she said in that way of hers that made him feel as though Minerva McGonagall had just caught him having a fag behind the greenhouses.

She had also summed up nine tenths of his time as a Death eater rather succinctly.

"Swear you will not laugh," he said.

"You have my solemn word," she said.

The zoo passed. He wished to fuck he had some idea what he was supposed to say. The truth was the most likely appropriate.

Odd that. It was such an insignificant piece of information, it was silly to guard it so, and yet sheer terror gripped him as the topic wore on. He had the irrational urge to leap from the car.

"According to my father avoiding embarrassment in front of the female of the species is of paramount importance."

"Oh really?" Granger said skeptically.

"It is also his sage opinion that the only thing worse than breaking wind in the presence of a romantic interest is declaring one's love. Were I to ask him, he would most assuredly rank admitting one's infantile interests somewhere in the vicinity of intestinal gas on the spectrum of poor judgement," he said, watching their home approach.

"He sounds very romantic, your father."

"He was and is a complete waste of skin. The man poisons everything he touches. Had the
circumstances of my life been sufficiently different..." he said then stopped. He could not bring himself to continue.

He searched the radio for music that was not an abomination to his ears, trying to convince himself he was not simply filling the awkward silence with radio static.

"I'll go first," she said, seeming to think for a moment. "The only time I fellated Ron, Ron Weasley, I gagged... to the point of vomit," she said. It was a non sequitur, but after moment's thought it occurred to him she'd said it in an attempt to even things up between them. Granger was the queen of quid pro quo. He wondered why she hadn't told him what she'd aspired to as a child.

Still, the topic of oral sex was, necessarily, intriguing.

"Is this some devious form of psychological torture you've learned at university?" he said feigning irritability in lieu of revealing his confusion.

Couldn't the witch understand he didn't want to be bloody embarrassed?

Wasn't what grew between them enough without inane questions? "Ply me with embarrassing questions then attempt to induce feelings of inadequacy?"

"No, that wasn't it. He was overexcited, and he thrust down my throat rather vigorously," she said carefully.

"Still," Severus said tightening his fingers round the wheel as he turned onto their street. "I am no Ronald Weasley, is that it?"

Granger turned to him. "No, you're not; your penis is bigger than his."

"Thank you," he said suddenly feeling better, but not that much better, such was the patent unfairness of his life that the Weasley boy had got a blow job, and he hadn't. Did that mean she liked Weasley better?

"It wasn't a compliment," she said, but he knew it was.

"It's hardly an insult," he answered, thinking of how he might induce her to fellate him. He had manners; he could lie still as the dead if there was a blowjob in it for him.

"It was a statement of fact. You have an enormous penis," she said.

"Do you have to call it that?" he said.

"What?" she said.

"Penis," he said, not bothering the mask his dislike of the word. "It makes me feel as though I am trapped in a medical text."

"What do you want me to call it?" she said.

"Cock is acceptable," he said, turning down the street toward home.

"Fine. Your cock is so abnormally large I am concerned that I might choke," she said sounding exasperated. "Does that make you happy?"

Severus Snape considered repeating his comment about the medical texts, but instead he decided to focus on more important matters. He knew Granger; fairness was her calling card, so logically,
instead of trying to convince her to give him what he desired, it made more sense to give her something similar in hopes she would feel inclined to respond in kind. Create a sense of obligation as it were.

As he pulled up in front of the house, he decided would lick her pretty little cunt. It would be two for one, really.

Turning the key and shutting off the ignition, it occurred to him he hadn't answered her question. "When I was a small..." he paused and restated that bit for emphasis "...very small child, I would at times amuse myself with the notion of becoming an astronaut."

"That is possibly the dearest thing I have ever heard."

"On second thought, I'd rather you laughed."

Hermione knew something was up, or as Severus would say "afoot".

He was exponentially more hygienic now than he had been during their Hogwarts days, but the Severus Snape she knew did not shower at 3 a.m. without ulterior motive.

He came to her with a towel wrapped around his waist, which very nearly did her in on account of the aggressive erection, which rendered the towel little better than window dressing.

"Do you mind?" he said, motioning for her to move towards the head of the bed; she did.

"Open your legs please," he said. "Move up a bit more; the bed is rather short."

"Can't I go to sleep? I'd like to go to sleep."

"I intended to lick your cunt. If you'd prefer to sleep, suit yourself."

"I'll sleep after."

"Good girl," he said, patting her leg awkwardly. He had no idea how to approve or encourage much of anything, so it sometimes came out peculiar when it came at all.

"Your skin is soft," he said, stroking the insides of her thighs with his fingertips.

"Severus," she said, reaching out to touch his head. Good god, it was wet.

He'd washed his hair. He was very serious about this.

He attempted to lie down between her legs; there was a thump and an...

"Ow, fuck!" Severus said, clutching his knee. "This sodding bed is too short. I would have been fine had it not been for the unnecessarily ornate footboard.

Once again the Malfoy aesthetic has proven to be a pain in my arse."

"I believe the bed came with the house. How badly are you hurt?" she asked.

"I doubt an amputation is in order if that is what you mean."

"You don't have to do this, you know."

"I wish to do it," he said. lying down beside her.
She stared at the ceiling feeling a bit guilty, partly that he'd injured himself in the course of trying to pleasure her, and partly because she wished he'd stop whinging about his bloody knee and get licking.

It didn't take long. Only a minute or so and Severus turned his long, still mostly thin body, smelling sharply of soap, round. Deft fingers stroked her belly, leading deliciously downward. But when she tried to return his touch, she was rebuffed.

"Cease and desist immediately."

"I was only...."

"I know what you were only, and I said stop. You're breaking my concentration."

"Yes, dear," she said sarcastically.

His long bitter tongue glancing between the cleft of her labia curbed any further sarcasm she might have been planning.

He had not licked her before, and knowing what she knew of him, had likely not licked any other woman, either. Still he had enough experience with Hermione's sexual response to take the skills he'd gathered from manual stimulation and intercourse and apply them orally.

One, two, three, four slow strokes that barely grazed her clitoris, and she was already wiggling uncontrollably.

Severus withdrew his lips and cupped one hand gently over her mons. He was such a bloody tease. At times she suspected he loved nothing more than hearing her beg for more. It made him feel wanted, she supposed.

The thing about his teasing, it felt so good when it was over.

He gave her another furtive lick and then another before withdrawing once again.

His fingers traced divine mandalas on the insides of her thighs.

A groan came to her throat quite on its own.

The sex she'd had with Ron was best compared to a ride around the block on a shiny red fire engine, sirens blaring. It was definitely fun and absolutely exhilarating, but she would be the first to admit the experience lacked a certain complexity.

Severus sucked her clitoris into his mouth, and her entire brain went muddled.

Although Severus' ability to resist orgasm was unpredictable at best, ranging from impressive to abysmal, her sex life with him these short few weeks was always something of a production. Pleasure was the stage on which their emotions played out; everything from doubt to bliss to pain like an endless black well cast its shadow in their bed. Even with his penis inside her and her tongue in his mouth, his desire for her seemed insatiable.

She had the distinct feeling whatever restlessness Severus had was catching.

She found herself longing for him, even as she held him in her arms at night, sometimes across the breakfast table, and heaven knew Severus was not endearing in any way, shape, or form upon waking.
She adored him. The funny part was that she felt just as strongly about him when his trousers were on. Though at that moment, whatever he was doing between her legs was very effectively shutting down the higher centres of her brain, and it only added to his appeal. As though a building was being demolished somewhere in her brain, there was no thought, only the feeling of exquisite bursting open, which seemed to be occurring simultaneously in her head and her genitals. She herself was cracking.

She did not realize until she regained her senses that she had wound a handful of Severus’ damp hair round her fist.

Severus pulled himself away slightly and cleared his throat.

"You appeared to have enjoyed that," he said woodenly.

Hermione knew what was coming next; he was going to expect fair recompense. She could either refuse and hurt his feelings -- something like that would bring on a sulk of which North America had never seen -- or she could acquiesce and risk vomiting on his penis. It was not a scene she would like to replay with Severus. Ron had been traumatised enough. Severus, who was already the single most neurotic person she knew, would be likely to go into a major depression.

While she was in the midst of her quandary, Severus muttered something that sounded strangely like a mumbled, "I like to wank."

"Excuse me?" she said, sitting up a bit.

"I should like something; it is fair, is it not, that I should have my turn now,"

Severus said, somewhere in the borderlands that lie between anxiety and defiance.

"Absolutely, as long as it's within reason," she said, setting her hand on his leg. "I would give you fellatio, I would, Severus; I don't want to sick up all over your cock."

"That's not it."

"It isn't?"

"I should like to... to pleasure myself, and I should like you to look at me while I do it," he said, closing his eyes; his voice was barely a whisper.

"Is that all?" she asked, surprised at such a simple request.

"I should also like, like to..." He paused and cleared his throat. "I would also be gratified if, I might touch my cock to your cheek. A kiss would be agreeable."

"You would like me to kiss your cock? Press my lips against it?"

"Yes, I believe I should enjoy that a great deal."

Hermione was not entirely certain she had heard him correctly; it seemed an almost banal request from a man who kept magazines of women in nearly every sexual position imaginable, like some mangy suspenders and bra version of the kama sutra. It was one of the peculiarities of Severus Snape that he was, in strange ways, almost childlike in his simplicity.

"Certainly, I can do that much," she said as he sat beside her on the bed, his white fingers tight around his blushing red penis.
He reached out and brushed a stray curl out of her face. It was a thoughtlessly intimate gesture that simultaneously meant nothing and a great deal indeed.

It was altogether odd being looked at like that. Hermione had always imagined that objectification would be unpleasant. The tableau certainly had the earmarks of objectification, but somehow it didn't fit properly.

Severus gaze seemed more worshipful than anything. Was that it? Had he made her into a heathen idol?

He leaned toward her, pressing the head of his penis to her cheek.

"Would it be permissible to request a smile?"

She grinned broadly at him and laid a chaste kiss near the weeping head of his cock. Cock. It wasn't strictly accurate, but it wasn't an altogether bad word.

Severus breathed in deeply, his chest shuddering.

Hermione rolled over onto her stomach and laid a row of similar closed mouthed kisses up the length of his shaft, smiling all the while. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Severus' fist grasp a handful of bed sheet.

She laid her fingertips in light caresses over his testicles, and he made an odd noise, almost a whimper.

Remembering his request, she brushed his cock against her cheek again, this time blowing him a kiss as she did.

He squeaked. She didn't know such a thing was even possible.

Slowly, with the barest, gentlest caress she was capable of, she brushed her lips across the head of his cock.

Restrained tremors passed through his hips, and he shamelessly gripped the headboard.

She'd hardly done anything, but there he was, Severus Snape, by most people's estimation Dark Wizard extraordinaire and scary bastard, and he was unabashedly weak and at her mercy. It was a strange conflicted feeling that held her in its grasp. As gratifying as it was to see the soft underbelly that lay under all his sneering and snarling, she was consumed by the desire to grant him some sort of succour and protection.

Hermione's own nipples were hard, and her cunt was pounding with the beat of her heart. She had never been so aroused; she felt like a lioness devouring her prey. She had no conscious thought when she slid his cock into her open lips.

Severus' fingers dug into the bed frame so hard his short nails splintered.

This was divinity, this power. Hermione heard a growl rising around her, and it took a moment for her to realize it had come from her own throat.

"Ssssstop," Severus said with a shudder.

Hermione obliged, difficult though it was.

"I want you to fuck me," Severus said, trembling, still holding onto the headboard. "The condoms
are in the bureau drawer."

"Are you certain?"

"Quite," he hissed, his jaw clenched.

Quickly and with steady hand, she ripped open the foil package and unrolled the condom onto his penis, mindful to avoid trapping air bubbles. Just as mindfully, she climbed astride him.

She was aroused enough that there was not even a passing discomfort as she slipped him inside her. His penis was so hard she could barely believe there was living flesh sheathed inside the latex.

He inhaled sharply through clenched crooked teeth.

She rocked back slowly, allowing his large hands to slide up her torso, grasping her breasts. He grasped her nipples between his callused thumb and forefinger. His grip was harder than she would have imagined she'd like, but under the circumstances it was perfect.

She rocked forward, sending another shot of lightning through her body as her breasts, brains, and vagina began to battle for sensory primacy.

Her eyelids closed of their own accord and behind them she saw scenes that were wholly unfamiliar to her. Even as her body shook and her heart raced behind her eyes, a peculiar blue light filtered through the leaves of countless trees, the scene flashed as if seen from the vantage point of a person running through a forest. Or THE forest; it seemed rather archetypal. Then she recognised her surroundings.

The forbidden forest.

She sat up, and her eyes shot open. She had been running through the forbidden forest.

It made no sense whatsoever.

The thought was lost as Severus pulled her to him, rough hands tangled in her hair.

His black eyes stared wide, no emotion evident in them but imploring. All trace of keen intellect and sarcasm discarded on the floor beside his trousers. His mouth opened and closed, fishlike, as if he were groping for language.

His starving want opened before her like a precipice.

And yet....

And yet his magic crackled so thick the air felt like flannel. She thought for a moment it was the after image from her orgasm, but no, a faint indigo corona was circling his blue black head, creeping toward his white muscled shoulders.

The dichotomy of his power and his need wrenched something loose in her she had only peripherally acknowledged.

"I..." she said, pausing as she met his hard thrusts with her own. "...love...you".

Severus’ hips went dead still as he gripped her face with both hands and held her fast as he stared hard into her eyes, his breath coming in canine pants.

Hermione had been in life threatening situations. She had been frightened before but never in
Sometimes it seemed the involvement of Severus Snape practically guaranteed drastic emotional stakes. Melodramatic sod. Any normal person would respond in kind. Still, her heart beat wild.

"Did you mean that? You love me?" he whispered harshly as they stared, each refusing to allow the other to look away.

She reached down and grasped his face in reply.

His cheeks were grey and rough with beard stubble, but his black eyes shone bright. All that was doubtful subsided in her as a wave of fierce love rose from her belly. She bucked her hips hard.

He answered her with a thrust of such singular purpose another orgasm came on her unawares.

She did not let go his face, simply did her quaking there, inches from his face.

"Yes," she said, suddenly angry amidst her intertwined ardour and pleasure.

"Yes, I meant it; I love you."

Then something not easily foreseen happened. He pulled her mouth to his, initiating a riot of hands, lips, fingers, tongues and teeth so frenzied Hermione gave up trying to sort it out. He made a noise that half grunted into her mouth, and she quite clearly felt Severus ejaculate, each drop of semen articulated.

Fearful again, she threw herself beside still and silent Severus on the narrow bed. Her suspicion was confirmed. The condom was in tatters around his penis.

This was not good.

"Fuck," Severus said, throwing his arm over his eyes.

Draco, meanwhile, was in his own room drawing up plans for Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Happy Christmas, Mr. Liston

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Happy Christmas, Mr. Liston

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands
And wrote my will across the sky in stars

To earn you Freedom, the seven pillared worthy house,
That your eyes might be shining for me

When we came

-- T. E. Lawrence

Epigraph to The Seven Pillars of Wisdom

Draco was rather more anxious than either Severus or Hermione, but then he had the holiday to worry about.

All his life Draco looked forward to Yule. It was the high point of his year. His parents loved and coddled and indulged him on a daily basis when he was growing up, but at Yule they went to lengths to outdo themselves and each other. There were custom-made training brooms and fanciful toys to delight even the most jaded wizard when he was small, and, as he grew older, the gifts became if anything more extravagant and wonderful.

Of course there would be silly pantos starring his Dad and the rest of the usual crowd. He suspected Mr. Mulciber looked forward to dressing up and taking a girl's part year after year.

In short, Yule was the time of year that all the things he appreciated shone.

Serious industry and intelligence were expended so that the food, clothes, and presents were the finest to be had, and that there were themes, and entertainments of all sorts, and of course round after round of parties.

Draco loved parties, especially dressing for parties.

The only trouble was, Draco was now Father.

Even after he'd married, holidays in the wood were the purview of adults, or at least those older than himself. Severus might stuff an ill-wrapped trinket in his stocking and disappear to get drunk on the other end of the wood for a week or two, but in the end, even Severus had more holiday responsibility than Draco.

Before, someone else planned things, arranged parties, bought presents, hired Chinese acrobats. This year it was up to him, and his handicaps were severe. Firstly, he was among Muggles; for safety's sake, the use of magic would have to be foregone, much as the prospect pained him. How was he to arrange a proper Yule with no magic? And second, his finances were not endless.

He had a budget, which was worse than having to make do without magic.
How was he to give his little family any sort of Yule worth mentioning under circumstances like that?

And yet, giving up was not an option he could allow himself. For Millie's sake, for Baby Phil's, for Severus' and even Granger's, he had to use all his training and intelligence to devise the best celebration he was able under the circumstances. For the first time, it no longer troubled him to have compromised his dignity. He slept well for a time after that.

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Hermione felt a bit sick as she contemplated the variables in the theorem before her. It didn't require years under the tutelage of Dr. Vector to sort this one out.

Her last period ended three days ago. She'd admitted to Severus and herself that her feelings for him had passed from simple gratitude, lust, and friendship into something else entirely. In a sense, giving her a belly full of ejaculate was a fairly eloquent response on his part. Even Muggles knew reproduction, speaking arithmantically without even realizing it, preferred the stability of the number three. Millie had supplied numbers one and two. The appearance of offspring number three was, from a magical perspective, inevitable as falling downhill.

Unfortunately, she had absolutely no interest in motherhood at present. It might be sort-of-interesting in an abstracted, distant sort of way to entertain the thought of a child on some far-off day in the fuzzy future, but as a reality?

The thought of a child now growing inside her this very minute, putting a damper on school and spreading their already thin finances even farther, added to the child Millie had multiplied by the one she was carrying, was all a bit much; "a bit much" in the same way that Voldemort was something of an inconvenience.

She would have to find a way round it. Muggle medicine was notoriously ineffective when applied to a witch's reproductive system, so she would need to manage it magically, even here among Muggles, which meant a certain amount of persistence and imagination would be required. Not to mention diligent care.

Severus meanwhile peeled the tattered remnants of the traitorous condom into the waste bin and switched off the light whispering "Nox" under his breath from force of habit.

Standing over her - she never realized he could loom naked - he lifted his chin, seeming at that moment every inch her distant old schoolmaster, despite the fact that he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing.

"I'll brew you a potion in the morning," he said, neither heavily nor lightly, neither pleasantly nor unpleasantly. "Now shove over, so I may get some small amount of sleep before I do so."

She wriggled over to make a place for him to lie beside her, provided he laid his head in the crook of her arm.

Severus stood impassive several beats longer than was necessary before rubbing his eyes furiously with the heels of his hands and settling into her arms and bed.

"Are you certain you've the necessary ingredients in your stores?" she asked, wrapping her arm round his side.

"I will manage," he said sleepily, shifting so he rested against her. "I assure you."
"You're certain?" she asked. She couldn't help herself.

"Quite," he mumbled, taking hold of the hand she was using to stroke his belly. "I've a knack for inhibiting reproduction. I successfully managed to brew an abortifacient before ever entering Hogwarts."

They lie there quietly. She could feel his body relaxing by the second.

"For whom?" she asked after holding the question in as long as she was able.

"My mother... She was rather indisposed at the time," he muttered. She could nearly hear the sound of sleep taking him.

Despite the late hour it was rather longer coming for her.

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Millicent Bulstrode Malfoy might be many things, she was undeniably fat, unquestionably brutish, and anyone who knew her even casually could tell she was bloody-minded, but stupid she was not.

An intrinsic part of not being stupid was knowing when her husband, the knob, was up to something. Simply because she was fagged out beyond all reason, it did not necessarily follow her brain had dribbled out her ears.

She lay awake with the bloody dog-buggering hiccups, yet again, stewing over what the idiot was up to this time.

It had something to do with the computer. She knew it the same way she knew the dough rose under the tea towel.

She glared at Sleeping Draco and fought off the urge to grab his pointy little nose and pull. On second thought, she'd just pinch it shut.

She turned, her belly impeding her for the first of what would be many times, and closed thumb and forefinger expertly over his nostrils. It took the count of five before he started to flail, ten before he had the sense to open his mouth and gasp for air.

He was still grasping and kicking when she began her interrogation.

"What are you up to? I've lost patience with waiting for you to trip up and tell me on your own."

"What?"

"I asked first."

"Millie?" he whinged, squinting as he got his bearings.

"What are you at with that computer?"

"Work," he said, rubbing at his eyes.

"Work? Explain yourself, how do you work at the computer? Snape said it was just for looking at pornography," Millie said. He'd sodding better not be holding truck with naked totty. She'd hate to have to orphan little Phil.

"You know how Severus is; he sees quim in every knothole in Hogsmeade."
Millie frowned; there was an element of truth in that. She'd always attributed that to their Head of House being chronically hard-up for female company.

"Explain to me how you go to work on the computer."

"It will be easier to show you; get your dressing gown," Draco said groggily.

"The computer's right here."

"But the television is in the lounge."

"And what has working on the computer got to do with the telly-vision?" Millie said, arms across her chest, not sure she wanted to see what Draco was going to show her.

"Come to the lounge, Millicent," Draco said, getting testy and sounding every bit like Mr. Malfoy, though the way he was looking at her, more and more impatient by the moment, reminded her more of his mum.

Grudgingly, Millie climbed out of bed.

Draco punched on the telly-vision and flipped until it fell onto one of those programs he liked to watch, the ones with the moving paintings, the car tunes they were called.

This one was about a little dog living in outer space. Or something like that. It had a pet flea.

"What do the car tunes have to do with the computer?" Millie said.

"I use the computer to make the cartoons; I do Flory the Flea, just the pictures not the voice, there's an actress for that."

Draco always drew since she could remember; she never imagined he could get Muggles to pay him for it. Millie made a conscious effort not to let on she was surprised; as an alternative, she glared.

"You're not ashamed, are you, about me having a job?" Draco said sheepishly.

Millie couldn't keep her brow from furrowing. "Start from the beginning," she ordered, "and explain."

"The offices are over by Severus' bar. I recognized the sign on the door from the little... it's called a logo, after the program ends."

"Go on, how did you get them to hire you?"

"Fascination," Draco said, wiggling his fingers in demonstration. "You lot act like Uncle Severus is the only wizard in the house."

"How do you draw on the computer?" Millie asked.

"It isn't proper drawing, exactly but it's... I can show you better than I can explain it. It took me longer than I expected to get the knack, but I'm quite good now."

"And you do this at home while I'm at work?"

Draco nodded. "Except for Wednesdays. Wednesday mornings, Phil and I take the bus to the office for the weekly meeting."
Millie rubbed her eyes, suddenly tired now her curiosity had been satisfied. She'd rather go to bed than listen to Draco give her the particulars in excruciating detail. Pulling her dressing gown closed, she headed for bed.

"Aren't you going to wait for my name to roll on the credits? I'll be right there, Nigel Black, plain as anything. Then I was going to show you how I do it on the computer," Draco called.

"Not tonight, I'm tired," she called behind her.

"Dearest?" he called after her.

"Tomorrow, when I've slept," she called from the bedroom.

She was already drifting off when she heard the sound of Draco running.

She pried her eyes open when he shook her shoulder the second time.

"You aren't upset with me, are you?" he asked.

He looked dear, for a stupid git, his hair falling in his eyes, his expression on the brink of pleading. If she'd said it once she'd said it a dozen times, she'd married the single most infantile male on Earth.

"Course not, Silly Bugger, you've done well," she said, pounding the space beside her on the bed. "Now shut up and let me sleep before I change my mind."

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It was nearly noon before the two of them, Severus and Hermione, also known as Stephen and Jane, left the house for Severus' well-hidden laboratory.

"Have you brewed since you left school? " Severus asked, once he shut the port-a-loo door behind him and they were safely inside his laboratory.

Hermione couldn't help but look embarrassed.

"I'll take that as a no," he said archly.

"Potions making requires a great deal of time," she said in her own defense.

"And my flat was a bedsit."

"I did hope..." he trailed off, standing, staring at her, his head cocked. "Never mind."

Hermione winced. "What do you intend to make?"

"There are several variables to be considered."

"Such as?"

Severus stood and stared at her, his expression impenetrable. He shrugged, but it seemed to her to be a singularly unambiguous gesture.
Hermione stared back trying to puzzle out what was going on inside that thick skull of his.

"What variables, Severus?" she finally asked, when she gave up trying to catch his beady black eyes. He was intent on looking everywhere, the floor, the table, the blue fibreglass walls, everywhere except her face.

"Would you like to be pregnant?" he said in a voice that would have been casual except for the softness of his tone; he was quite nearly whispering. "I should have inquired earlier. Technically, I venture the most... diligent of the sperm will not reach the ovum for another 12 to 15 hours, but I feel reasonably certain, if steps are not taken, conception will be achieved at that time. If that is what you desire, it is not necessary to take any further action; though I could, I suppose, ensure it, if you like."

"Isn't that rather impractical?" she asked, shocked at the words coming from his mouth.

"I did not address the issue of practicality. If it is what you desire, I will see that it is made feasible. A witch gains power through pregnancy, I do not wish to give the impression that I am attempting to slow the growth of your magic in any way," he said, still not meeting her eyes but rather diffidently scraping at the scarred tabletop with his thumbnail.

"And how do you, Severus Snape, feel about it?"

"My personal feelings are complicated."

"In what way?"

"If you desire a child, I'll be buggered if anyone else is going to sire it. Furthermore the idea of impregnation is... not repulsive." He coughed a bit at the admission, shaking his hair down over his eyes. "The reality is another matter entirely. Your school would no doubt be hindered, and our finances are already strained. But I will not have your will thwarted. If need be, I am more than capable of taking on another job."

"And your personal feelings are?"

"Immaterial. I desire to fulfill your desires," he said, peering at her through a curtain of unkempt hair.

"Just tell me how you bloody feel about it!" she said, exasperated.

"It scares the piss out of me. Infants are bearable, but in truth I find children to be a sodding miracle of affliction. Perhaps you recall your school days," he bit out.

"That's all I wanted to know. I happen to agree; it's impractical, and I'd prefer to finish school and establish a career before I have a child, if then."

Severus breathed out sharply, suddenly able to look her in the eye.

"Neither of us is prepared for parenthood; you're allowed to say that. You have something to say about everything; why dance around a subject that actually matters?"

Severus pursed his lips again and inhaled.

For his second act, he folded his arms across his chest "I do not wish to see you discontent."

Hermione narrowed her eyes.
"I endeavour to please you, such as I am able within my meagre circumstances." He shrugged. "Impregnation is within my means. I would not deny you, were you to wish it. Were I a wealthy man, I would deck you in jewels rather than salty pearls." He managed to sound both adoring and filthy at the same time, and his lip curled in response to his own bad joke.

"I'm not particularly interested in jewels." Hermione studied his face even as he pulled his hair to cover his eyes again.

How had she forgotten that this same wizard had given himself to twenty years of miserable servitude over a boyhood crush? Moreover, the witch in question, as far as she could ascertain, had hardly done more than hold his hand.

He had saved Hermione's life and now worked a menial job in order to support her. Experience had shown he would humiliate himself, break his back, suffer Cruciatius and more in exchange for even the slightest regard.

He was not like Harry or Ron. He wasn't there with his list of demands, always wanting more.

It was strange to see him, Master Snape, essentially unchanged from her school days in so many ways, and yet she knew that he was cringing, living in fear of her displeasure. What was the worst she could do to him?

Stop loving him? It made her chest hurt to imagine.

She could no more stop loving him than she could cut off her own head. It was a morose notion to her that both ideas seemed equally absurd. She'd never felt sillier in her life. She had to be in love.

"So, what are you going to brew?"

"I've wild carrot, the hook shaped bone from a frog, fillet of fenny snake, the toenails of twelve pigeons, a fairly unlimited supply of cockroaches, and curdled goat's milk. If I am able to locate sufficient quantities of copper and moonflower leaves, I will brew a potion which will annihilate my spermatozoa as soon as they are inside you."

"How long will the potion be effective?"

"A few days past six months, possibly it a bit more. It would be longer were the carrots fresh, but they are not."

"Will it take long?"

"Three hours, once I find the copper. Any other questions?"

Hermione stretched out her hand, catching the empty belt loop of his jeans with her finger.

"I do love you, you know. I meant that."

In response, Severus' eyes flickered shut, and his lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd prove it to you, but there aren't any raging battles handy. I would like to save your life if I could..."

Severus' eyes flickered open as she continued to pull him to her, his lips parted as if he didn't know what to say.
It was one of those odd moments; he reached for her, she folded her arms round him, yet he remained stiff, as though he was not quite sure how to respond to a touch that was neither violent nor sexual.

"Thank you," she whispered into his ear.

"May I ask what for?" he whispered back at her.

"Everything," she answered.

"That seems excessive," he replied. She could feel his lips touch her ear.

His body seemed abnormally warm as she held him to her. She stroked his hair, already dishevelled and leaning toward greasy. She inhaled, breathing in the scent of her sex still clinging to his face. He remained impassive, his muscles relaxing in almost imperceptible increments until he cleaved to her, limpet like.

They remained that way for some time.

~~~

It was at tea that same day, the sort of tea they always had when Millie was off work, complete with tall cakes and tiny sandwiches - they ate like scavengers otherwise - when Granger saw her way clear to bringing up the next burning topic on her personal agenda. Though Millie dropped a little bomb of her own.

"Pass the violet sugar will you, Granger? Did you know Draco got a job?" Millie said, as Phil in her arms sucked earnestly on the end of a pickle.

Severus' eyes bulged as tea shot unambiguously out of his nose and his cup clattered to the table, snorting and coughing and starting all at the same time.

"What?" Severus asked, wiping his face and righting his cup.

"Draco got a job with the telly," Millie said. "He draws on the computer."

"That's wonderful, Draco," Granger said, rather surprised herself. "When do you start?"

"The beginning of October," Draco said, which was notable considering it was nearly December.

An odd silence followed as the four of them looked round the table. Draco could only be described as sheepish. Millie smirked, which was the sort of thing Millie only did internally most of the time. Severus' expression seemed to be one of combined disbelief and pride and trepidation. Perhaps Granger didn't realize the entire issue was more complex than it looked from her vantage point.

"I usually see my parents in December," Granger said. "I've put some thought into it, and I believe I'll give them a call after tea."

Instead of the hail of protest she probably would have got from three Gryffindors in similar circumstances, for her trouble, she was awarded three narrow-eyed stares. Millie gave her one of them.

"My parents expect a call from me before the beginning of December; if they don't, they will attempt to contact every wizard and witch they know. The question is: phone them before that, or risk them poking at The Dark Lord's Britain trying to reach me," Granger said and took a swallow
of tea.

Severus, meanwhile, was leaning back in his chair, arms folded across his chest, staring at the ceiling. "And I thought the issue of in-laws had been neatly avoided."

"I would like to know, definitively, and without question, if there's any chance the family of Muggle-born witches and wizards are having their telephones monitored," Granger said.

Draco looked at Millie, perplexed; both of them were trepidatious as far as the phone went. They stared at one another, their brows knitted; they never even knew it was possible.

Severus snorted. "Not in this lifetime or any other is it even possible to imagine the thought occurring to any Death Eater to tap a Muggle's telephone."

"You're certain?" Granger asked.

Severus pushed his chair back loudly and stepped into the hall, bringing the strange white rotary phone he'd connected a week or two after they'd come to Texas. Its cord stretched to the limit, Severus and the phone came to a stop five feet away from the table.

"It's eleven o'clock at night in London," Granger said.

"I fail to see why I should be the only one who is inconvenienced." Severus scowled.

Granger looked at the Slytherins around her then back at the phone.

"Call, now."

Slowly and deliberately, she pushed the buttons.

"Mum?" Granger said, and Millie heard a sharp female voice answer on the other end.

"I didn't intend to call so late," Granger said, as Millie and the other Slytherins watched and Phil threw his pickle on the floor. Whack made off with the pickle before Millie could bend to get it.

Sometimes that cat was dead peculiar.

"No, no, nothing's wrong. I, well, I do have good news. Yes, tell Daddy to pick up the other line," Granger said.

Severus scowled and mouthed the word "Daddy" at her. Granger gave him a two-fingered salute in reply. Millie laid her chin on her fist, her eyes darting between the two of them; this was better than anything on the Telly, Draco's show included.

"Daddy? Are you listening?" Granger said. "You know how you've always been concerned that there aren't really any options for continuing my education in the magical world? I started at University this summer.

"Pre-Law," Granger said.

"Well... that's the bad news, Mum; I don't think I'll be able to make it home for Christmas this year. I'm attending University in America.

"Yes, I'm in America right now, and there's more..." Granger looked at Severus whose expression was dark and impenetrable, like he'd just lost the house cup. Draco, meanwhile, was twirling a butter knife in his fingers like a wand. "Daddy, Mum, I got married."
"Are you still there?

"No, He's English. He's a wizard. No, not Ron... Wait, I thought you liked Ron. Hmmph."

Severus apparently picked up enough of the other end of the conversation to grace Granger with a superior smirk.

"His name? Of course he has a name... His name is... Stephen Liston. He's Muggle-born," Granger said, and they all watched Severus' left eyebrow slowly rise.

Draco dropped his knife.

"Well, yes, it was something of a whirlwind romance. I mean we'd known one another for years but the romance was rather sudden.

"No, he was never a classmate. I mean after school. We got to know one another after I left school.

"Not this Christmas, we're a bit strapped... School fees.

"No... I'm not... Yes... Yes... We've agreed I need to focus on my school. He's not at University; he's working to pay for my school.

"Yes, we're living as Muggles. We aren't compelled to live as Wizards simply because we can. Thank you. I'm glad you approve.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea.

"No!

"It's not that I don't want to see you. I'm not ashamed of you. How could I be ashamed of you? Good god, Mummy!

"He's dying to meet you as well.

"Dallas. Dallas, Texas, yes, like the telly program.

"Lovely, I can hardly wait."

Millie watched as Granger looked round the room with a horror-stricken expression she had never seen on the witch's face before, not even when she was covered with blood in the airport loo.

"They're buying plane tickets in the morning," Granger said, addressing Severus. "And they're looking forward to meeting you."

Snape slumped forward, covering his head with his hands.

"Does this mean we're having Muggles for the holiday?" Draco asked excitedly.

"I, no doubt, will be the one on the spit with an apple in his mouth," Severus said mournfully.

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It was two full weeks later that Hermione had something of an existential crisis. She thought, if the truth were known, her psychology text might say it was high time, considering all she had been through.
She was in the midst of her final exam for her Psychology class, having already completed those for Calculus, English Composition I, and Biology.

Soon, all she would have left was American History to 1861.

The clock ticked pleasantly, and she filled in the appropriate bubbles with her number two pencil, a bit let down that she had already completed the essay portion of the questions in her regulation blue book.

She regretted that Psychology had not been more rigorous overall. She wanted more from her current university than the university appeared to be able to give.

She wanted information, she wanted knowledge, and had it doled out to her in teaspoons, liquid and soft as pabulum, when what she wanted was great horse choking bales of unrefined knowledge to leave her belly distended and stick in her teeth. She had expected to gorge on knowledge at university, not go to bed hungry but for the intellectual grace of Severus Snape.

Her fellow students seemed more concerned with socializing than they were with learning anything. It was depressing to admit their attitudes were virtually indistinguishable from the worst of her Hogwarts days, the primary difference between the two being that she hadn't fought off a troll with any of her university classmates, and so she found their inanities not the least bit endearing. On consideration, she realized she knew the names of only a handful of students from all her classes. She counted. Six. She knew six of them by name. Two in this class: Mrs. Choate, a middle aged woman with spectacles, and Andy, whose last name she didn't know. In American History, a student named Carl Ross sat near the door and sometimes ran errands for the instructor. In Calculus, a woman named Rachel served the same function.

A peculiar and smelly young man named something German she could almost recall sat near her in Biology. That counted, right?

In English Composition, an outgoing girl with a thick accent and white blonde hair had introduced herself on her first day as "I'm Jessica, and I'm from Cookie Town." Hermione would hardly describe them as friends, but Jessica did talk to her; she talked to positively everyone about positively anything. Every English Composition began before the instructor arrived with Jessica's running monologue on the events of her morning. In fact, it occurred to her that Jessica was the only Muggle she had got to know on her own since she'd been in Texas, not that she'd had any choice when it came down to it, the barrage of friendliness was so insistent.

Hermione was only interested in her schoolwork, and frankly she thought Jessica something of a twit. But to be fair, Jessica did sometimes specifically address Hermione.

Did she live on campus?

No.

Did she live with her parents? Jessica's parents were back home on their farm. The farm near Cookie Town.

No.

What was her name, again?

Hermione didn't recall telling her a first time, but Jane, Jane Liston.

She had some kind of an accent, Jessica said. It made her sound intelligent, where was she from?
London.

London like England? That London?

Yes.

It was always something tiresome along those lines; she'd much rather be left alone to concentrate on the facts at hand. What she wanted was more concentrated education and less socializing.

What was wrong with Hermione, that this was the only person she knew?

Other people made friends without assistance from life threatening situations, why couldn't she? Or perhaps that wasn't it at all. Perhaps she simply had little in common with other people. After all, she got on with Severus perfectly well the majority of the time.

She answered the last five questions on the examination.

Severus Snape wrote more bracing tests in his sleep. In a sudden rush of insight, she felt every bit as socially maladroit as she had ever been accused of being. She realized for the first time what a good match they were, she and Severus.

She looked back down at her exam before rising to stack it on the instructor's desk.

Forgive me, Freud, for I have neurosis.

I must, my husband suits me, she thought to herself as she strode from the room and then the building, warmed by the knowledge that Severus was sure to be in his usual parking spot, waiting for her.

Unfortunately, who should block her path to him but Jessica. Every blonde freckled farm girl bit of her, as husky and healthy as a field hand.

Jessica from Cookie Town.

"Girrrrl!" Jessica shrieked, her arms open wide, and for a horrible instant Hermione feared she might hug her. "I been lookin' all over for your narrow behind."

A smile froze on Hermione's face; perhaps she was addressing someone on the other side of her.

"Janie! Have I got a date for you or what. My boyfriend's brother is up from College Station, and I told him I had the purtiest little ol' British girl in my English class. I thought he'd appreciate some sophistication bein' a graduate student and all." All this was delivered at break neck pace and the top of her lungs.

Hermione blanched. "I can't," she said simply.

"Well, why the heck not?" Jessica asked, agog.

"Because I'm married?" Hermione said, brandishing the ring on her hand like a shield.

"You are?" Jessica from Cookie Town said, tilting her head in confusion. "Let me get this straight. You got a husband?"

"That's him there," Hermione said, pointing to Severus in the car, who narrowed his eyes and took a drag from his cigarette in response.
Jessica, being Jessica, linked her arm with Hermione's and made a beeline for Severus.

"Hey," Jessica said, literally sticking her head into the car window. "I am so sorry I tried to set your wife up on a date with my boyfriend's brother. He's a dumbass anyway; Pardon my French."

Hermione would have said Severus grinned a sharky grin, except his baring of teeth was no smile at all. "I was unaware dumbass was Froggish."

Hermione leapt in. "Jessica, this is my husband, Stephen Liston. Stephen, this is Jessica; she's in my English composition class."

'I'm from Cookie Town. That's how come I sound like a big ol' hick. Are you from London too? Like Janie here?" Jessica said, thrusting her hand at Severus to be shaken.

Personally, Hermione was surprised he didn't bite it off.

Severus kissed it instead. "I admit I hail from less exalted climes."

Jessica jumped as though she'd been electrocuted.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

Severus smirked. "And should you lose me my wife, Miss..."

"Weiderstein."

"Miss Weiderstein." He gave her an appraising stare, so rudely honest in its sexual aspect that Hermione felt an odd sensation she didn't recall having experienced since she was a teenager. Severus went on, "Would you be willing to find me another to take her place?"

The emotion was jealousy with annoyance following close on its heels.

Jessica's eyes were as big as saucers. Hermione couldn't say if she was terrified or aroused.

Severus Snape laughed, or at least made a short sharp noise that was his equivalent, and flicked his cigarette out the window. He was such an arse, playing his little game of real tit for imaginary tat.

"Shall we go?" he asked. "Phillip is a growing restless."

Hermione looked in the back seat. Sure enough, there was Baby Phil in the safety seat Draco had been so keen on. Phil had, predictably, pulled off his socks and was chewing on them earnestly. At least she hoped Phil had done it and it wasn't Severus' idea of appropriate infant care.

She didn't ask for fear of getting the wrong answer.

"You got a baby, too?" Jessica whose surname she hadn't known before today asked.

"To be honest, he came from the rubbish bin," Severus said, with the ghost of a smile. "A location I seriously considered returning him to after his most recent nappy."

Jessica brayed like a blonde donkey then grasped Hermione by the bicep.

"Janie, honey, I am so sorry."

"He is an unattractive child, but I don't believe condolences are quite in order,"Severus drawled.
Jessica brayed again, barely able to catch her breath. "You slay me."

Severus' eyebrows shot up, but pity stayed his tongue, or perhaps the field was so rich he had trouble choosing the best response.

"But seriously girlfriend, I got no business setting you up on a date. A husband and a kid both, no wonder you're so serious. This girl is soooooo serious."

Hermione looked at Jessica and then at Severus wondering if she ought to disabuse her of the notion Phil belonged to the two of them. What was the point?

Shaking her head, Hermione climbed into the car. "Goodbye, Jessica."

"Bye, y'all. Don't let her work too hard, you hear?" Jessica Weiderstein said, waving, friendly and cheerful to the last.

Severus pulled the car away with a screech, frowning.

"She's rather young, isn't she?"

"She's rather annoying. She is, however, the same age I am," Hermione said, straightening her books, "not unlike Millie and Draco."

"You may be the same age, but you aren't half as young," Severus said pensively.

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Severus Snape pulled a cigarette from the packet and held it between his lips unlit.

Since he and Granger had become intimate, he suffered odd flashes of inexplicable emotion from time to time.

Watching the girls come and go from their classes and realizing Hermione was virtually indistinguishable from the others, at least superficially, he felt a peculiar discomfort. He'd been her schoolmaster. When he'd entered into his position as Potions Master, he taught girls he'd elbowed out of the way in the Slytherin common room. He taught girls who taunted him that he might be able to pull more successfully if he were better acquainted with a bar of soap.

Undeniably intelligent as he was, it never before occurred to him that while the girls of Hogwarts remained eternally eighteen to eleven, he grew incrementally older each year.

He was like some doddering old perv. Not that forty was much beyond childhood for a wizard; it wasn't. It didn't look bad at all until you stood it next to twenty-one. Still, it was a damn sight better than thirty-five and sixteen. Fifty and thirty-one would look even better if he could go that long without cocking it up.

His feelings at that moment were muddy. Between the two of them, Granger had the upper hand. She was beginning to recognize she was more master now than he was. Certainly he was every speck as intelligent as she, yet she seemed to have some advantage that eluded him, as though she had experienced more variety, more sheer experience in half the time.

Perhaps she had.

Severus pressed his lips around the cigarette.

He had been right all those years to yearn for her; though he doubted he'd have the same opinion of
another man in his thirties wanking over an adolescent, no matter how bright. He wondered if Lupin had the chance to admit to him, before Sectumsempra or Avada or whatever they used took him, what a dirty game he and Black and Severus had been playing at, growling at each other, straining round the leash of propriety over the prize of a half grown witch.

The thought came unwanted, that it hadn't even been Granger he, or the others for that matter, desired, but a second chance to win Evans from Potter, Evans projected onto Granger's straight back and eternally raised hand. It took little imagination to fashion Potter the son into Potter the father. All he'd wanted was a chance to prove his worth to Evans.

Granger was a far cry from Evans.

What he got was better than what he'd aimed for. It was odd, but he had the sense that somehow in the process he'd gained footing on the thing he was struggling for when his troubles began all those years ago: manhood. It pricked at him that he so often felt like a boy among men, most of his fellow teachers had had him in class; he was easily excited, childish, too loud, even when he purposely whispered so quietly the rest of the world had to strain to hear him, pedalling like hell at what should have been as natural as breathing.

He strove and felt short of what the rest managed without effort.

Recalling the way he'd desired Granger before he truly knew who she was roiled in his gut like tainted meat.

He stifled the urge to ask her forgiveness. Not one word on the matter would pass his lips if he had any choice. He was well aware he was a bloody awkward sod; he saw no need to belabour the point.

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Hermione was sure she had been, at some point in her life, more nervous than she was meeting her parents' plane with Severus; she simply couldn't bring it to mind.

She didn't even object when Severus, as was his habit, used fascination to jump the queue and strode his way past metal detectors using a flick of his thumb and forefinger and a bit of wandless magic.

She did, however, draw a firm line at smoking at the terminal.

He growled but replaced the thin white stick in the packet all the same.

He was bored, he claimed, waiting in the plastic chairs for the plane to arrive.

She should let him wander round the airport.

She got the impression he was in abject horror of two middle class dentists.

She made him stay, mostly because she was more than half certain he'd run away if she didn't.

In the end, he amused both of them by reading aloud from a discarded paper he found wadded up in the rubbish bin.

Severus was particularly entertained by the police blotter.

It was one of those new vistas opened up by her relationship with him. She'd never read a police
blotter before she was involved with Severus.

The blotter was followed by the classified ads.

Links were drawn between items for sale, job openings, garage sales and divorce decrees in a nearly hysterical game Severus invented where he assigned items, motives, and personalities to couples who had the misfortune to have their divorce decree listed in Sunday's edition of The Dallas Morning News.

Mr. Brown's wife left him because he was a cross-dresser and had ruined the shape of her best knickers. She was selling her Lexus on the back pages after she discovered an unwholesome number of panty-girdles under the rear seat.

Mr. Hernandez' wife was caught having Sapphic trysts with the leader of her ladies book club, and as a result their His and Hers matching SUVs were going for half what they were worth.

Mr. Mueller was leaving his life as a plumber, as well as his wife and four children, to sail the seven seas as a pirate. He had an unhealthy fixation on coconuts. In a fit of rage and despair, the former Mrs. Mueller offered his collection of Don Ho records on a first come first served basis.

Mrs. Applen came to the sudden knowledge that if she was forced to listen to Mr. Applen clink his spoon against his morning tea cup one more time she would be driven to violence. Little did she realize Mr. Applen was already neck deep in a sordid affair and had run the family into terrible debt in an attempt to keep his cruel mistress satisfied.

Further speculations were cut short by the roar of an approaching aeroplane.

Panic washed over Hermione like a playful dunking from Hogwarts' resident giant squid. She looked at Severus, helpless to render him acceptable in the minutes before her parents set foot on solid ground. His hair was too long, his teeth were cigarette stained and crooked, and he dressed either like an aging greebo or the prince of darkness. His manners tended to be either supercilious or non-existent. There was nothing about him that either of her parents could latch onto to reassure themselves their only child hadn't taken leave of her senses.

Mentally giving herself a good hard shake, Hermione buckled down and concentrated until the blood felt like ice water in her veins.

Her parents undoubtedly loved her.

Severus undoubtedly loved her.

It only stood to reason that an accord would be reached.

That didn't stop her heart beating as though it was attempting to beat its way out of her chest when she saw her mother's slightly dishevelled bun, followed closely by her father's wavy grey head, pop out of the snaky, accordion-like tunnel that led from the plane.

They walked directly to the place where she and Severus stood; her Daddy, suddenly her same lovely old dad he'd always been rather than an object of anxiety, wrapped his arms round her. Her mum, though, stopped before Severus, looking him up and down critically.

"Happy Christmas, Mr. Liston," Mum said, extending her hand to him. "You are Mr. Liston, aren't you?"
Chapter End Notes

For Lora
A Very Preposterous December 22nd

"He'd bellyache about it if they hanged him with a new rope,"

--The Writer's Grandfather

Hermione Granger, the love of his life, fire of his heart, the sin of his loins, the witch whose very existence was the machinery that propelled him forward, had been engendered not only by two Muggle dentists, but by two Muggle dentists who listened to ABBA.

Severus Snape learned this unsettling bit of information in the car while he was attempting to locate a bearable radio station and found himself compelled to stop the dial on precisely the sort of thing that made him long to puncture his own ear drums. The only option that might have been worse was Elton John, but he wasn't sure; it was probably a toss up.

Perhaps she had even been conceived to some snippet of the noxious fluff.

Unbidden, a nauseated look crossed his face.

He had it on good authority he himself had been conceived up against the wall in the corridor outside the women's loo at the local pub. According to Eileen, Lloyd Price was singing "Stagger Lee" on the jukebox. He could say this for his mother, while there was no disputing her judgement was shit where the male of the species was concerned, he'd never questioned her musical taste.

On consideration, he preferred a clout upside the head from his Muggle father every now and again to growing up listening to nothing but the likes of Stubby Boardman; it was like Pat Boone for the wizarding set. Only they didn't have any Elvis to speak. Or a Link Wray, much less an Ozzy.

"So, Stephen, were you a barman in the wizarding world as well?" Granger's...mother - yes, mother, that tone of voice could only come from a mother - asked, narrowing her eyes at him from the back seat.

He looked back in the rear-view mirror. "No," he answered.

"Stephen was a potion maker, more of a researcher, really. Developing new potions and improving those already in existence," Granger interjected. She was telling the truth, albeit one full of holes, but not even the most scrupulous could call it a lie, he'd grant her that much.

"Why don't you find something more suited, if tending bar is beneath your abilities?" the mother said lightly.

"Like your daughter, I entered Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry directly from primary school. As you know, the possibilities are somewhat limited in the Muggle world for a man with little formal education."

"Why did you do it, then? Why leave behind a career and lifetime of work?"
Severus nearly pulled something in his neck, jerking round to look her in the eye, inadvertently hitting the brakes. "Would you care to know the truth?"

"Yes," she said with a gleam in her eye. "I did ask."

"The war went rather badly for our side. You are aware of the struggle between the Purebloods and Muggle-born wizards, are you not?"

Dr. Granger snorted.

"It is hardly a laughing matter, I assure you. The war went against those who felt a more inclusive society was to the benefit of all. Neither your daughter nor myself would have been safe as things stood, let alone free to pursue our chosen professions," Severus said, manoeuvring the car onto the shoulder and shutting off the engine.

"Are you saying Hermione was in danger? Real danger?" the father said.

Hermione who had meanwhile gone wide-eyed and pale as the proverbial sheet turned round in her seat to face her parents.

"I'm sorry, Dad. It all sort of sneaked up on me," Granger said, spreading her arms in a way meant to indicate either helplessness or perhaps it was a plea for forgiveness.

"What sneaked up on you?" her mother asked.

"Everything. The magical world was rather more dangerous than I led you to believe."

Severus said nothing, simply watched as the parental attention shifted away from him as though he'd never been the cradle-robbing miscreant the mother's gaze had wordlessly named him.

The father had ignored him from the beginning. It was a tactic he could both understand and tolerate. It was as good as it got, really, being ignored.

"I was nearly killed twice my first year at Hogwarts," Granger said. "It only got worse as time went on."

"Why weren't we notified?" the mother said.

He'd never even considered it at the time, but now that she'd brought it up it seemed a fairly reasonable question.

"It all seemed to be perfectly under control," Granger said. "And I didn't want you to worry."

"Where were the adults in all this?" the parents asked, more or less simultaneously.

"Hiding behind the children, for the most part," Severus found himself saying before he could stop himself.

He pinched his lips shut, looking helplessly at Granger, hoping she'd take pity on him and say something, bloody anything.

"Stephen was... very involved in the war effort but he differed with the way our leaders conducted..." Granger said slowly, as if each word was the bleeding stump of a rotten tooth being extracted. He knew, for once, precisely what she was holding back. If she couldn't bring herself to say it he would.
"If you won't say it I will. It was Dumbledore. I felt Dumbledore was passive when he should have been active. He left the school and the students far too unprotected. He was far too lax with his student's safety. I was also uncomfortable with the heavy burdens he placed on the shoulders of mere children. I felt, and still feel, it was cruel and unnecessary in addition to being an unwise gamble" Severus was surprised how liberating it was to finally criticise the old goat. Aloud. To an objective third party. 

"Sounds as though you were right," the father said grimly.

"There's more," Granger said reaching over the seat to pull her father's sleeve straight. "The day we left England... I feel I should tell you this in the new spirit of openness..."

"Go right ahead, Mr. Gorbachev," the mother said.

"S...Stephen saved my life. I would have been killed were it not for him."

"So, the two of you are essentially refugees," the mother said, astutely.

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Draco was feeding Phil, and Millie knew without turning around he was taking a bite of stewed cherries for every one he fed the baby as he did it, the shit.

"You call that feeding the baby?" Millie said, sinking her fist in the dough.

"As a matter of fact I do," he answered, his pronunciation indistinct on account of his full mouth.

Millie clicked her tongue in disgust and concentrated on the task before her.

The saffron stained her fingers yellow as she as crushed it into the dough before carefully taking the hair she had put aside, slick black and thin and just as carefully split it along its length. She squinted as the repeated the procedure twice more so that four long quartered lengths of a single hair lay before her.

She gave a quick blow with her knife followed by another and another until twenty blows had struck the single hair reducing it to specks as numerous as snowflakes on the counter. She sprinkled them carefully onto the mashed potatoes followed by several good cracks of pepper to disguise the bits of Snape.

"What are you making for the Christmas Muggles?" Draco asked after he'd swallowed.

"Supper," Millie said absently as she put her will into the heart-shaped ring of cardamom she was sprinkling over the dough.

"Uncle Severus is so fucked," Draco said conversationally.

"You think?" Millie said, now pounding in a hand full of almonds for each of them, herself included.

"Social situations are hardly his strong point," Draco said. Millie could hear the faint ringing sound of wet metal as he licked the spoon. "Besides they are Muggles, aren't they? And not the good kind."

Millie wondered what constituted "good Muggles" in Draco's upside down book right before she thought of a thousand pointless arguments she could make to counter Draco's reasoning, if you
could call it that. It didn't matter. No matter how Draco misunderstood the problem that wouldn't make it go away.

She answered with a "Mmmmph," as she stretched half the dough over the backs of her knuckles.

"What are you doing, Mil?" Draco asked. She could practically hear him squinting at her.

"Unfucking Severus," she answered, giving him more than she intended to as she twisted the long strands of dough together and laid them carefully round the edge. She could hear Phil grab the spoon as Draco rose from the table, carrying him over to get a good look at what his mum was doing. He was going to give him bad habits if he kept that up.

She took no mind of either of them, laying the apples and cherries in their concentric rings, just as she would have had her husband not been hanging over her shoulder like a great blond well-dressed dementor.

"Do you reckon you're a natural irritant, or do you have to work at it?" she said, closing her eyes so she could concentrate.

"He'll know. One bite and he'll be able to tell," Draco said, shifting Phil on his hip.

"Of course he will, and he'll be a fool if he objects," Millie said, sifting her hands three times through the golden sugar.

"What of Granger?" Draco asked.

"What of her?"

"She's bound to realise."

"You think she doesn't want her parents to like Severus?"

"The Muggles won't know?"

Millie looked at him. The trouble with Draco was he assumed every Muggle knew what he knew; he still didn't realise how big the gap between Magical and Muggle was. It was a wonder he didn't fall into the abyss of his own lack of awareness sometimes. You'd think he'd pick up more understanding of Muggles at work, but since they spent most of their time at his work playing pretend, she didn't suppose it helped clue Draco in much.

"I need to get the goose out of the oven before it goes dry," she said, waving him out of the way.

Millie pulled her hot pads out of her apron pocket and extracted the goose, inhaling the complicated smells, the rye crust over top of the bird, the sausages and apples inside. The spell was strong enough that she felt a wave of affection sweep over her and settle on Draco and Phil, and she hadn't even taken a bite yet.

Shaking her head a bit, she set the bird down, reattaching a doughy leaf, before turning up the fire and carefully setting her pastry in the oven.

She didn't even do anything when Draco reached out and untied her apron.

"You sexy thing, you're top totty, you know that?" he said.

Millie smiled against her will even as he ignored him.
"Did you make the biscuits for Santa Claus yet?"

"Do you think you're dealing with some sort of amateur?" Millie asked.

"Are you sure he can find us in America?"

"Don't be thick, Malfoy, we've a baby. A magical baby. Santa keeps track of every magical child born. We couldn't hide from him if we wanted," Millie said, fighting the urge to ruff up his hair. Silly bugger. "You'll get your fairy sweets."

"Promise?" he said, retying her apron, brushing his crotch up against her bum in a way that wasn't even slightly subtle.

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In the midst of the single most delicious meal Helen Granger D.D.S. had ever eaten, it occurred to her that she understood exactly what her daughter saw in Stephen Liston.

He was witty and just cheeky enough to be entertaining, and besides all that he was clearly besotted with Hermione.

He was a quirky sort of a dreamboat but a dreamboat nonetheless. She couldn't imagine finding a better candidate for Hermione's husband had she held a general election. He reminded her more than a bit of John Lennon without the glasses. Provided she squinted.

Dennis Granger D.D.S. felt at peace with the world in general and his new son-in-law in particular. Stephen was sitting very close to the potatoes and felt very free about passing them, which did not lessen him in Dennis' eyes.

As far as he could see, Stephen was doing well by Hermione, putting her through school. He was clearly devoted. Had it been another girl, he'd have suspected she was taking advantage of a smitten man's largesse.

True, he was a mite older than would be ideal but, to be honest, Dennis had never imagined his daughter marrying someone her own age. Considering what he knew of the life span of wizards, he was grateful to be older than his new son-in-law. It had been a particular fear of his for years that Hermione would set her cap on some old codger. It seemed the sort of thing she would do. After all, she'd practically been born middle-aged herself.

That was why the Weasley business had thrown him.

Dennis had never met anyone as unlike his daughter as Ronald Weasley.

Not that a bit of light-hearted carefree attitude was a bad thing. But he spent enough time with the Weasley boy to realize Hermione put forth more care and planning making a cup of tea than Ron spent on his entire school career.

Opposites might attract, but Dennis was old enough to know attraction in itself was hardly a basis for an extended weekend much less a marriage.

This Stephen, on the other hand, he seemed a better match for Hermione as far as temperament and inclination went. Hermione with Stephen seemed, well, happy. She seemed like the bright conscientious girl he'd known for twenty odd years instead of the relentless harpy she was
transformed into when her school friends were about.

Hermione had never been more grateful to Millie in her life. This was real friendship.

A fiasco of the first order had been brewing in the car, and if it took a calming draft and a spell for affection worked into dinner to set things right, she didn't mind.

Not that Severus hadn't tried. Sadly he was on his best behaviour both at the airport and in the car, and after three hours it was clearly all he could do to hold himself in. Never mind that all his good behaviour didn't amount to much.

It was an unfortunate reality that there were trolls who were better at ingratiating themselves than Severus. He just didn't seem to have it in him. He was the only person she'd ever known who was worse at making meaningless chit chat than she was. If he was quiet it tended to be the creepy sort of silence that gave people who didn't know him well the unsettling feeling he was up to something. Those who were better acquainted didn't suspect, they knew.

If he spoke it was no better: he invariably talked about something that interested him, which meant there was a good chance he was complaining. It was a sad state of affairs when the best you could hope for was a ruthless deconstruction.

None of this meant Hermione didn't adore him. Rather it simply indicated that he was an acquired taste, like a particularly smelly cheese, the sort that left you in a baffled horror when you were a child wondering how adults could stomach such a thing but later, when you were grown, you looked forward to the ugly lump waiting in your refrigerator that made everything else seem bland in comparison.

Hermione took another bite of the potatoes. Without thinking she reached out and pinched Severus' earlobe between her thumb and forefinger.

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Even baby Phil seemed to stare at her. It was the first time she could recall blushing in years.

Severus Snape had had less uncomfortable rounds of Crucio. While he felt he could have acquitted himself admirably were the assembled party allied against him, he hadn't so much as an inkling as to how to get on with a table full of people grinning at him like addled-pated ninny.

Not that Millie's little trick was unappreciated. He wordlessly said a prayer of thanks to the twisted heart of Black Alice that beat in her granddaughter's well-padded chest.

To make matters worse, every female at the table had erect nipples. He wondered if he was the only one who noticed. He also noted the distinct absence of any sort of draft.

It was in both exhilaration and sheer terror that he realized he was a bit more than slightly attracted to his mother-in-law. Maybe the nipple business was a positive rather than a negative.

He wasn't stupid enough to seriously consider infidelity, much less infidelity with his wife's mother, but if it weren't for her daughter he'd do Helen Granger in a heartbeat. He found himself smiling back at rest of the table.

When Hermione reached out and grabbed his ear lobe in exactly the gesture she used to guide his face between her thighs, he knew he was in a dangerous situation.

Trying to do the most expedient thing. he turned his head, catching her hand in his and pressing his
lips to her palm.

"On that note, Mrs. Liston, I must excuse myself from the table. Have you seen my fags? I was under the impression I had another packet," he asked, still holding her hand in his.

Darling Hermione wrinkled her nose.

There was a clatter of silverware on the other side of the table. "Mind if I join you?"

"Mummy, I thought you quit!" Hermione all but wailed.

Dennis sighed a long-suffering sigh. "You know your mother, Hermione, how many times has she quit smoking?"

"Yes," Helen said archly. "Your mother is a hopeless drug addict."

Severus coughed. His mother-in-law was a bitch of the first water, he could appreciate that. Still it was his darling who, knowing full well what the consequences were, threw Dolores Umbrage to the centaurs. He sincerely doubted Helen was that hard-hearted; still she was a dentist so he could be mistaken.

"I regret," he said as he rose, lying through his teeth at least as far as sentiment was concerned, "I will be absent from dinner tomorrow. My presence is required at my place of employment. We've a rather large show."

"Oh," said Dennis leaning forward in interest. "We haven't been to a concert since..."

"Forever," Helen interjected "Who is it?"

"Motorhead," Hermione supplied. "Not exactly you and Daddy's sort of thing."

"Nonsense, it sounds like fun," the mother said, narrowing her eyes. He preferred thinking of her as 'The Mother' it was most likely safer.

"If Stephen can take it so can we," Dennis said.

"Stephen," Hermione said, with a barely suppressed laugh in her voice, "is a fan."

Dr. and Dr. Granger looked as though they thought she might be having them on.

Severus was in a strange circle of Hell, being liked that way.

Millie calculated well. The effects ought to last at least the duration of the holiday visit.

Though he wasn't sure if Millie's cure for his personal inadequacy was any better than the problem itself.

He needed more than a few glasses of wine to make it to bedtime. The pleasant hum in the back of his brain was growing distracting like static.

Millie's spell hadn't stopped Hermione forcing him to observe every nicety ever dreamed up by the middle class. No matter how much he'd prefer to save someone the trouble of washing up by drinking sensibly from the bottle, she forced a glass into his hand instead. Harpy.

Now his beloved tormentor was approaching him with that look on her face, that look that told him he was moments away from being taken like the virgin bride in a pornographic novel. She'd had
some wine herself, although he hadn't bothered to note how much.

"Don't look at me like that," he said sternly, or as sternly as he could manage on a gut full of wine. Her hands were at his waist, lifting the hem of his shirt, but he tried to warn her. "Your mother and father are in the next room."

"I know. I helped my father make the bed," she said, lifting his shirt to his under arms.

This seemed the very epitome of a bad idea to Severus, but he lifted his arms over his head for her to finish relieving him of his shirt all the same.

Granger kissed the corner of his jaw, and a pleasant shiver traveled down his body and landed in his cock, which hardened in response.

"What if they hear?" he whispered without intending to. "They'll think we're having sex."

Hermione whispered, "We will be." Her lips caressed his ear lobe. What was that girl's strange obsession with his ears, for fuck's sake?

God, but it felt good, though.

He shuddered, his cock twitching with every flick of her tongue.

He whimpered, not even bothering to attempt to stop his reaction.

Her parents were on the other side of the wall and Prissy Mind-Your-Manners-Severus Granger was pinching his nipple between her slender thumb and forefinger. The static had become a roar in his head. He opened his mouth to find Granger kissing her way from his jaw to his lips.

Her mouth was very wet, very open, and as he answered her kiss, he found himself lost in the stupid pleasure of his body, lost to anything that was not of his body and hers together, touching. He rode the roar in his skull like a wave.

"Tell me what to do." He whispered his bald desire between her grasping lips, unsure if she could hear him over the sound in his head.

"Lick my cunt," she said. Miraculously, he heard her, and it sounded like the best idea anyone had put forth all wretched day.

Severus snaked his arms up her back as he walked her backwards to the bed.

There was no hesitation on his part as he removed her shirt. Who gave a fuck about the bloody buttons shooting about the room like so many comets? Not he. And by the look of things, not his love either.

For once he felt in control, in charge, master of the situation as he laid her back on the bed. He didn't bother to remove her brassiere but simply pulled the cloth out of the way until her breasts stood bare, nipples exposed to the light. He took one into his mouth, then the other, relishing the taste of salt and sweat and perfume. He pushed them closer with his hands that he might move from one to the other as quickly as possible.

Granger lifted her hips to grind against him. He raised his head to look at her and felt at once doubly drunk, intoxicated by the heady knowledge of her desire, by her wild eyes and open mouth.

His hands, quite of their own accord, released their grasp to rub his palms against her hard nipples.
She arched her back.

He lowered his head and ran his tongue down the valley between her breasts.

The taste was divine.

He used all his powers of concentration, kissing his way along her torso while his hands made short work of her trouser buttons. His fingers lingered against her skin as he slowly pulled down her trousers: hip, thigh, leg. She trembled as he returned to her knickers, tracing the crest of her hip bone with his thumb before leaning in and taking the elastic edge in his teeth and pulling.

"Holy Shit, Severus!" she gasped.

He felt like Elvis with Granger's knickers in his mouth, his face skimming the length of her thighs as he drew off the last barrier between his tongue and her cunt.

His cock was so hard he pulled off his own jeans and threw them on the floor rather than allow his todger to strangle to death.

Still his head roared.

He laid a chaste kiss to the inside of Hermione Granger's thigh, and she mewed like a kitten.

It was followed by another, farther up, closer to heaven. Her hips wiggled. He brushed his lips along the satiny skin tenderly, her body so divine the act was complete in itself. When he reached the juncture of inner thigh and paradise, his tongue darted out to taste the crease between the two. The closer he got to his quarry the more delectable she became. He was so excited by the prospect, he found he had begun to salivate. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

A moment later he self-indulgently buried his nose in the harsh wiry curls.

Granger grunted in frustration.

"Severussssss," she growled.

In reply, he drew his tongue down the cleft of her, like the most delicious peach already split wide with ripeness, salivating for him as he salivated for her. He stroked her perineum with two fingers as his tongue slid back up to her clitoris.

Her hips bucked, and he found that, though he was licking her, his own hips answered in kind, thrusting against the worn and aged cotton sheets. It felt good.

He pursed his lips round the base of her clitoris, sucking and sliding 'til he reached the tip. On instinct alone he nipped the knot of savoury flesh gently with his teeth, careful not to bite down.

The groan Granger made seemed to come from the very core of her. His cock pounded against the mattress to the beat her arse drummed.

Severus licked a dozen licks, one wet lick after another. One arm reached up to stroke her side, the other, wiser, hand slid to insinuate itself into the slickness of Granger. One finger curved inside her as he circled her clitoris with his lips. It was his kiss to her, his attempt to force all the emotion he did not trust himself to speak aloud into her genitals, and her body spoke back in shudders.

He removed his finger and felt the discontent as her arse wiggled toward him, seeking out penetration. He crossed that first finger with the one beside it and inserted two in the viscous
passage, twisting as he went. Granger made a low throaty grunt and thrust down hard until his 
fingertips touched the edge of her cervix.

Severus felt as though his chest was going to explode with pride and pleasure and the raw delight 
of it all.

Still his tongue rolled up and down and over and around the seat of her pleasure.

Still his cock thrust against the bedclothes.

In the frenzy, an odd thing happened. His thumb inadvertently brushed her arsehole, and it was as 
though he had run a current through her body. She made a high pitched sort of whimper, and 
Severus, being smart enough to take a hint when it was given him, slipped his thumb, dripping wet 
from her viscous cunt, into her arse.

All of her seemed to be pulsing; her clitoris, her cunt, her arse. Even her chest was vibrating, and 
the tremors resonated through him. He now suckled her clitoris as he had suckled her breasts. He 
thrust his fingers into the orifices he could reach, and his cock strained against the bed until it 
became a kind of storm of sensation. His own body shook, and what he felt was more than he knew 
his body to be capable of feeling. It was as though he had been turned inside out and filled up and 
overwhelmed. And still he shook.

And Granger shook.

And he called out in joy and terror, and he no longer knew his name nor did he note the sticky mess 
he had made.

All that would return in the morning, accompanied by a painful headache and the need to peel the 
crusted sheets off his dick.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Hermione had hoped they could sail breezily through her parents’ visit, and when Millie emerged from the kitchen that night, her face shining, Hermione thought there might be some chance that Severus and her parents could make it through the week without decidedly alienating one another. She held her breath, drank a bit more wine, and clung with all her might to the idea that her dad and mum could conceivably come to appreciate Severus, and Severus, in turn, could refrain from dismissing her parents as hopelessly middle class and snarling whenever they were mentioned. Maybe it was more than a bit more wine.

In any event she probably should have known better.

The reasons she loved her parents were all good sound reasons. They were loving, intelligent parents who had done their best to provide her with a solid foundation despite the fact that, as her father would say, life had thrown them googlie when she turned out to be a witch.

She loved Severus, and she found when she considered it she did love Severus, she couldn't imagine what else the feeling could be, for good solid reasons as well. The rub being that the reasons she loved Severus were in almost exact opposition to the reasons she loved her parents.

Severus was difficult, demanding even in his solicitousness. As far she could tell, it never occurred to him to coddle her, not really, not beyond a glass of water for a screaming, sweating, shaking nightmare at any rate. Furthermore, he was the most puzzling, fascinating, infuriating person she had ever known.

He was the first person she'd had in her life who didn't give her the feeling she was metaphorically pulling them through every day by the scruff of their neck.

Severus might be temperamental and he might be awkward enough to make her feel socially adept, but she'd never felt so well matched with anyone.
Unlike Harry or Ron, she never had to look over her shoulder to see how far behind he lagged, like as not he was a half a step ahead.

It gave her a dim sort of a glow, despite the brain-flattening hangover, to look about the kitchen and see the people she cared for most in the world assembled around the gold flecked Formica table.

Even Draco.

She was even fond of bratty Draco. He was rendered almost endearing when he squatted in the kitchen milking the goat for Baby Phil's breakfast, as aristocratic as ever despite his occupation, even if she didn't care much for the hair-eating monster in question. Yes, Draco Malfoy, despite a wealth of flaws, loved his wife and child even more than he loved himself, and that was something notable.

Millie, meanwhile, had bound her own hair up in a single plait so tight it made her squinty eyes even squintier, if such a thing were possible. Phil sat silently taking in the room as was his usual wont, as if he would later make a report on them all for his alien commanders. Whack wound back and forth round the legs of Millie's chair.

Severus and her Dad wore similar wincing expressions as they drank their tea.

Her Mum seemed more puffy and red than pained as she sat with Whack, of all people, on her lap.

Not that Whack was a person, strictly speaking, though if push came to shove, Hermione couldn't say for certain that she wasn't one either.

It was this false sense of security, stemming from the bruised but comfortable atmosphere, that likely led to the fateful moment.

"So when are you going to let us have a look at those teeth, Stephen?" Helen Granger D.D.S. said with the earnestness of a professional who is so embroiled in her line of work she has never stopped to consider that there might be people who could take exception to allowing someone they've just met to poke about in any of their orifices.

At least not without buying them a drink first.

Severus went red. Literally. Red as some potion of sketchy legality.

The look on his face would not have been unfamiliar to any of his former students. It was an expression of stricken rage that during the collective childhood of wizarding England presaged bellowing and spittle and, on a few notable occasions, flying glass.

"Mum!" Hermione leapt into the breach before either her mother or her husband could damage mutual relations further.

Helen snorted. "From what I've been able to see, at least superficially..."

"Mum, stop it."

"Don't be silly, Hermione, I think a good bleaching and a bit of orthodontia would do Stephen a world of good. What do you think, Dennis?"

Severus pursed his lips together to a hard thin line; Hermione was not sure whether it was to keep in the vitriol or to prevent her mother prying his mouth open to have a good look round.
Dennis gave Severus a stare of bleary appraisal.

Hermione was relieved when Severus rose from the table and stalked out of the room, knocking his chair over in his haste.

Under most circumstances, she might think it was very rude but not even a fraction of what Severus was capable of. It was most certainly better than any alternatives Hermione could imagine.

"Didn't it occur to you he might be sensitive about his teeth?" She turned to her mother.

"If it bothered him that much, you think he'd have done something about them. Besides, I was only trying to be helpful. I see worse on a daily basis," Mum said defensively.

Dennis aka Daddy hmmphed into his tea.

"Weekly, then."

Unable to properly explain the breadth of her mother's faux pas, Hermione chose to chase after Severus instead.

Severus had been mocked and embarrassed throughout his life; she understood that and were it feasible she'd hex every last party responsible.

Nonetheless, it seemed to Hermione that despite his habit of imagining slights where none were meant, enough of them had been pointed and purposeful that he ought to have developed a tougher hide at some point. Honestly, he was as sensitive as a schoolgirl.

After a bit of searching, she was able to locate him, predictably, sitting in the car, looking terribly sorry for himself and smoking.

His first words when he saw her were, "The woman is a bleeding cow." His lips twitched as if he was prepared to say far worse. "If I'd had my wits about me, I should have offered to give her a pelvic examination in exchange."

"That woman, as you call her, is my mother, and she didn't mean any harm. It's what she does for a living. She wasn't trying to hurt your feelings, and I would be very careful choosing the next words out of my mouth if I were you," she said.

"I would have absolutely no objections were you to call my mother a cow," he said, sullen as he took another drag from his cigarette, "or worse. I know I have."

"I like my parents."

"More than you like me, apparently."

"Don't be such a..." Arousal was just one of the many emotions Severus was able to elicit from her with ease; exasperation was a close second on the list.

"Such a what?" he asked, squinting.

"A childish, hyper-sensitive, manipulative..."

"Perhaps you should bring the Pater Familias outside to have a go as well, seeing as he is the only member of your little clan who has yet to insult me this morning," he said, that waspish twist coming to his lips. "Or perhaps it would be more efficient should you simply commence packing up your belongings immediately. That was your intention all along, was it not? To return to
England with your parents now that you've tired of me? Or did you imagine I couldn't see? Poor
old Severus, he's such a fool where females are concerned."

Hermione stared at him a moment, utterly perplexed. Sometimes the things that went on in that
wizard's head could only be described as a wonderment of fuckery.

"Severus?" she said, moving toward him and resting her hand on his arm.

"I wouldn't be too concerned, my dear, I'm sure if you keep a low profile the Death Eaters will
never catch wind of your continued existence."

"Severus," she said, catching hold of his wrist. "What are you talking about?"

Severus in his turn recoiled then surged toward her like a striking snake. She was stunned to find
she was still holding his arm. His black eyes shone, and his lips were wet.

"Do you sincerely believe I've no idea how unlovable I am? How ugly?" he snarled. He flashed an
angry mockery of a simpering smile at her, baring his viciously crooked lower incisors and
oversized canines with a perverse sort of delight. "You think I don't know I am repulsive? Do you
believe I have no idea you would never consider me a romantic possibility under normal
circumstances?"

Their faces were mere inches apart.

It occurred to her that were she still his pupil he would be throwing things by now. All that
restrained Severus was likely his notion that she had the upper hand. She would do well to behave
as if she had it.

Hermione Granger took Severus Snape's other bony wrist in addition to the one she'd grasped in
haste earlier, effectively pinning where he sat in the car.

His nails were ragged from being bitten. It seemed perverse, but the same sort of glistening rage
that had terrified her as a girl made her heart beat hard in a completely different sort of way now
that she was older.

"My mother asked to look at your teeth, not especially unusual considering she is a dentist,
although I admit it might be a bit awkward coming from one's Mother-in-Law," she said. "The part
I don't understand is where this turns into my leaving you because you didn't get metal braces put
on your teeth when you were a teenager."

"Simple," he said, exhaling smoke through his clenched teeth and directly into her face. "You
chose me, though it strains credulity to call it a choice, since as far as you were concerned I was the
last man on Earth."

"Last man on Earth? Good god… They should have named you Hyperbolus."

"Last wizard, then. In any case, you no doubt would have preferred someone more appealing."

This was ridiculous. She had already treated Severus' antics far too seriously.

She let go his wrists and rolled her eyes in disgust, slumping in her side of the car.

"Stop playing silly buggers, she didn't mean to be rude. You're not an eight year old girl, Severus.
Suck. It. Up."
She appeared to have successfully disarmed her husband; his eyes went wide, and his lips parted and re-parted silently for an instant. Sorting himself out, not unlike a wet cat, Severus looked away and tossed his cigarette butt out the window, moving quickly to light a fresh cancer-causing agent.

"You're not going then?" he murmured, still inspecting the interior of his cigarette packet, his unwashed hair hanging over his face.

"The thought of returning to London never entered my mind," she chided him.

She caught it when his eyes flicked furtively toward her for an instant, but he said nothing.

"Smoke that cigarette, and then I expect you to come finish your tea so my mother may apologize properly," she said before darting forward and slipping a quick kiss on his stubbled cheek. "And stop sulking, you should realize by now I find you quite fascinating, crooked teeth, big nose, and all."

She didn't give him time to reply but rather bounded back into the house with a spring in her stride.

She felt oddly elated. Her mother had behaved true to form and so had Severus, and yet the sky had not fallen. All she had to do to contain them was maintain a sense of perspective.

She found herself humming tunelessly as she returned to her still warm tea.

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Severus thought it was just his luck that he had to work through a show when all he wanted to do was stand and stare, consumed by the music. One bloody show he actively wanted to see and he had to spend most of it mixing candy drinks for arrested adolescents whose palates were on par with the average infant's. He'd be serving vodka and pabulum before the night was out if this kept up.

He did manage to push his breaks as far as he dared, making his way to the stage with Granger in front of him. That way he was able to snatch a few minutes, his head nearly inside the speakers, the crowd so tightly packed that he had no choice but to press his cock against Granger's backside.

Brief as it was, he found the experience sublime. The music washing through him in waves, he was lost to himself in a way that was usually impossible except for a few moments during sex. While it could not be reckoned that his mind shut itself down, precisely, instead his thoughts seemed to expand until his brain lost track of who it belonged to and what it was supposed to be worrying over at that particular moment, not returning to it's regularly scheduled grumble until Shakeleg beckoned to him between songs that he needed to get back to pouring liquor down idiots.

It was then, as he made his way back to his place behind the bar, that it occurred to him how singularly pleasant it was to be attached romantically to a female. It seemed to him as he glared a path for himself to the bar, still holding Granger's hand, his fingertips in contact with her soft palm, that even at times like this when they were neither fucking nor talking, her mere presence soothed him and gave him an unfamiliar yet not unpleasant feeling best described as a general lessening of anxiety.

He ought to have had something like this earlier, when he was younger.

Unlacing his fingers from Granger's, he re-imagined his life as it might have been with her at his side from say, fifteen or so. Discounting the fact that she had not been born yet, he felt with absolute certainty that she never would have allowed him to be mocked or bullied, and he knew without much consideration she would have put her foot down right away about his going into the
Dark Lord's service. No, no such foolishness on Granger's watch.

He should have had her when he was younger. It would have changed the course of his entire life. If he could work out who to blame for the lack in his early years on, he'd have started plotting revenge right away.

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Dennis Granger couldn't say he was surprised, exactly, by how loud the music was, any more than he was surprised by the concrete floor, or the eye-watering smoke. That didn't make it any less overwhelming. He spent most of the evening with the skin on his face pressed back, like a test pilot in a wind tunnel.

The startling moment. The moment he later realized was one of those life altering moments, like his daughter's birth, or when he'd well and truly realized her Hogwarts letter was not an elaborate practical joke.

After the band was done, with his ears ringing and Helen in the ladies' lavatory, he, Dennis, saw his daughter, his daughter who had always been anything but physically demonstrative, reach out and squeeze a man's behind.

Man was the word his brain supplied, but at that moment he knew in his heart the operative word was husband.

That's it then, some small voice in Dennis' psyche admitted.

He watched them for a time amidst the milling crowd of waitresses, musicians, and various and sundry technicians after the last of the straggling customers had gone. Stephen said something presumably cheeky over his shoulder that made Hermione smile. Hermione loosed the tie of Stephen's bar apron. In retaliation, Stephen turned round and caught her easily by the hand as he laid his apron on the counter. She threw her head back in sparkling pleasure and laughed. Hermione, who since she was a child found it so hard to be easy with anyone. Dennis watched as Hermione looked at Stephen, and Stephen looked back at her as though the rest of the world had slipped away like soap bubbles. Stephen planted a kiss squarely on her glinting gold wedding ring.

That was it then.

Dennis keenly felt the loss of something he knew he never really possessed.

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Helen was a bit light-headed on the ride back to Hermione's house. Not drunk, mind you, just a bit light headed. She normally didn't burst into song, but it was Christmas time, and she was on holiday, and she hadn't been out to a concert in forever, even if this one wasn't her usual sort.

She had a collection of paper umbrellas and even two tiny red devils from the night's drinks in her coat pocket and felt full to the brim with holiday cheer.

Also she felt better about Stephen's driving under present circumstances.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen," she burst out half-mocking, almost flirting, but also overflowing with the sort of happiness one had when the perfect amount of drink had been imbibed.

Dennis looked at her out of the corner of his eye. If he thought he was going to spoil her mood, he was going to have a fight on his hands. She, Helen Granger, would declare war on any attempt at fun ruining.
She tugged on his coat sleeve and started again. "Good King Wenceslas looked down..."

Dennis, knowing what was good for him, joined in. "On the feast of Steeeeephen."

Buoyed by her success with Dennis, she prodded Hermione's back until she did her duty and joined the song. "Snow was falling all around..."

She was surprised when Stephen came in quite on his own. In the first place, she had already noticed, although she'd known him only briefly, he was very reticent and a damn sight short of jolly. Secondly, his voice was stunning.

He speaking voice was very engaging, certainly, but his singing was the sort of thing she'd never heard just tumble out of a person without warning. It shocked her into silence.

She hardly noticed as Dennis and Hermione dropped away as well, and Stephen went on into a rendition of "Silent Night" that seemed at once solemn and menacing. Inappropriately so. Chills raced up her spine.

Sorrow. Devastating sorrow followed inexplicably on the heels of terror.

Perhaps she'd had more to drink than she realized.

Without rhyme or reason that Helen could puzzle out in her currently not-pissed but pissed-ish state, "Silent Night" was followed by an energetic rendition of "Twist and Shout" which was both a relief and a bafflement.

The rest of the ride home was spent caught up in the voice of Hermione's husband. It was strange, but Helen felt ever so slightly bereft when the car pulled into the drive, and Stephen stopped singing and turned off the engine.

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Hermione enjoyed herself at the show, and Severus' behaviour had been stellar, particularly in comparison to what it could have been. His only lapse had been tossing the accumulated rubbish from the car at the Salvation Army as they drove past. It went without saying that he had deadly accuracy.

Fortunately he was singing at the time, so her mother didn't notice.

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Draco loved the night before Yule, there was no disputing that. He loved the preparation and anticipation of a grand time nearly as much as the grand time itself. In fact, he wanted to time his placement of presents in the lounge to coincide with the arrival of Santa Claus.

Draco frankly adored Santa Claus and would be delighted to see him again, Gryffindor though he was. Who couldn't love a man with a sack full of presents? The fact that he wanted the old man's job didn't lessen his fondness for him in the least.

Not tomorrow but some day, in the future, after he was older and his looks were going soft, he would do what he could to secure the position for himself.

Millie's family would certainly help there. Not just the individual members of her family, powerful as they were, but those who owed something to Old Alice Eye and her kin.
Draco, of course, would wear more fitting Slytherin green when he was Santa.

He was too young to have known the old Ravenclaw Santa in his sparkling blue robes from his grandfather Abraxas' day, but he always felt extremely fortunate to have been born after the time when Santa brought new babies as well as gifts. He enjoyed being an only child all too much. Still, he was perfect, or rather in another hundred years when this Santa was winding down, he would be perfect for the job. But as he carefully laid Little Phil in his relocated cot in the lounge, Draco Malfoy's mind was far from easy.

Tonight's problem was the gifts. Yesterday he had been stymied by how he was expected to wrap gifts without a spell, and he still wasn't certain he had exactly conquered that one. Now they were wrapped, how he was going to get them out to the tree without Millie seeing?

He didn't want to ruin it by letting her catch sight of them before hand.

It didn't seem strange to him that Millie all of a sudden over the past few days had begun to look noticeably pregnant. It was as though the first of his gifts had arrived, in a way. There was something so powerful about her, or perhaps he should say even more powerful, now that she was so full of life and magic everyone could see it. When she held Baby Phil in her arms, it was almost more than he could stand. She was like a beacon of strength and sex. He'd take one look and want to swoon. The mother of his children, protector of his home and hearth, it made him feel precious and cosseted in a bone deep way to belong to such a powerful witch.

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Millie sat on the edge of the bed trying to work a way round Draco.

She'd done what she could to acquire presents without anyone being the wiser. Which was one thing where Snape, Granger, and Phil were concerned, all of them could be counted on to respect a person's right to secrets. Draco, on the other hand, respected no such thing. The only thing he held sacred was his own right to stick his nose into everything going on around him.

Someone should have let him suffer the consequences of his actions once or twice when he was younger. It might have saved them all a load of trouble.

She wanted to give him more than one lash on the bottom herself and not in the usual friendly way.

Her husband was such an awful brat. She looked at him purposefully unblinking, trying to puzzle out the best way to keep him from ruining his Christmas surprise.

Draco looked back at her shiftily.

If it wouldn't offend one of the few sensibilities she'd admit to having, she'd let him ruin his own surprise. Her worry over making Christmas just right for the arse was more than he deserved.

Next year, she wasn't going to get him anything. He'd drive himself mad trying to work that one out. It jollied her a bit to consider the twists and turns and machinations he'd work himself into trying to figure all the angles on gifts that didn't exist.

Still he stood there, fidgeting.

She pinched her lips and remained unmoved, never looking away, her blood turned icy in her veins. If all else failed, her Slytherin training would never desert her, bless Snape's crippled black heart for that, a cool head and a watchful eye would prevail. She would get Draco's gifts to the lounge without him seeing even if she had to hex him to accomplish it.
Still hexing was a last resort, only after lies and trickery failed. She might be a brute at heart, but what sort of wife was she if she couldn't get past her own husband?

Draco was showing signs of breaking, a certain barely noticeable twitch in the third finger of his left hand coupled with an undue glassiness of eye. All she had to do was hold out.

"Well," Draco said, and suddenly Millie knew things were going to be resolved one way or another, but immediately thereafter came a jingling clatter accompanied by the overwhelming scent of evergreen that could only mean one thing.

Millie couldn't help herself; she shouted "Santa," only to find that Draco had shouted the exact same thing at the exact moment. Some things were ingrained, she supposed. It was a by-product of a Pureblood upbringing to love the fat man. To prove her self-possession, she made a point not to race out of the room on Draco's heels; instead she pulled her paper sacks full of gifts from their hiding place behind a loose piece of plaster in the closet and heaved them into the lounge.

While she was expecting Santa in his red leather trimmed in fur, she was not expecting Snape, his hair wet, to be sitting on the divan toying with an unlit cigarette wearing only one sock. The other foot jutted naked out from the bottom of his trouser leg as long and white as a brick in a marble tomb.

Draco stood there looking gleefully from Snape to Santa's wide arse and back again to Snape, his lips pressed into the sort of thin line that threatened to erupt into giggles at any moment.

Snape, meanwhile, closed his eyes and held his cigarette, still not lit, to his nose, inhaling.

Granger, meanwhile, with sleep in her eyes and reeking to the sky of fucking, came wearily into the room.

"That can't possibly..." she said, drawing her dressing gown up tight around her.

"It is," Snape said.

"You've got to be joking," she said.

"You have my solemn promise you are in the presence of a legend, and I am not referring to Bulstrode's chest measurements."

"Where'd your other sock go?" she asked.

Snape frowned more deeply and cut his eyes in Santa Claus's direction.

Millie smirked. Snape had been the only hold out when Draco hung stockings after dinner. Even the Muggles went along, even if they seemed to think it was a hysterical giggle. Served Snape right.

Not that she'd seen it coming. No, as far as she knew, Snape always managed to avoid Santa completely. Well the time of reckoning had come.

Whatever Santa was putting in that sock, there was an awful lot of it. She wondered how difficult it was to get reindeer shit out of white cotton. Good thing Snape did his own laundry.

"Tea, milk, or brandy?" Draco asked Granger, waving his hand in the general direction of the decanter, pitcher, and kettle he'd had arranged like a bleeding still life on the side table.
"All three in my cup, if it's not any trouble," said Santa turning around. "I am delighted to finally meet you, Hermione; you've done Severus a great deal of good. He usually avoids me like consumption, though now that I think of it, he does look a bit consumptive himself."

"He always looks consumptive," Millie said automatically.

"Have you got the consumption, Severus? I've something in my bag for that," said Santa.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," Granger said warily. Millie wondered what she was so shirty for. Santa hadn't been dangerous since before her mother's time.

Santa seemed to understand though; he just chuckled. "Everyone knows me; I'm Santa Claus, and I know every witch and wizard as soon as they come into the world, Hermione."

"Then why haven't we ever met?" she asked.

Santa gave her a hard look. "It's a long story."

"I don't suppose you've the time to tell it on Christmas Eve," Granger said.

"You've had too much experience with time to believe foolishness such as that," Santa said with a conspiratorial air. "Santa has all the time in the world, on this night of all nights."

"Mind if we listen in as well," said Mr. Granger rubbing his eyes in the doorway.

"Blast, the Muggles are awake. Promise you won't tell anyone you spotted me, or I'll be filling out forms 'til doomsday," Santa said clearly embarrassed at being caught.

"Certainly," said Granger's mother cagily; she seemed to Millie to be someone worth giving a wide swath to even if she was a Muggle. "Provided you explain."

Millie wondered exactly what Santa was supposed to say to that.

"Explain what?" asked Draco.

"Why the fat man doesn't visit mu..." said Snape, "Muggle-born."

"He doesn't visit Muggle-born?" Millie asked, quite astonished, or she would have waited and asked Snape about it later, in private.

"No, he doesn't," Granger said, her brow knitted as a jumper.

"I'll be off then," Santa said uncomfortably.

"I thought you had all the time in the world?" Granger asked, her eyes now slitted. It went well with the brow thing. She was dead off-putting like that.

"Figure of speech," Santa said.

Snape sniggered.

"Generally meant to suggest the speaker doesn't intend to rush off," Granger went on.

Snape smiled a smile of pure pleasure at Santa's distress; it was almost heartwarming, that.

Santa's face took on a level of seriousness Millie had never quite seen before in all her dealings
with Santa. "I misspoke."

Then, instead of his usual, long slow leave taking and I-couldn't-possibly-have-another-bite-Prunie-well-perhaps-a-smidge-more-pudding, Santa reached down to the chain round his neck and the golden whistle strung there and gave a sharp blast.

The next thing she, or any of them as far as Millie could tell, knew, Santa was gone and the gifts, not just Santa's gifts but those she had snuck round and bought, and those she presumed came from Draco, were dangling from ribbons on the tree. She could tell Draco's because he was apparently unaware of standard Muggle gift wrapping tape and appeared to have secured the coloured paper to the packages by means of straight pins, glue and a stapling machine he'd lifted from the animation office.

"Stockings first!" Draco announced, making Phil grunt in his sleep like a little pig.

"No, wait," Millie said, lifting Phil from his cot, feeling the delicious heat that emanated from his little body like a stone at the edge of the hearth. "We can't let him sleep through Christmas."

She blew as softly as she was able on the side of his face. "Wake up, sleepy arse. There's presents on the tree."

The baby stirred slightly but didn't bother to open his eyes.

Millie planted a string of kisses along his neck ending on his soft little earlobe.

"Wake up, you," she sang, or croaked rather, she knew her singing was the sort the frogs did in the spring.

Phil looked at her out of one eye, his fist rubbing furiously at the other.

He'd come round to Christmas soon enough.

~~~

Hermione wasn't sure when she'd seen a sight to compare with Severus' dingy cotton sock. It was stretched out longer than could be managed without magic and now ended somewhere near the front door, five meters or so away.

After watching for a bit as Severus pulled objects ranging from toy spaceships to arcane magical objects to velvet neck cloths not to mention numerous books from the depths of his white cotton sock, she asked, "What did he give you, Severus? It doesn't seem to have any rhyme or reason."

Severus, his cigarette now safely tucked behind his ear for later, frowned and stuck his hand into the sock, tentatively pulling out another object, a magazine featuring a blonde woman in shiny rubber gear on its cover, which he stowed quickly and discreetly under the mammoth pile. "It has the appearance of being everything I've ever wanted."

"Can anyone here explain the Santa Claus business?" asked Hermione's mother.

Hermione settled her eyes on Millie, because, honestly, she'd like an answer as well, and Millie seemed as good a candidate to supply it as any.

"He used to collect Muggle-borns in a sack," Draco said, and Millie nodded vigorously, or as
vigorously as could be managed by someone with a mouth full of chocolate.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione's dad said, choking on his tea a bit.

"Once upon a time, before the international accord in, what year was it?"

Draco turned to Severus.

"1802, signed by both Magical and Muggle world leaders at the time," Severus supplied absently as he pulled what appeared to be a powerful microscope from his stocking.

"Before 1802, it used to be The Fat Man's job to look for magical children in Muggle households. He'd round up all the ones he could find on Christmas Eve in a sack and drop them off with Pureblood witches and wizards, along with a few prezzies for the other sprogs to soften the blow," Draco said, trying to gauge how the Muggles were taking it. "Now he just brings presents."

"But..." said Severus, extricating a rather bulky green velvet coverlet from the sock, an act which appeared to be nearly as physically impossible as it sounded.

"Only to Pureblood families," said Draco, his tongue making a quick detour to the corner of his mouth.

"Why?" asked Hermione's parents in concert.

"That was the agreement," said Severus. "It was a matter of serious contention, and one of many times the Purebloods believed their interests to be in conflict with those of the general magical rabble, who felt that the Hogwarts' book and its fellows at the various magical schools were sufficient."

"Why? I thought they were all some sort of racists," asked Hermione's dad.

Hermione watched as Millie's nostrils flared ever so slightly, and Draco looked pointedly at the ceiling.

"A common misconception," Severus said, brushing his hair out of his face to stare into the apparently infinite depths of his stocking. "The superiority the true Pureblood is so smugly convinced of is more cultural than chromosomal. Their fear is less that of being polluted by inferior genes than it is of new Muggle-inspired ideas. The earlier children are incorporated into magical society, the less the impact of their time among Muggles on society as a whole, which was why they weren't keen on signing an agreement to stop snatching Muggle children, whether Napoleon was breathing down the necks of the mixed bloods or not."

"So we got Santa Claus in concession," said Draco brightly.

"Who is responsible financially?" Hermione's mother asked, true to form.

Admittedly it was a good question.

"There was an international fund set up by the nations who took part in the Amiens Accord," Severus said, startling a bit as a singularly soft-looking brown puppy, Labrador as far as Hermione could guess, wiggled out of the sock, a strange sight under any circumstance. "1965. I asked for a dog for Christmas 1965."

He lifted said dog, his long white fingers grasping its round belly and peered, both brows arched, into its face. Instantaneously a long red tongue took a generous swipe across Severus' cheek.
Hermione cringed, fully expecting him to either strike the puppy or hurl it across the room or at least say something nasty, none of which were very nice options, but all seemed within the realm of possibility. Instead, the strangest thing happened; a grin curled like ball lightning in the corners of Severus' mouth before he covered it with a stern expression.

He turned the dog upside down casually and lifted its tail. "It's a bitch," he said before turning it right side round again. "Look, Miss, we have a crowded household already, and a small dog such as yourself is easily disposed of, so we will have no shitting or pissing indoors and much less digging the garden all to hell. The neighbor two doors down takes the paper; I would be kindly disposed by a dog with initiative, a dog who was able to retrieve said paper before it finds its way into the neighbor's hands."

Hermione would certainly have had a list of probing questions if she hadn't at that exact moment peered into her stocking and found, poking out amidst a sea of perfectly ripe strawberries, a new wand.

She failed to note the fact that after the puppy, Severus tied his sock closed with a rather solid looking knot.

Before New Year's, Hermione noticed her father giving Severus strange sideways looks from across the room. Later the consensus held that Dr. and Dr. Granger hadn't left the great state of Texas a moment too soon.

Miss, as the Labrador retriever continued to be called, proved herself to be singularly devoted to her master, not only stealing a variety of newspapers for his perusal, but insisting on accompanying him to the bar each evening and waiting faithfully at the back door until he emerged.

She slept at the foot of his bed, warming Hermione's cold feet, was friendly to the rest of the household, and even saw fit to have a cuddle with Whack the Cat when she was cruelly exiled from the bedroom by her otherwise occupied object of adoration.

By New Year's, she had learned to fetch cigarettes on command without crushing the packet.

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Severus Snape counted his life changed from that Christmas; it wasn't as if he had much of a choice, getting everything one ever wanted was like that. To be shittily honest, the entire business left him at something of a loss.

Severus Snape was, by definition, a chap who did not get everything he ever wanted. As a rule, Severus Snape did not get anything he wanted, ever.

Severus Snape did not fall into the arms of a charming young witch at the end of a long day. Severus Snape absolutely did not fall into the arms of a charming young witch who loved him. In a bed. With clean sheets. Severus Snape had an uncomfortable half-naked fumble with drunk Muggles who refused to meet his eyes afterwards.

Severus Snape hid from Santa Claus because Christmas was for sentimental cunts, and besides, his cousin Edburga assured him the Fat Man had nothing but a sock full of reindeer dung for dirty Half-Bloods.

Dogs bit Severus Snape when they could get at him. Severus Snape did not have a faithful hound who brought him newspapers and cigarettes on command.

So it was that on that particular night, around 3 a.m. as he left work and was greeted by a single
happy bark and joyfully wagging tail, the wizard once known as Severus Snape wondered whose life he was now living.

It wasn't as if he wanted his old life back. No, he didn't relish having his dick ground into the dirt repeatedly, either literally or metaphorically. He didn't care if he never heard the name of Severus Snape again, but he wondered how the hell one went about being Stephen Liston, with a loving wife and a faithful dog. Stephen Liston who didn't have the Dark Mark or two masters bent on tearing him in half. Stephen Liston: who was not wanted for murder. He felt like a pretender, waiting for Old Bill to come with the cuffs and return his good fortune to its rightful owner.

Somehow the fact that it was his birthday made the nebulous anxiety worse.

No doubt Hermione would do something genuinely nice, something he would like.

It was difficult to parse. He wanted it, sweet balls of Merlin, how he wanted every single drop of happiness he could wring out of this life or any other. At the same time, it didn't sit easy. A feeling of horror he could not explain gripped him.

He needed a drink.

Or not.

A hangover would not improve whatever it was Hermione had planned. What he really wanted was a look at the Daily Prophet, his one comfort besides drink, tobacco, and masturbation during his years at Hogwarts. He had no idea why, but it seemed like a comfortingly unreachable object to covet.

He had managed to stuff the still-knotted sock into his jacket pocket Christmas morning, though it had taken some effort.

It would be an interesting experiment to see if more than containing all his past desires, the lump of Muggle-made cotton could also anticipate desires yet to come.

Miss laid her muzzle on his thigh as if beseeching him to think better of it.

Thumbing his nose at Severus Snape and his hard-learned caution, Stephen Liston wrenched the sock from his pocket; it appeared to have shrunk somewhat. Perhaps the magic was gone, meant for the holiday only. Now that was Severus Snape's sort of luck. Still, Stephen Liston would poke it with a stick and see if it blew up in his face. Could it be that it was merely his desires that had receded?

"Happy Birthday to Me," he sang softly.

Taking a deep breath, he untied the knotted fabric and plunged his hand inside. A cold shiver that had nothing to do with the wind howling outside the car spread through his body as his fingers grasped paper.

He pulled the newspaper from the stocking in a crumpled wad, wondering what sort of news the Dark Lord would allow to be printed.

His eyes jumped about the pages as he did his best to smooth the pages into some semblance of readable order.

"I WILL BRING THE HEADMASTER'S KILLER TO JUSTICE," VOWS MINISTER LONGBOTTOM.
Severus couldn't help himself; he threw up, just a bit, in his mouth when he read the words.

He tried to read the rest of the article but "Minister for Magic, Neville Longbottom, the very same strapping young hero who vanquished the late Lord Voldemort in the recent wars, has promised to bring Albus Dumbledore's killer to justice. Severus Snape and his accomplice, Draco Malfoy, are among the last Death Eaters remaining at large," was as far as he got. He was stopped by a particularly unflattering picture of himself scowling, in chains, from the first war. Beside it was a much larger image of Longbottom, his chest puffed up and a grim smile on his face pushing his hair out of his eyes.

The desire to philosophize left him without adieu. He tossed both the paper and his hopelessly misshapen sock out the window. All he could do was drive.

He had no idea where.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
On the morning of January 9th, Hermione woke up to the sensation of light streaming in her bedroom window. She had managed to complete a spectacular night's sleep, deep and unbroken and above all comfortable; mostly because she'd had the bed entirely to herself. It was too narrow a bed to share with anyone, much less a person with as many angles as Severus.

The realization hit Hermione, stinging her brain into alertness like a shot from a hex. Severus was conspicuously absent.

Her husband had not come home from work last night. Her jaw set hard and her stomach plummeted even as she forced herself out of bed.

She had classes to attend, the vagaries of Severus Snape be damned. She had classes. To which she went. Besides, knowing Severus and knowing it was his birthday, it was likely he had "celebrated" with Shakeleg after work and was now asleep on Shakeleg's couch, unable to safely make the trip home. Still it seemed unlike him not to appear in the wee hours, rouse her from a peaceful sleep and insist she throw on clothes and join them. It was even less un-Severus-like to admit his driving ability could be hampered by much of anything.

Or perhaps, taking his peculiar quality of Severus-ness into account, he might have some idiosyncratic and maudlin birthday tradition to uphold. One that required solitude.

When she arrived home after class, after taking a ride from the redoubtable blonde, Jessica, the driveway was woefully empty.

The moment she came through the front door she was met by Draco, standing worriedly with baby Phil in his arms.

"Uncle Severus didn't come home from work last night," he said. Hermione had some time ago noted that Draco didn't call him "uncle" unless he was too upset to be concerned about sounding childish.

"I know," she said, her gut flipping over for the fiftieth time. "There isn't something he usually does on his birthday, is there?"

"Not that I know of," Draco said, as though he was the world's foremost authority on all things Severus Snape. Perhaps he once had been, but that position had been taken, quite literally. If he cared to dispute it, Hermione could challenge him on the sensitivity of his "uncle's" nipples and
undoubtedly that would be that.

They stood and looked at each other.

It came to Hermione as she stood staring at an obviously worried Draco there was only one thing for it.

She walked to the corridor outside the loo, Draco trailing close behind. She picked up the telephone book and phone from the niche cut in the wall and called Albert Shakeleg.

Apparently, Severus left work alone except for his new dog and in a timely fashion. He hadn't seen fit to mention his birthday.

This was not good.

She called round to the hospitals. Nothing.

She refused to even consider contacting the police.

Millie came home an hour or so later, and her gravity did nothing to improve the household mood.

Much as she distrusted divination, Hermione didn't see how it could reasonably be avoided. She wasn't entirely sure how to broach the subject in front of Draco.

Millie was still floury from work and a bit red in the cheeks from standing over the cooker.

"Millie," Hermione said as her friend took the baby into her arms.

Millie didn't respond verbally, simply cut her eyes in the direction of the kitchen.

"What're you two up to?" Draco asked, rather inevitably if you asked Hermione.

"Granger and I've come up with a method of divination," Millie said briskly,

"Looks like it's time to put it to work," Draco nodded tensely.

In the kitchen Draco watched as Millie and Granger pulled all the magnetic words off the refrigerator and tossed them in a tea mug.

"You pick," Millie said to Granger, and Draco, being Draco, felt a bit miffed.

She might be his wife, but Draco was the closest thing Severus Snape had to a child.

Granger closed her eyes and reached into the bowl, laying seven words face down in a row.

Millie turned over the first one.

Panic. That was what it said.

"That seems fitting," Draco said.

"I wonder whether it's an instruction or a description of Snape's mental state," Millie said.

Granger turned the next two.
Birthday. Surprise.

"What did you do?"

"I've not seen him since he left for work last night; don't try to blame me, Draco Malfoy."

"Cut it out, you two, obviously something surprised him, on his birthday, that's all. Bickering doesn't help anything, and it definitely isn't going to bring Snape home."

Granger turned over another word.

Gas.

It was at that precise moment Draco moved from worrying over Severus and began to fear for their collective future. Severus had watched out for him and Millie, and Granger to a lesser extent, since they were eleven years old. How were they to manage without him? The very idea of finding Severus, at large, in his car, if he was even on the continent any longer, seemed too unlikely to even consider seriously.

Granger breathed in deeply and turned over the last three.

Food. Used. Tire. Nothing but gibberish as far as Draco could see. Panic indeed. The cold welled up in his belly, twisting as it went.

Granger and Millie stared at the words, as if by staring they could force them into something useful. Little Phil mirrored Millie's expression, his lips raised to a pucker.

"Millie, he's got something in his mouth."

"What? "Millie asked, obviously roused from some deep level of concentration.

"Phillip has something in his mouth," Draco repeated.

As much as anyone, he was surprised when Millie fished out two words from between Philly's lips.

"What does it say?" Granger beat him to asking.

"Drive East," said Millie.

~~~

Severus Snape rifled through the pile of dog-eared reading material in the petrol station's decidedly stale magazine rack. There was nothing even vaguely distracting. The local Neanderthal they had dragged out from his cave to change Severus' tire had better make quick work of it. It was unfortunate the Grand Marquis was already held together by more magic than he cared to admit, or he would have simply charmed the shredded treads right again. As it stood, the steel belted radials, as proclaimed by the barely legible legend on the tires themselves, had reached the state best described as having "no 'there' there", and he was forced to fall back on the mundane.

He was also unbearably dry.

There was no tea to be had in the place, unless one counted something garishly and improbably canned in the cold display. Against his better judgement, he opened the door and took one for himself. Bracing himself, he raised it to his lips. Swallowed.

And spat it right out again.
It was worse than he imagined. Miss sniffed tentatively at the ersatz tea spatter and, in apparent agreement with her master, decided to leave it be. He could hear the apelike creature with the coverall and name-tag swearing ineffectually beneath the Grand Marquis. Severus still had not so much as an inkling as to what he was going to do, but in the distance, down the thrice-accursed highway, he spied a friendly neon sign calling out to him.

Liquor.

Open.

Liquor.

Open.

If it weren't for the tender mercies of intoxicification, he'd have swallowed poison years ago. The irony wasn't lost on him.

~~~

The following morning irony reared its head in Texas as Hermione, the same Hermione who had lectured, chided, and railed at Severus Snape for fascinating Muggle clerks out of cigarettes and crisps, used the same technique to relieve a Muggle salesman of an entire automobile.

Millie agreed it was the right thing to do, a fact which did not entirely soothe Hermione's conscience, though it did rack up points towards the inevitability of the act. Millie was practical, if nothing else.

In their mutual defence, they had nowhere near enough money to pay cash up front. Severus had spent most everything he'd saved over the past six months to pay for her upcoming semester at school, and Draco and Millie had sunk every single spare penny into Christmas, which meant there were laptop computers and cashmere jumpers all round, not to mention enough shoes to start their own shop, but no cash to speak of.

When they spoke to the salesman about buying on credit, the finance department came back with a rate of interest so high Hermione felt as though she'd been slapped.

Finally, there was the salesman himself. It only stood to reason that somewhere in the States there had to be a single smarmiest most condescending male. It was a matter of simple logic. Still, she didn't see why she and Millie had drawn him on their first attempt at buying a car.

She wound up fascinating him into showing her the best car on the lot and buying it for a button and two five cent pieces Millie had in the pocket of her dress. So while she would admit she had taken advantage somewhat, it could not be said they had stolen outright.

So it was that she and Millie left the dealership with a convertible of German make, the colour of a nacred pearl.

Two hours later Millie waved goodbye to her little family as she and her partner left the drive in the jerking fits and starts common to those who have never before driven a motor vehicle. It was the most logical course. Draco could stay behind with Phil and the goat, keeping the home fires burning, leaving the rescue of Snape -- because each one of them felt fairly certain Snape did need a good rescue -- to those less apt to make a bad situation worse.

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Somewhere near the bottom of a bottle of Scotch, which he dedicated to Minerva McGonagall’s
tartan knickers, Severus Snape had not so much an fully formed idea as a notion as to where he
could get one. Two really. He had two notions. One, he had an epiphany as to whom he could turn
to for wisdom in his hour of distress. Two, it occurred to him that he could stomach it through if he
didn't allow himself to sober up somewhere along the way.

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It only took a few hours for both Millie and Granger to get the hang of driving the car. By the time
they stopped for food and the loo, a worry that had been niggling in the back of Millie's brain
pressed its way to the fore.

"It's been botherin' me how we're supposed to find Snape. I mean how do we know he's even still
in the country?" Millie said, shovelling as many chips as she could manage into her mouth as they
sat in the so-called food-court. It was more of a fried dough court, if you asked Millie. Didn't
Muggles bake anything?

Granger chewed her mouthful of salad slowly, as if looking for a good answer.

Millie went on. "I mean he could be hiding out in Egypt with his Muggle dad for all we know."

Granger wiped her lips with her napkin as her eyebrows shot up like twin racing brooms. "Severus'
father lives in Egypt?"

"Sure, he's said it himself, his Muggle granny gets a post every now and again from Memphis
askin' for money," Millie said, only remembering halfway through that she had a mouth full of
potato.

Granger apparently knew something Millie didn't because a light seemed to dawn in her eyes that
hadn't been there a moment earlier.

"Did he specify which Memphis?" she asked.

"Is there more than one?" Millie asked Granger's back as she jumped from her seat and walked at a
fast clip toward a bank of silver alcoves, each with a tellyphone nestled inside.

Millie kept close as Granger used the wand tucked discreetly in her sleeve to coax the pay phone
into connecting her to someone called "long distance operator" who gave her the address and
tellyphone number of one Tobias Snape residing in Memphis, Tennessee.

It seemed there was another Memphis, fancy that.

And now they had a destination; it was a stab in the dark, but it was better than nothing. And it was
still in the same country; so how far away could it be?

Pretty bloody far, as it turned out.

~~~

Hermione Granger had never consciously formed an image of Toby Snape in her mind's eye. From
what little she had heard of him from Severus, she should have expected the figure that opened the
doors of the narrow row house, but he was so totally unlike Severus, at first glance, that she
stuttered for a moment.
"Hello, Love," said the man with a smarmy smile and a thick Northern accent.

His hair was obviously dyed and improbably greased into a pompadour. If that weren't enough, he wore blue jeans so tight he might as well have painted them on and had faded tattoos running up and down both arms. A packet of cigarettes was rolled up in one of the short sleeves of his vest. Muscles bulged through the thin cotton, a testament to vanity and more hours devoted to his appearance than a man with a job could manage. He was clearly old enough to be Severus' father provided he'd been young when Severus was born, but he had the sort of sculptural male face -- high cheeks, Roman nose, square jaw -- that is only enhanced by the weathering of age. She saw absolutely nothing in him that reminded her of Severus. One look, and it was clear he knew he was handsome. There was not so much as a hint of Severus' diffidence, Severus' depth. If he was Severus' father, and she didn't want to think he was, he hadn't passed a thing down to him. From head to toe, he was lewd and lurid.

"Hello... sir, I'm not certain I have the correct Tobias Snape; the man I am looking for has a son named..." It all seemed ludicrous; this man, this Muggle could no more be Severus' father than...

As she looked, she realized that among the many coloured markings under his skin, like something out of an anthropological film, was the name "Eileen" in florid script, marked through with a black line like an incorrect answer on one of Severus' tests.

"The Toby Snape I'm looking for has a son named Severus," she said, hoping to sound confident.

"He knock you up?" the man said with a laugh.

"No, he..." she started to explain but was cut off.

"I had a boy. His mum said he was mine. I was married to 'er at the time at any rate. She used to call him 'Sev'rus'; she may have even registered him that way with her people. Her people... weren't my people, if you catch my meaning," the man said, keeping one hand on the door frame and one on the screen door, effectively barring the way.

"I'm your son's wife. My name is Hermione," she said patiently, at least she hoped it was patiently.

"Severus has gone missing. I have reason to believe he may have come to Memphis. Have you seen him? He's having a bit of difficulty with the authorities in England."

"Is that so? In that case, he may be the fruit of me loins after all. What's this Sev'rus fella look like?" he asked, a coy smile on his lips.

Hermione could see a glint of devilry in his eyes.

She folded her arms across her chest and scowled. "Six feet tall, perhaps a bit more, black hair, thinnish build."

"Thin...ish?" he repeated with a smirk. "He been takin' seconds on puddin' lately? What about the..." and Toby tapped the tip of own hawkish his nose playfully. It was large, unless you compared it to Severus'.

"The Severus Snape I'm looking for has an enormous nose, is that what you want me to say?" she said, exasperated.

"Gahh, I swear when he was a lad, his poor little head used to tremble under the weight of it." He laughed again in a way that made his mocking seem far more charming than it was. Hermione, for one, was not impressed.
"Have you seen him?" she asked.

"First you tell me somethin'," he said, suddenly serious.

"Certainly," Hermione said.

She'd heard the phrase, to be undressed with the eyes, but having this horrible man, reeking of pomade, look at her in such a frankly sexual way made her feel filthy and uncomfortable. Particularly because it was not entirely unlike being ogled by Severus, who stared as if looking were in itself a physical act.

She felt nauseated.

Something about Toby Snape was pointedly nasty. On second thought, Hermione struck that idea through like the name on the man's bicep.

Everything about Toby Snape was nasty.

"You a witch?" He leered as he said it.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I am."

"An' her in the car, she a witch, too?" he said, gesturing over her shoulder at Millie in the car with her arms folded across her chest.

Hermione nodded.

"You armed?" he asked.

Hermione wasn't sure what he meant.

"Got any suspicious lengths a' wood about your person?" he said in a sarcastic tone Severus must have learned at his knee.

"No, neither of us has a wand," she said and then wondered after if she should have been honest. Surely he wouldn't be able to know the difference.

"Right, then, if he's in these parts I got a pretty good idea where we can find 'im," he said, pushing an errant lock of hair back into his pompadour. "Gimme your keys."

"Excuse me?" Hermione said.

Toby Snape had turned his back and screamed into the house at the top of his lungs. "Shift yer arse, Suzette!"

"Why should I hand over my keys to you?" she asked.

"'Cause I drive, that's why. It's one of me rules. If you don't like it you can get fucked... metaphorically," he said, looking hard as flint, the formerly flirtatious eyes gone dead and mouth turned down; although there was next to no resemblance to Severus in his features, the expression of immovability was identical to the one she knew well.

"Suzette!" he bellowed again as Hermione handed him the keys, and there behind him appeared a woman, if you could call her that. Hermione would be surprised if she was out of her teens. Besides being young, she was small, even shorter than Millie, with skin the purplish black of a ripe plum, and a rounded belly that could only mean one thing, Severus Snape was not far away from
having a sibling.

Hermione felt mortified on his behalf.

"This is the latest Mrs. Snape; Suzette, lucky number seven," Toby said with a grin. "Don't forget your wand, Suze," he said, reaching a proprietary arm and swatting the poor girl on the bum.

Alarm bells rang in Hermione's mind, but she warily handed him her keys all the same.

Hermione wedged herself into the backseat beside "Mrs. Snape". She could have kicked herself as soon as they turned onto Elvis Presley Boulevard.

Severus hadn't come to Memphis to have it out with his father. He'd gone to Graceland.

She knew it as certainly as she knew she was a witch. The street was dead and silent and all the hallmarks of an enchantment lay over the entire area.

Though she needed no confirmation, the thick magic that lay like a rug over the house all but smelled of Severus and there, parked along the brick wall, was a certain black Mercury Grand Marquis, mounds of empty liquor bottles in the back seat. Lovely.

She heard a sound, a long low mournful sound that rose like a swelling tide accompanied by the howling of a dog. He was round back, she was sure of it.

And he was; beside a kidney-shaped swimming pool and next to lit up fountain was a circle of graves, and Severus Snape knelt on one of them...

singing.

As if his empty bottles weren't proof enough, that in itself was confirmation he was pissed.

It was a pity that his voice sounded so... perfect, so low and smooth and full.

As she approached, she strained to hear the words.

"You can bury my body as deep as you want, but my spirit will rise to you." He drew the words out long and gliding. "Ain't that lovin' you, baby, and you don't even know my name," and then burst out in a strange fit of shrieking laughter.

Hermione kept her distance, half-waiting for the others behind her, half-curious to see exactly what he was doing before she burst in and ruined the moment.

He stumbled to his feet, and it reminded her of nothing more that night he'd kissed her schoolgirl self.

"Well," he shouted down at the grave below him. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

He waved his arms, and she could see there was a bottle in his fist.

"I would appreciate a pearl of wisdom at the moment. One bloody pearl's all I ask," he said, wagging an extended finger at the grave. "What would you do? As soon as she finds out, she's going to leave me. Like that," he said, snapping his fingers unsuccessfully. He attempted to snap them twice more, finally abandoning the idea.

Hermione reached out and grabbed hold of Millie's sleeve with her right hand, holding her back.
"Never mind that this means, this means I'll be hounded for the rest of my days. He'll look under every stone, every rotten log, in every public loo. No doubt I'll find Aurors in the soap dish next time I take a bath. I shall never bathe again," he said decisively.

"You ever been in the nick, Your Highness?" he went on blearily, and Hermione wondered where he found the wherewithal to enchant the grounds, drunk as he was. "I've been in Azkaban, which I would not recommend to the seasoned traveller... but I've never been quite stupid enough for Ol' Bill to...What the fuck am I going to do?" he said, hanging his head.

"It hardly need be said he was in love with her as well. There are times, Elvis, may I call you Elvis? If you find it unduly familiar, feel free to object," he shook a cigarette out of the pack with one hand and swayed as he spoke, "there are times, when I believe every third male at that accursed institution was enamored of my darling; Potter, Weasley, Longbottom, The entire house of Ravenclaw, including a few of the females, Lupin... Myself. That shit smear, Black. You know he and Regulus... their own mother... people said she was the mad one, but they were all similarly tainted. The Black Stain. I feel relieved that little Draco has managed to escape relatively un...barmy. Bahhh. Sirius Black. I watched him fuck her with his eyes at Grimmauld Place often enough to know. All she would have had to do was crook her finger, and the dog would have been on her."

"Did you know she had a famous Quidditch star as a lover, fourth year? Gave him the boot for being dull. She's very discerning. She never would have fucked the dog... Unlike some I could mention.

"But she's mine now. I won. I beat out every other sod who wanted her. She. Is. Mine. Where's my bloody happy ending?" he said angrily, before erupting in a shrill scream. "Why can't I have nice things?"

Hermione was torn between bile at the thought he classed her a 'nice thing', which in his mind included double-thick cauldrons and silver cigarette lighters, and embarrassment that he had set her price too high and might have to mark her value down on consideration.

"I should have let Longbottom blow himself up when I had the opportunity," he muttered, "though with my luck I would have been castrated in the explosion."

She watched his head hang limp again, perfect little smoke rings rising from his crumpled form. Like a marionette, he jerked himself to a gangly attention out of the apparent blue.

"What's next?" he asked, stil addressing the grave marker. "'Jail House Rock' would be appropriate, but somehow I lack the stomach at present. Wait. Wait. I've got it."

In retrospect, magic was such a mundane word for what happened next.

Hermione knew Severus Snape was a Legilimens and an Occlumens. She'd known since her sixth year he was adept at casting spells without uttering a word, and while they had been in Dallas, she had learned he was one of the rare wizards with the focus to perform most spells without the benefit of a wand.

But none of that was this.

He sang.

It was a long accepted fact his voice was drop-dead sexy. And she had been surprised by how casually tuneful he was as he habitually sang along with the radio. Her own family was decidedly
uninterested in music, and she'd never really thought twice about it until recently.

But now he sang. In earnest.

The song itself was immaterial. It was one she'd heard before, and it had never struck her as particularly meaningful or poetic or even notable. Not that she paid much attention to songs before Severus. Now though, now it contained multitudes. Something in her chest felt as though it were in danger of breaking open with the sound of his voice, something red and raw as magma at the sorrowful heart of the world. It was a kind of broken contentment she had never experienced before, as deep and true as love, as deep and true as truth, and it beckoned like a cinema femme fatale. Then at an unexpected moment, the song soared, and she almost wept with relief.

The sound seemed to come up from some place deeper than his own body, almost as if he was drawing it up from the earth through the soles of his feet and out of the sky with his upraised fist still clutching the neck of that bottle.

And he was singing it to her.

"Thank you for the days," it came from him low and long. It came from he who never thanked anyone.

And then.

And then. The ground began to ripple, and the Earth seemed to be answering him. The moon had gone red in the sky.

A knocking seemed to come from the grave beneath him. Bloody Hell, he was raising Elvis Presley from the dead. Necromancy was very nearly as dark as it got.

Hermione knew, objectively, that he should be stopped as soon as possible, but the thought of moving made her more weak-kneed than a Jelly-Legs curse. It was as though she'd never seen the pure beauty of Dark Arts 'til that minute.

She watched numbly as Toby Snape approached Severus's imposing figure and proceeded to box his ears.

"The bleeding Kinks? You worthless cunt, singin' a fucking Kinks song at the grave of Elvis fucking Presley!" he shouted as he swung.

Like the flicking of a switch, the spell was broken, literally, and the night was one like any other. The grounds seemed to sigh with relief. The knocking receded into silence.

"Ooaaaaaaaw," Severus said, raising his arms instinctively to cover his head.

"Fucking..."

"Philistine. Tune deaf pop music poofter Philistine like your ugly slag of a mum," Toby said, slapping his head once more for good measure.

"Fucking...Toby?" Severus said, squinting one eye. "Father?"

"Father?" Toby repeated in snarling mockery of Severus' careful accent. "You always were a wanker."

Severus stared in drunken disbelief.
It must have been one of those infamous moments when time and Hermione's mind were not in sync, because before she realized it, she caught up with Toby Snape and hit him dead in the eye with a fist that, though attached to her body, seemed to have a will quite its own.

A snigger she recognized as Millie's echoed in the darkness as a dispassionate voice in the back of her mind counted off the blows she'd seen Severus take from Toby as she attempted to visit each of them back on him.

Time still out of joint, or her perception of time at least, Severus stepped between her and her prey in a move both agile and intimate, wrapping his arms round her waist and burying his face in her hair. Shielding her in his arms, his back to his father, he hissed in her ear.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, and time was restored.

"I don't believe so," she said, panting. "Why didn't you tell me you could do that?"

"Do what?" he asked.

"Sing... sing magic," she said, although that might not have been the word for it.

She felt him chuckle. "Little more than a parlour trick."

Hermione had certainly never heard necromancy equated with pulling coins out of people's ears, but before she could say so, the thought was interrupted.

"Let me at her, Sonny," Toby threatened his voice low. "She brought it on herself."

"Did you follow me here?" Severus asked.

"More or less. I thought you came here to have it out with your father."

Hermione felt rather than heard Severus chuckle deep in his chest. "Not even close." The alcohol was like a separate entity enveloping his body; it was like stepping through a Hogwarts ghost the smell was so strong.

He turned both of them round to face his father so quickly it made Hermione a bit dizzy in his arms. Severus' heart thumped loudly against her left ear as he spoke, his tone deceptively casual.

"Have you any idea, Old Man, how many men I've killed?" he said. "I'll give you a hint, raise a hand to this witch, and the number will be seven."

Hermione tensed, fighting the urge to twist out of his arms and demand an explanation. It never occurred to her he might have harmed anyone other than the Headmaster. They were going to have a long talk once he was sober.

"Bollocks," Toby snorted. "You haven't the bollocks for a felony."

Severus' entire person shifted; he drew himself taller and his shoulders went back, his legs braced themselves against the ground. "Care to try me?"

"Little Sonny wants to be a bad man, is that it?" Toby snorted.

"My name is Severus," he said in a quiet way that chilled Hermione.

Toby laughed bitterly. "Sodding predictable, take her side."
"I am not ‘taking anyone's side'; you were both abysmal parents," Severus said, letting go his grip on her.

"Long as you admit," Toby said, stepping closer, "she weren't no better than me."

"With pleasure," Severus said. "If she'd been half as concerned with being a mother to me as she was with attracting your attention..."

"And your name is Sonny Liston Snape," Toby went on.

Hermione looked from one to the other. Severus' temperament had always been quick silver, but she'd never seen his anger distracted so thoroughly so quickly; drink must have played some part. Severus rolled his eyes. "Do I look like a ‘Sonny' to you? No one other than you has called me that since I was eleven years old."

"It's your sodding name," Toby insisted, "and nothin' t' be ashamed of; bloke was heavyweight champion of the world."

"He was a petty criminal... like you."

"There's nothin' petty about armed robbery, son."

Severus sighed and rolled his eyes in the exact same way he did when Dumbledore made him pull a Christmas cracker.

"C'mon back to the house, Sonny, your new Mum'll witch up some jerk chicken and beds fer your mates."

"No, thank you, one inadequate mother is quite enough... besides which I have a room at the Marriott..." Severus' words trailed off as Suzette, standing near Millie, gestured ineffectually with her wand.

"You managed to manipulate another witch into marrying you... What is she, fifteen... sixteen?"

"Twenty-one next month... that's older than your mum was," Toby said.

"How is it that you get older and older, and yet your wives remain in their teens?" Severus said with disgust.

"She don't look no forty to me, lad," Toby gestured to Hermione with a jut of his chin.

"Twenty," Severus bit out.

Toby sniggered. "That apple fell close to the tree, dinnit?"

"I am nothing like you," Severus said, enunciating each syllable.

Toby's eyes narrowed, and he gave Severus a studious look followed by a grim smile. "You'd never know it by lookin', Sonny, but you might be most like me of all of 'em."

Severus curled his upper lip into a cruel snarl. "Unlikely, since I, for one, do not spend my seed like a pocketful of counterfeit currency."

"Why not?" Toby cocked his head. "Got some kind o' plumbin' problem?"
Severus threw his head back, hands combing through greasy tangled hair, and laughed a drunken exasperated laugh.

"Have you even the vaguest idea how absurd this conversation is?"

"You know what I think's absurd? Mr. fancypants wizard squanderin' what nature gave 'im; tossin' yer greatest gift down the shower drain, and what fer? Spite?"

"I have elected to remain childless precisely because I have no desire to follow in your piss-filled footsteps, Old Man."

"That why you run off from your missus here?"

"Not that you'd understand it, but I was attempting to protect her."

"That's a right funny way to pronounce abandonment, Sonny,"

Toby stepped closer to Severus, and Hermione watched in something like hot horror as Severus placed his hand against the old Muggle's chest and shoved him backwards.

The old man pushed back, and in an instant it had turned into a scene from her school days, and she and the plum-skinned witch held back their respective Snapes, who stood chest to chest like schoolboys.

Toby surged forward first, spitting squarely in Severus' face, not even backing away as Severus slowly raised his arm to wipe his face with the back of his hand.

Severus spoke softly and dangerously. "Get out of my sight, old man, before I lose my patience."

"Kiss my arse, Sonny, We ain't walking home."

"Granger?" Severus', or should she say Sonny's, voice was accusatory. "You gave this piece of offal a ride?"

All she could do was nod.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora

A number of songs are featured in this chapter, from the Kink's "Days" to Jimmy Rogers' "Blue Yodel" however the song, sadly, that is most obscure is likely "Ain't That Lovin' Ya, Baby?" by Link Wray. Have a listen https://youtu.be/IWQ9X-zG5Q8
Shake, Rattle, and Roll!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shake, Rattle and Roll

Well, you won't do right to save your doggone soul

--Charles Calhoun 1954

Hermione couldn't help herself; she shut the car door with a slam and turned to her husband. Somehow, at some impossible to pinpoint juncture, Severus had gone from being ersatz to being as much of a husband as those acquired by more traditional means, and his recent stupidity and Hermione's chasing after him had somehow cemented it.

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

Severus cringed, likely from both the question and the sheer unmodulated shriek of her voice. She watched as his cringe worked its way into a sneer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Elvis?" was all Hermione said, not entirely trusting her tongue left unrestrained.

"I had initially considered the possibility of raising Albus Dumbledore to speak on my behalf, but there was a certain matter of geography to consider,"

Severus said, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Speak to whom?" Hermione asked, utterly befuddled. "Why?"

"Longbottom." Severus, face still hidden behind his own hands, pronounced the name with a venom she had rarely heard before.

"Neville Longbottom?" Hermione asked, supposing this was what she got for attempting to have a row with Severus when he was pissed.

"It seems our presumption of the Dark Lord's inevitable victory was not only presumptuous but premature as well," Severus said with what Hermione could only describe as a grand sarcasm. "Consider it something of a theme."

Still her gut went cold and didn't know whether it was going to sink or rise.

"What is more, that tubby little nothing was the one who did him in," Severus said with a sort of drunken wonder.

"Neville?"

"The very same."

Hermione was about to ask how he knew when he held out his hand for her to be quiet. Behind them, Millie started the white whale. She could see Suzette in the front seat beside Millie and a pair of feet reaching from the back seat to rest between their shoulders in the front. Toby.
"Wait, there's more. There's no end to the laughs in this bleeding cunt of a comedy. Longbottom is being lionized in The Prophet as the saviour of the wizarding world, and he has named, as his new raison d'être, my capture."

"He's just one person, Severus, and it's not as though..." Hermione was about to explain that Neville Longbottom was essentially a reasonable, tractable person when Severus broke in.

"No, he's not, not anymore," he said, looking smug and nauseated.

"Neville is more than one person? Would you mind explaining exactly how that works?"

"That incompetent cunt, one of the most inept fucking students it was ever my torment to attempt to pound knowledge into, is now Minister for Magic. When he says he won't rest until I'm tucked away for life in Azkaban, it is not solely himself he's referring to; it is the entire sodding weight of the government of Magical Britain. International Aurors are likely involved as well. Were I to seek refuge in Indochina there would probably be an Auror hiding in a bowl of rice, wand ready to cast Stupefy."

Hermione thought Severus looked inappropriately proud of himself. "Where did you get this information?"

"The Daily Prophet," he said folding his arms across his chest and nodding his bobbling head for emphasis.

"And how did you get hold of a copy of the Daily Prophet?"

"It was in the bottom of my Christmas stocking. It seems the fat man is of some use after all."

Hermione attempted to follow the sequence of events in her brain, but there was little discernible logic to it.

"Let's see if I've understood you correctly. You wished for a current copy of the Daily Prophet, saw that the Order had triumphed and Neville is now head of the ministry, so you decided the only thing for it was to raise Elvis Presley from the dead?"

"It sounds irrational when you put it that way." Severus was petulant. "Initially my intended subject was Albus."

"Oh, yes, I quite forgot about that. How did you think you were going to get to the body without being noticed somewhere along the way?"

Chagrin crept slowly across Severus' face.

"That was something of a conundrum."

"And raising dead rock stars was the obvious answer?" she asked with earnest curiosity. She had been intimate with him since October, yet the inner workings of his mind were as opaque to her as ever. "Honestly, Elvis?"

"I thought he might have helped," he said wapsishly.

And then she looked at him, a bit more closely this time.

Something peculiar happened in that moment. He looked perfectly horrid and smelled even worse. If there a name could be laid to the odour, she would have said he reeked of desperation. His hair
fell across his face in greasy, tacky-looking strands. His complexion had taken on an ever so slightly greenish cast. There was a film over his teeth. He had three days of beard stubble.

"How long have you been drinking?" she asked.

He muttered something sheepishly.

Hermione stared.

"Since Arkansas," he repeated enunciating a bit.

And that answered all Hermione's questions. Really. Three solid days of drunkenness as far as she could surmise from the number of bottles she dumped out of the car, and it was only reasonable that Severus might be making poor decisions. It was likely only thanks to years of a building up a tolerance that he hadn't keeled over from alcohol poisoning.

Still Hermione looked at him. It was foolish of any student to think they knew much of anything about their teachers' private lives, but that went double for Severus. Never in her school days had she, or anyone else for that matter, even toyed with the notion that he was.... well, as he was.

During her school days, there was a persistent rumour that the Potions master was a member of the magical peerage. She half bought into that one at the time. It seemed more plausible than some of the other tales floating about, that he was a vampire, that he traded grades for sexual favours from either gender, but his tastes were so sadistic that the student often didn't survive, or alternately that he was a sexual maestro capable of ensnaring a young witch as surely as Imperio.

No one had ever once suggested that he'd grown up with a Muggle father. Not only a Muggle but a chav, not even a chav, really, but something poorer, greasier, and altogether less respectable.

No one said anything to suggest he had ever been afraid a day in his life. That he might have a sense of humour. That he might be excited or interested in anything besides taking house points away from Gryffindor.

Yet she knew now he delighted in learning; she had many times seen him as he pored over her textbooks. He would quite nearly begin to purr in that moment when his new information merged with the old foundation and some wholly new and slightly startling theory came to him. It was much the same as his response when a song he loved came on the radio. His entire body would react, and his amazing voice would unfurl and begin to repaint the world in colours of his own choosing.

As a girl she never imagined he was capable of any such thing. She'd sooner have believed McGonagall was a Prima Ballerina in her spare time than Severus Snape was a... a... well, what was he? If pressed, he would simply say he enjoyed music, but she knew this was less than the truth.

A talented amateur? Was that what he was? That seemed a pale and inaccurate description.

A wizard? Was that it? Was he simply the single most magical individual she'd ever known? And the most pigheaded, she thought, looking him over again.

Still, he could perform magic in silence and magic with his voice alone. There was magic in his sex and magic in his celibacy.

As testament to all this was the fact that she had raced after him without stopping to wonder once if he was worth it. Severus Snape was many things, but his value was indisputable.
He squinted back at her.

"What did you do for music, Severus, when you were in the magical world?" she asked.

"I didn't," he said. "Music in our world is unmitigated shit. Still, one takes the good with the bad. The ability to perform magic must be weighed against some unqualified evils, and thus Stubby Boardman is explained. What sort of depraved wanker would refer to themselves as Stubby?"

"And what you did earlier, with your voice, did you choose that particular song for a reason? Was it a question of harmonics? Or..."

"How typically Granger, adding needless complication when the answer is directly in front of you," he interrupted her with a grimace. "All magic, outside Potion Making and the other Magical Sciences, is a question of will. The song is like a wand, merely a conduit for the desire of the caster. Some songs make better conduits than others, just as some wands better suit the indi... individual wizard."

"How did you learn to do that?" she asked. "When did you learn to do that?"

Severus pulled his hair over his eyes and shifted in his seat. "An hour ago, more or less. It was something of an experiment. So?"

"What?" she asked.

"What are we going to do? You know Longbottom... Aurors in the Christmas pudding?" he said.

"First, we go home." And sober you up; all her self-restraint was required to keep from voicing the second bit.

"And second?" Severus asked.

"We come up with a plan," she said.

"Oh goody, a plan," Severus said fatuously. "Albus used to come up with three or four plans a week, and we know how well that went. Are you going to share the plan with me, or will I just have to content myself with guessing? Albus almost never told me his plans. I suppose I'm not exactly trustworthy. Still, I did kill the old pouf, so he may have had a point..."

"I do wish you would shut up, Severus!" Hermione said, finally losing her temper.

Shockingly, he did shut up. Silence reigned for rather longer than Hermione was comfortable with.

"Severus Snape, you really are the most amazing wizard," she said, then paused. "Is your given name really Sonny Liston Snape?"

"That is what it says on my Muggle birth certificate." He frowned, and the lines went from his nostrils to his chin. "Bloody wretched, isn't it."

"Yes," she said honestly, "yes, it is."

"Worse than Stubby?"

There was a scratching and a high pitched whine at her car door, and it suddenly occurred to her that they'd both forgot Miss. It was a good thing they didn't have children.

One opened door and a bound across her lap later, the three of them were situated, and the two
vehicles set off down the road.

As she followed Millie away from the scene of Severus' crime, as it were, a befuddled voice surprised her.

"When did you learn to operate a motor vehicle?"

"Two days ago."

"Granger?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Later, at the motel, a room of her own safely fascinated up for Millie, Hermione laid back on the hotel bed, completely bloody knackered to the core of her being. All she desired in all the world was sleep.

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Millicent Malfoy was jealous. It was pointedly anti-climactic to catch a missing husband when it wasn't one's own. Certainly there was the satisfaction of having got him, but it hardly stood up beside having to chase him in the first place. Besides, she was jealous. There was not much likelihood that given an infinite number of Millies in an infinite number of universes one would eventually admit, even to herself, that she was in the grip of any bloody such thing, but there had to be some order to any existence, even one as stupid as theirs.

The particular order Millie had chosen to bring shape to her life was reason. It was an odd choice for a witch, really, since the tyranny of two plus two equalling four wasn't enforced nearly so stringently on the Magical side of the fence. Still, Millie was, by nature, perverse, so perhaps it made a sort of sense after all.

In any event, she was jealous, even if she would rather have been torn limb from limb by wild Manticores than admit it. It was awkward and embarrassing, and she had a husband of her own, thank you. A better husband, really.

You could count on Draco to mind his manners, care for the house, look after the baby, and give you a foot massage at the end of the day. And while Snape was a powerful wizard, she'd grant him that, as a husband, he was never going to be better than fair-to-middling. More to the point, he was Granger's fair-to-middling husband. She'd never had a female friend before, and she wasn't about to queer it by wanting a go at her husband. Millie refused.

She didn't want Snape. Not anymore. Not to keep, at any rate.

Still.

Still.

In the back, the very back, mind you, of Millie's brain, a small voice groused to itself she should liked to have fucked Snape once before she was married.

Because her mum was right, he wasn't the sort one made a proper husband of, but he certainly had
the marks of a lusty roll in the grass. She would have liked to see for herself, to touch the spark of his magic. Not to mention his cock.

And then she felt guilty about Draco, which she also categorically refused to admit. Even if she adored the prissy little sod.

There was nothing for it but to lie there clenching and unclenching her jaw, in that strange room on that strange bed with cold, crisp sheets. Drowsiness came up on her unawares, and she was quite nearly asleep, despite her churning thoughts turning rapidly to some sort of brain butter, as her fat little fingers found their way between her plump little labia to her clitoris.

At the foot of her bed, Snape's dog snored.

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Sleep was the furthest thing from Severus' mind.

Granger loved him. He felt quite convinced of it now. Between a thorough scrub, a shave, and a somewhat sloppy self-directed Ennervate that stopped at the right knee, he felt like a new man. More or less. Which was fortunate, because the old man hadn't been having a very good time.

He felt even better when he found a very nearly full bottle stashed away with the complimentary what-have-yous when he was cleaning his teeth. A drink was exactly what he needed to still the anxiety that always seemed to be rolling towards him no matter which way he ran trying to evade it.

On his third swallow, the bottle now diminished by half, he had a brilliant idea.

Granger had been worried. Concerned for his sake. Which meant she had anxiety, too. Undoubtedly her worries were not as serious as his own, but surely after coming all this way she could use a drink as well.

She loved him, so it was on him to do her as much good as he was able. He resolved at that moment to share the bottle.

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Hermione awoke to the decision of whether to choke or swallow. Having opted for swallowing, she was rewarded with a burning in her throat and the distinct smoky flavour of Scotch whisky.

She would have flailed about blindly but found she was being held fast by Severus, who had mercifully bathed and was now cradling her firmly but gently in his arms. Looking up into his bemused face, he seemed himself again.

"That's a girl," Severus said, wiping the corner of her mouth with his thumb.

"Severus?" she said, unsure if she was awake or not.

"Shhhhh," he said and gave her an indulgent smile that curled the corners of his mouth as he gingerly placed the bottle to her lips and poured more whisky down her throat.

She looked up at him, felt his arm wrapped round her, heard his heart pounding against her ear. It
seemed this was Severus' idea of taking care of her. She wasn't going to discourage him. Despite the fact that she tired and more than a bit hungry, again she swallowed. She could indeed use a drink.

Rest was sure to follow, and there was always room service.

After the fourth swallow, it was really very dear of him. He leant down and kissed her before placing the bottle to her lips once more. There was also something very dear about the way his nose was off-centre.

And then another kiss, which was followed by another drink.

And then a kiss wasn't quite enough. He slid his free hand inside the unevenly buttoned front of her shirt, under the wire of her brassiere, to cup her breast in the palm of his hand.

He broke his kiss just long enough to tip the bottle into her mouth once more.

She wasn't sure his kisses had ever been so sweet. He suckled at her lower lip as though it dripped honey.

"Finish up like a good girl," he said, breaking away and practically upending the bottle into her gullet.

It took a bit of doing for her to get it all down without spluttering. She would have thought he was trying to soften her up but for the fact that it was completely unnecessary, and besides, he had begun the night far more drunk than she had any hope of becoming on a half a bottle of scotch.

He dropped the near empty bottle on the heavily carpeted floor and buried his darling face between her breasts.

She pulled him up to kiss his lips. He wrapped his arms so tight round her that she nearly had trouble breathing, so she squeezed him just as hard, which he seemed to like quite a bit as he sighed and came close to melting into her mouth.

He seemed intent on touching her, everywhere, every inch of her skin, and it seemed right for her to respond in kind.

Snaky was perhaps the best description of the coupling.

His long arms slid along her arms, tracing a path from her shoulders to the outside edge of her smallest finger. He panted in her ear as he withdrew just enough to leave a gap between her dishevelled, half-dressed body and his naked self. Then, like a crack of lightning, he pulled her close again; his same tongue that was capable of every spell known to wizarding kind did its work on her ear, wet and divine and nearly as intoxicating as the whisky.

Kissing his way across her face, her lips, her throat, her ears as if every part of her were delectable, he, who rarely smiled, smiled as he covered her with kisses. His powerful hands meanwhile gripped her bum through her trousers.

He was rather glorious himself. Gone was the cursing, cowering drunk who'd ridden to the hotel with her. In his place was a confident wizard who sent thrills up her spine. She kissed her way down his magnificent nose, across his cheeks like sheer cliffs, his thick eyelashes fluttered against her face, his long white-muscled throat swanlike to her drunken eyes.

Again he relaxed and withdrew just long enough to catch his breath and pull them, crashing
together again.

How was it possible to drown in him and yet continue to crave him so? His breath in her ear. His nipples hard against her chest.

She felt a sort of a pang in her gut and writhed, yes, writhed against him. Her jaw clenched as she moved with the heartbeat as loud as thunder in her ears.

Those hands, bigger than she ever realized until they held hers, those hands that in her girlhood memory were stained with ink and moved endlessly grading parchment after parchment, those hands of his slithered over her belly and unbuttoned her trousers with horrible, tantalizing slowness. Those subtle, soft hands of his teased their way down the front of her knickers seemingly content to play in her pubic hair all night.

She didn't intend to, but she groaned out loud as she placed her hand over his, and throwing subtlety to the wind, moved his fingers to her clitoris. It would have hurt his feelings if she ever told him, but this was Severus' sexual forte. He was undeniably, unarguably, brilliant with his hands. She'd never imagined any man could masturbate her better than she could masturbate herself; after all she had the benefit of years of practice as well as an instant access to feedback, and yet Severus' hand in her knickers made the back of her head threaten to fly off in a way she could never quite duplicate on her own.

She knew, because she was philosophizing, that she would come to orgasm soon. Her body and brain had the habit of detaching in the minute or so before the rush of her body beat her brain into submission. The first time she'd truly grasped the Kreb's cycle in toto she'd been having an intimate moment with herself in the shower.

Fucking Severus was divine in every sense. Tonight it felt as if some previously closed part of her fell open, like an unlocked door. She was suddenly cold and naked even though she wasn't; goose-flesh prickled the exposed skin of her chest. In the merest flicker, pressure slowly came over her brain and body as though she was being crushed by huge stones. She pressed her eyes closed tight. For an unreasoning, unreasonable moment, she thought she was going to die until the stone rolled away, and she had the feeling of rising almost as if she'd sprouted wings. It had never been quite like that before.

She was shocked back into her senses by Severus roughly pulling off her trousers throwing them over his shoulder with more force than she'd credited him.

"My turn," he muttered, and he no longer looked surprisingly good. He was closer to a well-washed version of the wreck she'd seen earlier, but even less coherent.

His jaw was slack, and there was no sense in his black eyes as he crawled atop her.

A strange feeling came over her, not fear and not lust, but something nearer to what she felt when sitting down to a well written examination.

Severus, drunk as he was, jabbed his cock frustratedly against the inside of her thigh.

Whatever it was that had been whetted in Hermione would not be so easily denied. She reached up and guided him into her. Severus' head rested against her shoulder as he settled into her. Really, some people shouldn't ought to go about getting other people all worked up if they were only going to pass out in the middle of the act.

With a grunt of frustration, Hermione rolled Severus onto his back. He gazed up at her through
dumbfounded black eyes, his penis apparently the only part of him that functioned according to specifications at the moment.

She thought for a moment he was going to say something, but instead a hum rose from Severus' closed lips. It sounded like a Beatles song.

Hermione ground herself against him, sending a jolt through her body. Some part of her brain chattered away about the physical reality of their coupling.

His hard penis, erectile tissues engorged with blood, prostate, seminal vesicles, his entire body working together to complete this act, it was wonder his alcohol impaired system had managed as much as it had. Another part of her, the most primitive portion of her lizard brain, no doubt, concerned itself only with sensation; the slick slide singeing every nerve in her body, the seemingly endless tremors that shook her as she rode his oversized cock.

And then he went soft. She suppressed the rather shocking and fleeting desire to slap his face and tell him to tend to his duty.

With little or no adieu, she slipped off of him and pulled his slack cock into her mouth. She supposed it was slightly perverse, but the tart flavour of her own sex had always been delicious to her. Gratifying too was the sensation of Severus' penis hardening in her mouth.

It seemed even bigger than usual, which had to be a matter of perception.

Still, his body fairly vibrated with the effort of holding in the power that thrummed just under the skin.

His humming continued. Became clearer. More tuneful.

Severus didn't seem much more coherent when he rolled her over onto her back and delivered a few ragged strokes. In no time, she felt the hot spray against her cervix.

She fully expected him to collapse on her then. Instead she was taken aback when he fell, face first, between her legs. Not that she was complaining, mind you.

And then.

And then.

Hermione, who thought she was over-stimulated and couldn't possible have another orgasm, felt Severus Snape insinuate that silver tongue of his between her labia and admitted she had been very much mistaken. The very thought of him licking his own semen out of her sensitive cunt delighted her and seemed filthy in the most wonderful sort of way. But the reality was...more. Waves of pressure, mindless perfect wave after wave crashed across her brain and body, waves so intense she lost consciousness and for the next several hours knew no more.

At first Severus thought it was just that he was pissed. By the time he realized that Granger had been unknowingly sapping his magic at a heretofore unexperienced rate, it was too late, and he lost consciousness along with her.

Black Alice Eye was going to have competition if he didn't keep his head.

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Millie woke up to the sight of dawn and the smell of smoke. So it happened that as the sun was
sending its first pink streams across the Eastern skies, she was holding her dressing gown closed
over her big belly and following her nose to the source of the burning, her wand tucked neatly in
her sleeve. Miss followed close behind, wagging her tail violently.

She should have sodding known.

Of course it would be Severus and Granger's room.

"Alohamora," she cast in a whisper, the door falling open with a soft snick.

And there, coming from Granger's trousers draped carelessly over the top of a table lamp, was
more of a middle-sized smoulder than a proper fire.

Both Granger and Snape were snoring to wake the dead.

She stood for she wasn't sure how long, staring at the two of them, well more at Snape, really.
Thinking Mrs. Malfoy would say his bits were quite a bit bigger than was warranted for a
penniless schoolteacher. She didn't really want to step closer to naked Snape, but she was going to
have to if she was going to move the trousers off the lamp.

The next thing she knew, the most awful ringing came close to splitting her head in two. She
couldn't think let alone act with the sound like a hatchet in her brain. She was dimly aware of
Snape rolling over, perhaps in response to the sound, and knocking the lamp to the floor where it
hit a bottle, and the smoulder was transformed into a small flame.

It wasn't really that surprising when a crowd of Muggles showed up, though honestly, had Millie
been down the corridor when that noise started, she would have run in the opposite direction.

"Sir, Sir," said a frightened-looking Muggle in a polyester waistcoat and a bad mustache, gently
shaking naked Severus by the shoulder. "Your room is on fire."

"I'm not surprised," said Severus, his eyes closed.

"Your room is on fire, Sir," the Waistcoat-wearer repeated.

"Tell Granger to put it out," he groaned, still not bothering to open his eyes.

"What the hell?" shouted a second mustache and waistcoat-ed male from behind the crowd of
sleepy-looking Muggles. He looked remarkably like the first, or perhaps it was only that they were
dressed to match.

"The room's on fire," said Waistcoat Number One.

"Pour something on it," shouted Waistcoat Number Two. "Find something to pour on it."

Only the innocent looking glass of water Waistcoat Number One found and subsequently hurled
toward the flames was something closer to petrol, spreading the fire halfway cross the room.

"You couldn't pour piss out of a boot with instructions printed on the heel, could ya, Larry?"
bellowed Waistcoat Number Two, finally pushing his way into the room.

In one smooth motion, Waistcoat Two ripped the bedclothes off of Granger and Severus and began
smothering the fire.

Granger slept on blissfully.
"It's cold," Severus muttered.

"The room's on fire," someone, Millie wasn't sure who, said.

"I don't see why that means I should freeze my bollocks off..." Snape said, opening one eye. "Are you truly so short on brains that it requires such an excessive number of hands or are these... gawkers?"

"Are dogs allowed in this hotel?" some pain in the arse asked loudly.

It was not exactly surprising they were asked to vacate the hotel in no uncertain terms.

Millie knew one thing, she was hungry and irritated, and she had a good shot at home cooked food if she demanded they go to Snape Sr.'s house. If that Suzette wasn't a Pureblood, she'd eat her car keys.

~~~

Severus Snape supposed he would rather visit Toby's house than Azkaban, but only just.

His father's house also rated higher than a pit full of incontinent Trolls or a Lamia's nest. It ranked slightly below an open sewer, however. Shit washed off easier than the stench that hearkened back to childhood.

Apparently, an angry girl child ranked somewhere near a Manticore, because he did indeed find himself in Toby's home with no one to blame but Millicent Bulstrode. While it was not his miserable childhood home, his stomach heaved at the familiarity.

The smell of grease saturated the air. A lumpy sofa, its threadbare arms patched with silver tape, was draped with lurid orange, pink, and green-striped blanket, the dayglow bastard brother of a Mexican serape. In lieu of wallpaper, the lounge was plastered with the covers of ancient LPs, thumb-tacked at the corners. The Old Man's weight set lay on a scarred and dented portion of the floor. An electric guitar occupied a ditch in the seat directly across from the telly.

Severus clasped his hands behind his back, unwilling to allow himself to be touched by any of it. He wondered if there was some way to avoid his father altogether, when a hand laid across the back of his neck sent that hope plummeting.

Suddenly Severus was ten years old, and Toby was steering him into a "private" corner where he leaned against the wall reaching out one arm to box Severus in.

"Boy," the Old Man said, though truth be known, there was less than 16 years between them.

Severus' frown deepened, and he consciously worked at meeting his father's gaze, managing instead to give his father's navel the hardest glare in his repertoire.

"Coward. Coward, the voice in his head called. Sodding coward. They were right when they called you Snivellus. He could only attribute standing up to him at Graceland to the shock of the moment. But as he fought the natural desire to shrink under his father's gaze, it seemed to him he could either do as he had always done with Toby, or he could kill him where he stood. And Granger probably didn't approve of patricide before tea.

"Boy," Toby said. "Sonny! Look at me when I talk to you, boy."

Severus flipped his eyes toward Toby's face.
"I didn't know what I had in your mum," he said, leaning in closer, as his voice became quieter, till it was conspiratorial in tone. "I think them potions of hers half addled me brains, and I couldn't make use of what I had. Took more'n twenty five year to get me hands on another witch. I'm under no spell this time round. Don't queer it for me, Boy."

Severus didn't know what sort of speech he was expecting, but this was not it.

He raised his head in surprise and looked his father in the eye. His eyebrow went up unbidden.

"Interfere and you'll live to regret it, Sonny."

"I am not afraid of you, Old Man," he said, nearly convinced that he meant it.

Toby cocked his head, and something veiled itself behind his eyes. Severus had the strange feeling he was watching a man-sized snake deciding when to strike.

Granger chose that precise moment to stick her head through the doorway like a puffy-headed ray of sunshine.

"Tea's on," she smiled, and it was a beautiful smile for all it was forced. "Do you think you're able to eat, Severus?"

Toby threw his arm over Severus' shoulder and saw to it they squeezed through the doorway side by side. "The princess here'll eat it and like it," he said, before turning to whisper in his ear, "And don't hold it against your new mum; she might be black as sin, but she's pink where it counts."

How charming.

Severus was a bit taken aback by the table laid full to groaning in the painfully yellow kitchen with blood red trim.

Toby's child bride looked up at him timidly and said in a voice barely above a whisper, "We've got ackee, callaloo, hardough bread, fried plantains, soft-boiled egg, beef liver and boiled green bananas, coffee, tea, butter, roast & fried breadfruit, fried dumplings, fried bammy, bacon or ham, water and hot chocolate."

Meanwhile Bulstrode, who never stood on ceremony when she could avoid it, loaded her plate until food threatened to spill off all the edges.

Miss stood at the ready, catching each spill before it hit the floor.

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For her part, Hermione was torn between disgust and fascination. The disgust was easy to explain: Toby Snape was a rude, obnoxious, perfectly horrid person who seemed to belittle Severus without conscious effort. Hermione felt a bit guilty at her fascination because the whole uncomfortable situation cast the clear light of illumination on Severus as never before.

Toby treated Severus in a way that was very similar to the way Severus had treated Neville Longbottom.

Even more intriguing was the way Severus simply folded up in his father's presence. He seemed to hold himself smaller, stoop his shoulders, bow his head. It was quite nearly the polar opposite of the way he strode like an unchallenged despot through the halls of Hogwarts.
She and Severus predictably sported matching his and hers hangovers of similar magnitudes, despite the differences in their amount of consumption.

Among the most likely causal factors was the fact that she was a rank amateur drinker while Severus was a well-seasoned drunk. Suzette - Hermione could not force herself to think of her as Severus' step-mother, the very notion was too ridiculous for words - Suzette had plied them with the same surprisingly effective hang-over cure.

Severus had balked, of course. He didn't care to ingest any potion not of his own hand.

But one stern look from his father and he had complied.

And after breakfast, Millie volunteered to lend a hand with the washing up, to pump Suzette for information, most likely.

"C'mere, Sonny," Toby called from the living room, and Hermione followed out of both curiosity and the desire to protect Severus.

She was greeted by a low hum followed by a strange electronic crackle and hiss that made Severus wince.

Apparently her father-in-law had pulled out an electric guitar she hadn't noticed on her first pass through the room. Two actually. A silver sparkle-covered model was balanced on his own knee. He gestured with his chin to another, more weather-beaten instrument, black and smaller bodied, at the far end of the divan.

Toby twiddled knobs and made a few noises with the guitar that reminded her of Draco turning on his lawn mower.

"I hope you been practicin', Sonny."

Severus blinked then frowned. "I have not."

"Try to raise a boy right and see how he repays you?" Toby said with disgust.

"Right being all too subjective," Severus muttered.

Toby sneered.

Severus glowered.

Hermione wondered if Toby knew about the unfortunate and unpredictable effects of mixing electricity and high volumes of magic.

Severus stood over the guitar with his arms folded.

"Feelin' a might yellow?" Toby said with a look of amusement. "Don't want to embarrass yerself in front of the Missus."

Severus' back straightened, and he took up the guitar reflexively.

Toby's playing went from chaotic to tuneful in a single roar of sound.

"Get outta that bed, wash your face and hands

Get outta that bed, wash your face and hands
Well, you get in that kitchen, make some noise with the pots and pans,” he sang.

His singing and playing were fine, she supposed, tuneful and competent, but a far cry from Severus. He aped an American sort of an accent, which also unsettled her.

Severus clearly hadn't spent much time playing music since he had been in the magical world; Hermione surprised herself by easily picking out Toby's confident playing from Severus' wooden attempt. Severus' was clearly rubbing off on her.

"Well, you wear low dresses, the sun comes shining through

"Well, you wear low dresses, the sun comes shining through

"I can't believe my eyes all that mess belongs to you," Toby went on, motioning for Severus to do something as he entered the chorus again.

"Shake, rattle, and roll. Shake, rattle, and roll. Shake, rattle, and roll."

And then Severus opened his mouth, cutting his eyes at her as he leapt in with the next verse, and it hardly mattered about his playing.

"I believe to my soul you're a devil in nylon hose.

"I believe to my soul you're a devil in nylon hose.

"Well, the harder I work, the faster my money goes."

A shiver went down Hermione's arms. Severus responded to her shudder with gleam in his eyes and the faintest shadow of a smile.

It was a strangely heady moment when they launched into the chorus together. She had to struggle hard to keep her hips from swaying with the music. Before her eyes, Severus moved from stiffly holding the instrument close to his chest to balancing the body of it across his thighs, leaning forward, his playing noticeably smoothing out.

Had it been less infectious, she would have laughed at the idea of the scourge of the Hogwarts dungeon tapping time with his foot. Instead she suppressed the urge to shake her arse.

Severus and his father didn't look any more alike sitting side by side, but it was clear that somehow Severus shared that horrible man's expressions, his movements, his sheer physical grace, somehow strung tighter when it was powered by Severus' boundless anxiety. She really did not want to admit, even in her most private inner thoughts, that she understood what a witch who was thinking with nothing but her loins might see in Severus' father. Neither did she like the idea that there was any similarity between them.

When she gathered her wits, she realized they were both leering. At her.

She looked away only to catch sight of Millie and Suzette dancing. Shaking their bums without the slightest hint of embarrassment in the kitchen. She had never seen a dog dance, but she couldn't offer a better description of what Miss was doing in the kitchen than an elaborate folk dance of the Labrador Retriever.

She stared.

Behind her Toby sang, "I'm like a one-eyed cat peeping in a sea-food store.
I'm like a one-eyed cat peeping in a sea-food store.
Well, I can look at you, child, till you ain't no child no more."

When the chorus came, it gripped her physically.

Hermione's stomach flipped. Her nipples were hard.

"I'm over the hill and way down underneath.

"I'm over the hill and way down underneath.

"You make me roll my eyes.

"Girl, you make me grit my teeth," Severus sang in that voice of his.

She nearly laughed at that, a wizard Severus' age was no more "over the hill" than she was.

When the chorus came this time it was different. "Shake, baby, shake," he sang out. She most certainly was no man's "baby", no matter how proficient he was at magic. No matter how fond she was of him, Severus could certainly be an arse when the mood was on him.

She turned back round to face him with her arms folded across chest.

And still he sang his raucous entreaty. Hermione had always thought those ancient videos of the girls weeping and screaming their heads off to the Beatles were histrionics combined with crowd psychology, but she felt it, whatever "it" was. When Severus put his mind to performing, he was able to strum, with surgical precision, a Dionysian impulse she never even knew she had. He'd better watch himself; the followers of Dionysus used to rip men to shreds with their bare hands.

"Hurry up, Baby, before I get too old," Toby finished the song.

It felt flat and sad and completely unmagical, and Hermione was deeply grateful.

She strode across the room and stopped to stand directly in front of Severus.

"I think Millie and Suzette need my help," she said.

Severus looked dubious but nodded all the same.

The guitar rang out loud like a wind at her back, and the voice she heard belonged to Severus.

"I got a woman as mean as she can be, sometimes I think she's almost mean as me."

Stepping into the kitchen was like stepping behind a buffer. Millie took her by the hand and spun her in a circle.

Tiny rivulets of sweat trickled down Suzette's forehead as she looked Hermione in the eye for the first time.

"Toby never told me... Sonny was so... good," she said, out of breath from her dancing.

"He is good, isn't he?" Hermione said, unsure what else to say. He could have been a singer if he'd wanted to. Hermione supposed Severus had the potential to excel at a good many things despite himself. Not that she held musicians in any great esteem, but she wondered at the inanity of Severus winding up a schoolmaster. It seemed such a waste. Perhaps the life of a performer seemed inane to Severus compared to that of a spy, but then what was a spy but another sort of performer?
Still it was a puzzle, wasn't it? Severus fairly craved recognition, and she couldn't imagine him being averse to having aroused witches clamouring for him. But then she could see him wanting to dissociate himself from anything that hearkened back to Toby Snape no matter how much pleasure it gave him.

She peered through the doorway to see a rare sight, Severus focused as surely on his song as he would on a complex potion, and with the same result, the music fairly shone with magic.

She stood there, glancing intermittently round the doorframe at him. He seemed to become more proficient with the momentum of a boulder rolling downhill. A few hours later, his right hand zoomed down the neck of his guitar, and as he began to growl, the narrow Muggle house shook in response.

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Millie had always maintained that silence was the best policy; still she had to give up something for all Suzette told her. It was a basic law of magic that no deed, no matter how small, is without consequence.

Suzette had finished at Laveau's Academie two years ago. Born to the unfashionable Jamaican branch of an old Ethiopian Pureblood family, she was supposed to be on a post-graduation grand tour when she met Toby Snape.

She reckoned her family hadn't tracked her down because her chaperone was too afraid to admit she'd lost her charge.

Suzette had the same misgivings about the insular little world of Purebloods Millie did, but unlike Millie, Suzette had enough of whatever it took to walk away from her place in the family.

Still, Millie couldn't make herself quite comfortable with the idea of marrying a Muggle like Snape's father. Sure, she could see throwing a fuck his way, but marriage didn't seem quite... seemly with a Muggle.

She'd known witches like Suzette before; they seemed as docile as rabbits until someone backed them into a corner. And then when push came to push back, they tended to demolish all threats with the mercy and sense of proportion of Dementors.

"I married a Death Eater," Millie said over the kitchen table, feeling more than a bit embarrassed.

"Truly?" Suzette asked, leaning forward "You must tell me all about it."

"He's a big whinging baby," she said, "but he's not half bad-looking."

"Go on," Suzette said, so she did.

~~~

It was late in the day when Severus took the opportunity afforded by Toby stepping into the loo and followed his stepmother into the kitchen. She had skilfully avoided him all day. It was no good. He was well acquainted with people not wanting to hear what he needed to tell them.

She crossed to the sink when she saw him coming and feigned a half-hearted wipe at the counter. She would have to try harder than that. He crossed to the sink as well.
She darted for the cooker, and he turned round sharply, boxing her in with an arm on either side, her full belly nearly touching him.

"I do not intend to cause you harm," he said, careful to keep his voice as quiet as he was able. A pregnant witch was a dangerous thing indeed, and he saw no need to antagonize her.

"Then leave me be," she said softly.

"I merely wish to offer a piece of advice," he said.

"Advice?" she repeated.

"As one who had seventeen years to observe Toby Snape at close range, I would offer this one warning. Do not allow him to strike you a second time. If you do, you will suffer. Both of you." Severus wasn't sure if she fully grasped his meaning. He looked down at her high, hard belly. "All of you."

The girl cocked her head and gaped at him. "He hasn't struck me a first time."

"Yet," was all Severus could manage to bite out before he turned and walked out of the room.

He, Granger, Miss, and Millicent left soon after in the Bavarian Motor Works Vehicle, leaving the Grand Marquis parked in Toby's front garden. Severus told him to consider it a wedding gift.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Tits Up!

If I can catch him once upon the hip,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.

--Shakespeare - The Merchant of Venice

Privately, Kingsley Shacklebolt thought the new Minister was off his nut when it came to anything having to do with Snape. Kingsley wasn't entirely convinced Snape was still alive after scouring the British Isles and most of the continent for him. Fact was, he was last verified to be among the living the morning of the final battle when he breakfasted with Phillipus Bulstrode at the Lusty Hag in Knockturn Alley. No one would admit to having seen or heard from the bugger since.

The same went for young Malfoy, whose father was spotted now and again in the poncier robe shops on the continent. Either the pair were dead as doorknobs, which was Kingsley's feeling, or they had a more successful hiding spot. Which was less likely.

The time had come for Longbottom to face facts and bury whatever it was kept him up nights. Since the war ended, Kingsley had been on what amounted to an extended holiday, tooling about on his broom, meeting witches in each new town with expense account enough to pay for drinks, asking after two strange wizards, "both tall, the older one dark haired, the younger a blond, the older has a cigarette habit. No? Now that we've got that out of the way, what sort of local sights would you recommend to a couple of visiting English wizards?"

But the time had come to go home and get back to work.

And if they weren't dead, what good would bringing them back do? Damned little, as far as Kingsley could see. The wounds that had begun to heal would be reopened. It wasn't as though either of them were going to go out looking for trouble. Snape was a weird one and not one he'd care to have to Christmas dinner, but he had never been one for mayhem for its own sake.

No, Kingsley knew Snape well enough to know he would keep his head down and his big nose clean as long as there was a price on his head, provided he was still alive, which he probably wasn't. Young Malfoy was strictly a follower.

And dead to boot. But dead or not, he would stick with the older wizard.

Kingsley didn't see the point of keeping at it.

Not everyone felt the way he did. Young Weasley for instance.

Since everything that had happened... well... had happened, Longbottom appointed Weasley a "special officer" and Kingsley's partner, despite the fact that he didn't have any sodding training. Weasley hated Snape, as far as Kingsley could tell, as much as Longbottom did. They both seemed to hold their old schoolmaster personally responsible for every loss suffered in the war.
War wasn't personal. No matter how it felt in the heat of the moment. No matter what you lost. Taking it personal was the sort of thing that drove good people mad and only served to make the bad ones worse.

It was true, good people died in wars, people you were never expecting to lose, that was what made it such shit. That was why you chose not only your battles but your wars carefully. That was why you didn't jump headlong into dangerous business like a decapitated basilisk. Losing good people, like Granger, to take the favourite example of both Longbottom and Weasley, was the reason you stopped and considered before you rushed into a vendetta against a frightened and no doubt tired man who was likely dead in any event.

If you didn't, before you knew it you'd be bringing home fresh dead to mourn.

The sooner Weasley and Longbottom learned that the better.

Not that either one of them were bad sorts. Longbottom was a level-headed young chap. And Weasley had his heart in more or less the right place; he just wasn't suited for the Aurory. Law enforcement was no place for hot heads.

And now, of all the ridiculous shit, they had gone to America. On what?

Information from Snape's father, a Muggle with a criminal background to rival Mundungus Sodding Fletcher, that's what on. Personally, Kingsley wouldn't trust Snape Sr. to tell him if his robes were on fire.

Weasley and Longbottom though, took it as vindication. Only a nasty piece of work could earn treatment like that from his own flesh and blood.

Whereas Kingsley suspected the father was at least half the reason Snape went over to Voldemort's side in the first place. Wizards as twisty and shirty as Severus Snape were made, not born, and he suspected Snape Sr. had more than a small hand in that. If he was the type to grass on his own son, who knew what else he was capable of.

And so it was that, despite his own opinion on the matter, he found himself halfway round the world watching a Muggle neighbourhood with magical law enforcement from three nations to co-ordinate. A big pain in the arse for nothing if you asked him, not that anyone did.

There were the British; Neen and Parker, brought in special from home to "lend a hand" as it were, as well as Weasley and Kingsley himself, then the New Englanders, who had a treaty of co-operation and extradition with the UK and came in to assist with the apprehension of wanted criminals on their territory; Bradley, Laurentino, Davis, West, Molinaro, and Sickleback.

And finally the Californians who had no such treaty but shared a rather oddly cut half of the city and had come, essentially, to keep an eye on New England; Gilbert (pronounced and repronounced with a froggish accent no matter how many times you made it clear you couldn't care less) Apodaca, Trujillo, Conejo, Maestas, Fundy, and Rodgers. Again, a bleeding pain in his bleeding arse.

And for what?

Precious little as far as he could see. In fact all he could see at the moment was roses. Which was strange for January, and likely magic, though with the local weather you couldn't be sure. Either way it was hardly a sign of dark forces at work.

And then a Muggle motorcar pulled in front of the house.
Snape stepped out first, lit a cigarette, then proceeded to stretch like a wizard who'd been folded up in a box for some hours. Next were a female, pregnant, and a half-grown black dog. From the look of it, Snape mightn't have been suffering as much as he'd thought.

Kingsley calculated the odds she was a witch. Snape had a history of keeping to Muggle females, his magic as unsullied as a sodomite's. Kingsley couldn't imagine he'd give it up to a witch at this late date.

Added up, it meant they wouldn't have to stand off against a witch with perhaps as much as seven times the power of all of them combined, depending on what she was carrying.

He hoped to hell Weasley was able to keep hold of himself until he gave the signal, and they could apprehend Snape without drawing the attention of every Muggle in the city. Besides it only followed that if Snape was here Malfoy was likely close by. Kingsley would rather not alert Malfoy before they could lay hands on him if it could be helped.

While Kingsley Shacklebolt had been an Auror long enough that not much surprised him, he did feel cold in his belly a moment when Hermione Granger stepped out of the auto yawning and stretching. The cold came back again when Snape reached out his hand to the small of her back. The move was quick as a snake, but the meaning was anything but muddy.

If Weasley saw that they might as well drop trouser and grab the ground now because they were buggered for sure.

The unknown female proceeded to the front door just behind Granger and Snape, so reaching into his pocket, Kingsley gave the signal for the Aurors to advance. The coins each one damn well ought to be clutching in their hand should be starting to warm. With some skill and a degree of luck, they would be able to walk right in the front door behind Snape, and the neighbours would never know the difference. The trouble was that their disillusionment charm was not selective, and so the timing had to be spot on to keep them from falling all over each other like so many skittles. With fifteen agents, it was a bloody catastrophe waiting to happen. The charm on the coins was supposed to turn them ice cold if they came within half a meter of another charmed coin, but nothing was foolproof. Not in Kingsley's experience, at any rate.

Weasley hadn't lost his head. That was good.

By his best guess, seven or eight of them had slipped through the door when the operation went tits up.

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Draco didn't understand what happened until later. One minute he was feeding Phil, the next Uncle Severus was walking in the door followed by Millie and Granger, a second later Whack meowed, Severus' dog turned snarling, and the room went somehow haywire; bodies and furniture went flying. Spells flashed. It was all he could do to wrap his arms round Phil and hope for the best. His wand was lying atop his pyjama dresser.

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For a good quarter of a second, Millie thought Snape's dog was about to make a lunge for her throat. To be fair, Miss did lunge but went right past her, a sliver of a second later something heavy but invisible fell her way, followed several more somethings that bounced off of her like so many rubber balls. It went too quick for her to right herself much less reach her wand. In the end, it must have been the baby's magic that protected her belly, because whatever it was didn't give two shits
about her hitting her head on the end table and everything going black.

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Severus Snape's gut was uneasy from the minute he set foot outside the car.

He should never have let Hermione talk him into coming back. They should have made Draco and the infant come to them instead. He could feel it. There was magic afoot, and it had none of Draco's smell on it.

Within seconds of stepping through the door, the claustrophobic feeling of being unbearably crowded was on him. His feelings were confirmed when Miss turned and leapt, snarling.

He pulled his wand and pivoted and was in the midst of silently casting Finite Incantatum for all he was worth when something or someone damn heavy came flying, landing heavily across his back.

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Hermione had simply been grateful to be home, where things could be properly sorted before further action was taken.

Sometimes, however, events don't co-operate with reasonable courses of action. As evidence of this being in the way of the world, Miss turned and hurled herself at something behind her. She assumed instantaneously that it had to be someone, or more than one someone, under a disillusionment charm. It was like she had never left the Aurors. Instincts kicked in, she dropped to her haunches, pulled her wand in one move and found herself surrounded by suddenly revealed Aurors, she assumed they were all Aurors, scattered about the room like nine pins pointing their wands in every direction, and herself nose to nose and wand to wand with Ronald Weasley.

Kingsley was sitting on Severus, his wand pointed at Draco. Neen, who'd been a trainee during her days, was staring horrified at Millie, and the others she didn't know, besides Parker who she had gone through training with, but they were everywhere.

"How could you?" Ron said, his wand in her face.

"How could I what?" she asked.

"You were in it with him all along," Ron said, his voice quavering.

"Don't be stupid, Ron," Hermione said.

Behind her, a slightly squashed Severus repeated sarcastically, "By all means, don't be stupid, Ron."

"He saved me at the Ministry," Hermione said. "As far as we knew, you were all dead."

"Are you asking me to believe Hermione Granger ran away when her friends were in danger?" Ron said.

"It wasn't exactly my decision," she said, careful not to drop her guard.

"The Hermione I know wouldn't let the side down for anything... unless it wasn't really her side to begin with," said Ron.

Hermione groaned. "Ronald Weasley, are you accusing me of being in league with Lord Voldemort?"
"Why not? Harry always said you were two steps away from dark lording yourself."

"He said that when I gave you two dunderheads revision schedules; he wasn't serious." The insult slipped out of her mouth as if she'd been born saying it, damn damn damn Severus Snape.

Something strengthened behind Ronald's eyes. "Put down your wand, Hermione,"

"Why should I?" she said.

"Because you'll be more use to him free than you will in the cell beside him in Azkaban," Kingsley Shacklebolt broke in sensibly. He was right, she knew.

She lowered her wand slowly and turned her head to see Shacklebolt close the manacles on Severus' wrists.

"Do you want to take this baby?" one of the others, she didn't know his name but he had an American accent, called, his wand very close to Draco's face.

She rushed in to get Phil from Draco before an Auror could lay hands on him.

Predictably, Phil wailed as the manacles shut on his father's arms. She looked for Millie and finally caught a glimpse of her unconscious at the foot of the divan.

"Are you going to do anything for her?" she said.

"Muggles are not our jurisdiction, Ma'am," said one of the Aurors she didn't recognize.

"That's not a Muggle, you knob, that's Millie Malfoy, the granddaughter of Black Alice Eye," Hermione said, wanting with all her soul to hex one of them.

"Oh, is it then?" said Parker, standing close by Millie. Hermione watched in horror as he made to point his wand squarely at Millie's crotch.

As fast as she was able balancing Phil against her chest, she raised her wand and shouted "Protego."

"Any more of that and I'll hex you myself," Shacklebolt said, as Parker picked himself up off the floor.

"But if she's..." Parker started.

"I don't want to hear it, Parker," Shacklebolt said.

Still holding baby Phil, Hermione knelt beside Millie, trying to recall her emergency healing training. Head injuries were tricky business. Hermione sincerely hoped Millie's skull was as hard as it seemed.

"Get her to a Muggle physician," Severus said as he and Draco were dragged toward the centre of the room.

Hermione nodded.

"Is there anyone I can go to, where I can look for evidence to free you?" she asked Severus while trying not to notice Draco had fat tears rolling down his cheeks and was making strangled sobs.

"I imagine the outcome of this particular trial is something of a foregone conclusion," Severus said
"Kingsley?" Hermione asked, addressing her former boss. "May I kiss my husband goodbye?"

Kingsley shook his head. "It's not allowed; you could pass him a magical object."

"Please, I'll keep my hands to myself and my lips closed I swear," she said and watched as Severus, perversely prudish to the end, blushed.

"Suit yourself." Shacklebolt shrugged, and Hermione felt more grateful than she could imagine for a simple kiss.

Looking into Severus face, she kissed him gently. "I'm going to get you out, I swear," she whispered in his ear as her cheek brushed against his stubbled cheek.

"No whispering!" Ron shouted and shoved them apart.

"Take care of them, Granger," Draco cried as Kingsley raised his wand and both Aurors and prisoners disappeared from view.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Chapter 25. The Refugees Return

Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.
--Saint Thomas Aquinas

Corollary 1. A belief which leaves no place for doubt is not a belief; it is a superstition.
--Jose Bergamin

Corollary 2. In prison, those things withheld from and denied to the prisoner become precisely what he wants most of all.
--Eldridge Cleaver

Corollary 3. I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act.
--Buddha

Millie had always wanted to see the inside of a Muggle hospital, but, not to sound like a wanker, she hadn't been interested in having the complete medical experience.

To be frank, she had never been in a magical hospital either; her granny had always healed what needed healing in her woods. It occurred to Millie, as she lay like a fowl on the block ready for carving with Muggles crowding round her, that she was a hick. It wasn't a word she'd been familiar with until recently. Maybe it was American. Maybe it wasn't American and no one had been brave enough to use it in her presence at Hogwarts. Either way, she noted, disgusted at her own racing heart, she was one. People on telly went to hospital all the time.

"Can you tell me what day it is?" asked someone behind a white paper mask that strangely covered only their mouth and nose instead of the usual eyes.

"No." But then she never knew what day it was. Millie wondered if this meant something, and if so, what? Did it mean she was as slow as people usually assumed? She tried to remember why she was at hospital and could not. Her brain was holding in thoughts nearly as well as cheesecloth. She tried to sit up and get her bearings, but a crushing pain behind her ear stopped her.

"Phil!" she called, fear overpowering her will yet again. "Where's my baby?"

"We're about to check," said a woman, also in a mask, who obviously misunderstood.

"Millie," said a voice belonging to someone out of sight, someone behind the white curtain. Granger, her brain chimed in. That was Granger. "I have Phil. Phil is fine."

"This is going to be a little chilly," said a mask, as someone pushed her legs apart.
Chilly was not the word she would use for cold metal going into her cunt then ratcheting wider. It was, all in all, a bizarre but not precisely painful feeling. Her only complaint was a pinch near the bottom of the opening. As far as she could figure, it was a device for holding the cunt open. The only reason she could think of for that was so they could take a look at the cervix and see if she was starting to labour. Ingenious really.

She pondered the inventiveness of Muggles for a moment before her mind wandered to something else.

Where was Draco?

"Where's Draco?" she called out to Granger, wherever she was.

There was no reply. She waited. One of the healers pulled the metal thing out of her vagina, which was a relief.

"Your cervix is high and hard and closed up tight as a drum," said the masked woman. "But it would probably be a good idea to take a look at your baby."

"My friend's got him on the other side of the curtain," Millie said.

"I mean the one you've got inside you right now," the masked woman clarified. "Is that one yours, too?"

Millie wanted to nod, but her head hurt too much so she said, "Yes," the 's' lingering rather longer than she intended.

"How did you manage that?" the woman asked.

Nosey, thought Millie.

"I mean, you're about six months, right? Your size is consistent with six months," the woman said, mucking about with some new machine. Millie grunted an affirmative, before the woman went on, "And that baby out there looks to be about three months old, give or take. That, and the fact that I can see by your cervix you've never given birth."

"He's... what do you call it when the cow who gave birth to a baby doesn't want it?"

"Adopted," the masked woman supplied. "You look awfully young to adopt."

"I'm old for my years or young for my age, something like that," Millie said.

"Which brings me to my next question. You don't know what day it is..."

"I never do..."

"Can you tell me when you were born?" asked another masked face.

Millie thought about that one, her head pounding. "In summer... I think... it was a long time ago."

"Do you know what this is?" the masked woman asked, holding up a long tubish thing on a coiled cord attached to a rolling beeping box-shaped machine.

Millie stayed silent.

"It's an ultrasound machine. I'm going to use it to take a look inside at your baby."
Without further ado she pulled up the weird arseless dress Millie wore and squirted a pile of something cold indeed on her belly. Millie found herself looking at what was happening despite the pain the shot through her skull whenever she moved her head, sheer curiosity winning out.

The woman hummed to herself as she clicked at the machine.

"Your baby looks healthy; can you tell me what happened to you? Why you're here?" she asked, turning the screen round to face Millie.

All Millie could see on the screen the healer was so absorbed in were dark masses.

"You're awfully nosey," Millie said rather than admit she wasn't quite sure herself.

The female healer stuck her head outside the curtains and a few minutes later Granger appeared beside the bed.

"The baby appears to be in good shape, but your friend here has a mild to moderate concussion. Can you tell me what happened to her?"

Granger sighed. "We were coming in from holiday at Graceland carrying in our bags when Millie tripped and struck her head against the coffee table leg."

"That sounds like me," Millie said, not believing it for a second.

Granger looked at her with a puzzling expression in her eyes. The closer Millie looked the more it looked like something best discussed outside the earshot of Muggles. After assessing the facts of her life, she wondered what, if anything, they could discuss in public.

So... what are we to do?" Hermione said, after refreshing Millie's memory of the events surrounding her blow to the head.

"If it were the other way round and Aurors had us locked up, the blokes would be halfway to England by now," Millie said, frowning. "Probably wouldn't have bothered to shut the front door."

"Undoubtedly," Hermione said. "And yet somehow I'm not certain that is the wisest course for you and I."

"You've that right, for sure," Millie said with a snort. "How do you reckon we get started? First we'll need to see to the house, then I want to go round and give notice to Mrs. Bertolli and at Draco's work as well, perhaps squeeze a paycheque out of one of them."

"It will be difficult to travel with all the animals, which leads me to the question of exactly how we are to get back home."

"I don't fancy I could fly either a dog or a goat on the back of a broom."

"Nor do I relish trying to cross the Atlantic Ocean on a Firebolt," Hermione agreed.

"Well I've better than that, I've two Nimbuses in my bedroom closet, but I still wouldn't like to fly cross a sea with 'em. We could always take The Dutchman."

Hermione was surprised Millie brought up the flying ship up as an option, it was well known to be
astronomically expensive. "Can we afford that?"

"I don't think I could dig it out of the divan cushions, if that's what you mean, but they'd send it from home if I asked."

"So how do we get to New York?" Hermione asked wondering if an offhand comment Severus had once made about Millie marrying down was true in more ways than she had realised at the time.

"That's the question, isn't it?" Millie said frowning.

In the end they had little choice but to take the car to New York with Miss, Whack, and Baby Phil in tow. The unnamed goat was presented as a gift to Albert Shakeleg's granny. Phil would have to make do with tinned goat milk from here out. The house was presented to Shakeleg himself, who thought it was a joke until Millie pulled the title out of her handbag.

Draco's co-workers seemed completely flummoxed by his sudden inexplicable return to England, and Mrs. Bertolli wept openly to see Millie go.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Severus and Draco were stupefied and didn't awake until some undetermined point when they found themselves trussed up like two stags destined to have their heads mounted on the wall at a sporty club. Quick wand work from Weasley, and they were both petrified and stupefied once again.

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Millie had heard of the Zodiac, who hadn't? More or less the counterpart of the Leaky Cauldron in London, it served as a gateway to Magical Manhattan. Bearing this in mind, she expected it to be more... well, like the Leaky Cauldron.

Instead, a neon sign flashing blue directed them to a subterranean den of modernity. The robes were short or strangely cut or missing altogether, and more than a few people wore Muggle gear. Everything from drinks to food seemed to be served on square glass dishes. Electric blue light buzzed everywhere. Hazy pink, rose-scented smoke billowed. Three wizards in black trousers and close-cropped beards stood sullenly on the stage. The events on the stage were confusing all the way round. The piano she recognized, the drums were strange with metal discs and strange holders, but she knew them too. There was also what she could only describe as a fiddle as tall as man that was played standing up. The sound they made together was most accurately likened to a musical expression of what it felt like to take a tumble on the Hogwarts stairs.

Granger said it was called "jazz".

Millie didn't know whether she felt better or worse to be returning home. Would the past months in America be wiped away? She could certainly see it working out more or less like that. She would go back home and be little Millipede again. Her granny would say Draco and Snape were paying for their stupidity, and wasn't it clever how she got the best part of Draco while they were in America? What a good girl to get herself big in the belly like that. Two babies in only six months, how clever. She could see the future where she did nothing but please her family unfolding before her like a flower. A big, stinking flower.
Baby Phil chewed her shoulder, and Millie sipped at her terrible tea. She had gone away, and had something like an adventure; she was not going to let her family dictate the rest of her life. She would have to put her foot down from the beginning. She would see to it her husband got out of Azkaban, and Snape, too, it went without saying. She was not going to fall back into the same life she had before she left home; she wasn't going to do it the old fashioned way and let her Granny run her life as she saw fit. She was going home, but she was going to show them from the start that she was not Little Millipede any longer. She had been polluted by Mudblood associations, and she liked it.

Millie looked across the corner booth at Granger, worrying her drink, pensively.

"Granger?" she asked.

"Yes, Millie?" Granger answered.

"Would you show me how to use cosmetics?" Millie asked; it was one thing that would set her apart among Pureblood witches, the use of paint instead of glamour.

"Now?"

Millie nodded. "Before I Floo my granny."

Draco first returned to awareness in the distinctly unpleasant way particular to a spell deteriorating on its own. His eyes were loosed first. Thanks to the rest of the binding spell, he couldn't move much else. Still he could see. And if he turned his eyes as far to the side as anatomy would allow, he could just make out Severus. Or the side of Severus' head at any rate. The hair made it all but impossible to mistake him for anyone else. Besides, he knew Severus' smell so well he'd have known it was Severus beside him even if he hadn't spied his greasy black hair.

Draco made a mental note to ask Snape, when his vocal cords worked again, if Snape thought he could sniff Draco out in the dark.

It was only once Draco had assured himself he was not alone, that he still had Snape with him, that he thought to take in his surroundings.

Despite the dark, he could tell the walls were curved and quarters were close. He had the sense that even had he been able to move there wasn't enough room to manoeuvre. He closed his eyes and tried to still whatever it was that was causing the unstable feeling. The air was awfully humid. His hair was likely as lank as Severus' under these conditions.

He tried to have a proper think, as Millie would say. But no matter how hard he tried, his head kept rocking; it was like he was on a fucking boat.

Then the floor shifted, and he rolled on top of Snape. He was on a fucking boat!

Hermione was more or less used to Millie's oddness, but this was a bit beyond the pale. Still, based on Hermione's experience, Millie was constitutionally incapable of acting without reason.
"Do you mind if we do it here?" she asked, opening her purse.

Millie looked puzzled. "Why would I?"

"The loo is traditional," Hermione said with a wince, knowing Millie felt more or less the same way she did about spending more time than necessary in public bogs.

"We'll do it here," Millie said.

Hermione rummaged through her bag, laying each piece of make-up on the table as she happened upon it until an array of coloured powders, creams, and liquids lay before her. The trouble was they were the wrong colours. Millie would look bizarre in Hermione's make-up.

Finally she culled from a herd a duplicate of her favourite liquid eyeliner, a lipstick that hadn't suited her either, some mascara, and an off shade of eyeshadow. Drawing her wand discreetly she touched the tip to the eyeliner and spoke a simple spell. It took a few tries to get the colour she was after.

Millie sat, her usual subdued self, Phil fussing a bit as Hermione did her best not to fight Mrs. Malfoy's natural features but instead augment them a bit. It was a bit of a challenge though, to make up a face that looked so different from her own. She could understand why Lavender and her bunch had considered it such fun during their school days. Where Hermione's eyes were large and round with curling lashes, Millie's eyes were small and slanted with heavy lids with a bit of a fold at the corners. Her lashes were fairly long, but as stick straight and coal black as her hair.

Millie's lips were more of a problem. They were much smaller than her own and so pale they had a tendency to fade into the rest of her face. No colour Hermione tried looked right until, in a flash of inspiration, Hermione thought of Snow White. She doubted Millie would appreciate the comparison, but there it was all the same. Millie Malfoy could have been formed on exactly that premise, hair black as ebony, skin white as snow; all she needed was lips red as blood.

After she traced the surprisingly coquettish cupid's bow of Millie's lips in blood red and pulled back to take in the look as a whole, she was impressed with her work.

Millie looked rather pretty, in a distinctly odd sort of a way. Exotic. That was a nice way to put it.

"You never told me where your Granny was from, Millie," she asked, wondering if the answer would clear anything up.

"That's 'cause I don't know, exactly. She says she climbed over the edge of the world, hunting vampires... but that can't be right. Sometimes it takes a bit before the things she says make proper sense," Millie said turning her teacup over on her saucer.

Hermione couldn't say how the meeting went, exactly. As sometimes happened with Millie, all one had were guesses. Millie asked the barkeep for a private Floo and got one, leaving Phil to fuss on Hermione's lap. When she returned, she offered no details of her conversation, and her jaw was set hard.

"We're to set sail in the morning. They'll pay for the passage on their end,"

Hermione wondered that the ship's captain would allow them aboard simply on the strength of a
single Pureblood name. She had to fight to keep a shiver from shaking her shoulders.

Severus's dignity creaked a bit after all his mistreatment. But he managed to co-operate well enough with his forced disrobing not to get a boot to the kidneys as he was stripped.

He wished he could say the same for Draco.

Still he did not wince as he saw the blows out of the corner of his eye. He had no desire to grant the worthless cunt of a gaoler the satisfaction. Also, in Severus's world-weary estimation, it would always be unwise to do anything to upset a wizard who is currently lifting one's testicles to search for whatever might be hidden there.

What exactly could one safely hide in such a location?

"Spread yer arse," the larger gaoler ordered.

Severus's skin crawled, but if there was one thing he knew it was how to comply. He had certainly never even considered hiding anything there, in any event. Perhaps if he had been the sort to secret things away in his rectum, his entire life might have gone differently.

The gaoler was rough, and thorough, but at least he was professional about it. For a horrible moment, Severus had been afraid the whole thing could have turned more... well... personal.

But it didn't. And in not turning into something found on late night telly, it gave Severus, who had been through quite a bit in the ten days since his fortieth birthday, a bit of hope. Hope, as Severus well knew, was a traitorous bitch.

The Snape family axiom didn't come to Severus until later, though.

At the moment, it was all he could do to blurt, "Pardon me, but have you any notion of when we are to be tried?" as the gaoler, referred to by his fellow as "Shaun", apparently satisfied that there was no wand to be found up the former spy's backside, removed the sneak-o-scope. It was nearly as uncomfortable coming out as it had been going in.

"Already been done," said self same Shaun. "You two was tried in-absentia, three months back. This is the beginning of a life sentence, Sunny Jim."

Once again fate was fucking Severus Snape. At least, he thought morbidly, this time he was in the proper position for it.

Millie looked natural and at ease boarding the ghost ship, with a baby on her hip and a cat on her shoulder. Hermione had been wrong to think a single name would get them aboard the ship. They hadn't had to say a thing, just step aboard as if they had every right.

The captain kissed their hands and ogled Millie's belly with the biggest leer Hermione had ever seen, sending a chill up her spine. The transparent sailors, too, despite their caps in hands and diffidently downcast faces, stole glances with something slightly less than wholesome intent in
their eyes.

Hermione inhaled and the scent of salt water nearly caused her to sick. Millie linked arms and dragged her, bodily below deck.

The cabin was luxurious, if decrepit. Perhaps in addition to being crewed by ghosts, the ship was appointed by a spectral decorator. She easily pictured some grey-faced soul flouncing through, ordering more dust on the velvet coverlet, more cobwebs on the silver framed mirror, and requesting more unnerving creaking in all the furniture.

She sneezed hard, twice in a row and fought off a third, nearly missing Millie setting quill to a piece of parchment in the captain's hands. Three bold scratches later and the captain backed his way out of the room, bowing as he went.

Severus's dog apparently didn't mind cobwebs; she took a flying leap onto the centre of the bed, sending more dust flying and starting Hermione on yet another round of sneezes.

When night came to Azkaban, Severus still hadn't moved from the pile of straw that served as the prisoner’s bed. He didn't see the point. Certainly the time would come when he would pace his cell like a jungle cat in a Victorian zoo, but this was not that time. He refused to allow his own nervous energy to wear him out. He would, instead, sit tight and think, keep himself in one healthy piece. Recall all the days he'd wasted. All in all he'd wasted more of days in his life than he'd used to his advantage. He cringed at the thought of summing up all the time he'd spent planning his brilliant seduction of Granger, too terrified take the slightest action. Each plan had been blindingly dazzlingly clever, so clever in fact that he was afraid to commit to one tactic for fear he would come up with a better one in the morning. Or perhaps it was something else. Perhaps it was the way that what seemed brilliant when he was drinking in his dungeon rooms, or at the base of some tree in the enchanted woods, became questionable when reality came into play. If it had been left to him, chances were Granger would have remained nothing but an exercise for his imagination. His head ached, likely from the way he was grinding his teeth.

He needed to put a stop to this quickly. Had he been anywhere else, he would have drunk himself into a stupor as a remedy.

He hadn't been in the nick as a habit, but he was his father's son, and he knew what not to do. After all, Azkaban was, finally, his location. Perhaps it was where he had been headed all his life.

On consideration he might have a kip; it wasn't as though there were any babies creeping round the corner waiting to cry and spoil it.

And so, while Draco paced the stone floor of his cell till his expensive shoes were quite ruined, periodically gripping the iron bars and looking mournfully to the cell across the way, Severus Liston Snape stretched himself out on the floor of their mutual confinement and willed himself to sleep.

He fell asleep to the sound of Draco's voice, and he awoke it as well.

"Do you miss them yet, Severus?" he said mournfully. What a stupid sodding question.
Millie stood on the deck observing the setting moon illuminated by the rising sun. It unnerved the sailors when she came up in these silver hours, but she did it just the same. She was too restless to reasonably expect herself to stay still while Phil and Granger were having a peaceful snore.

It was good, too, to have time to herself, the salt water spraying over the deck, the ship rocking along with her belly, the sun barely starting to peer over the horizon, and somewhere beyond her sight, Blackpool. She could feel herself moving inexorably closer to her family and the battle to pull Draco's bacon out of the fire. The anticipation of the fight was very nearly sexual.

It was a strange feeling. If she'd had a sodding clue being up a pole would make her feel so strong, so powerful, she'd have done it ages ago. Magic at her fingertips in such surges practically begged to impose her will on the rest of the world. If she'd known it would feel like this, she would have gotten pregnant instead of going to Hogwarts.

If she'd felt like a brute before, it was doubly true now. At times, when she woke up quite sure she'd smelled Granger having a lusty dream, she wondered if this was how werewolves felt. She had a difficult time not doing magic. In the galley, the tastiest dishes tipped themselves toward her. If she was tired, the cozy counterpane rose up to meet her. And it was all a pleasure. She took pleasure in everything. Even the January sea stinging her cheeks made her body glow with delight. Everything stirred up the magic because there was so bloody much of it.

She could feel, in the base of her spine and rising to the crown of her head, something unfurl full length at the thought of the struggle to come. Millie wondered vaguely if she should feel a bit guilty at enjoying, yes, enjoying the idea of rescuing Draco and Snape. It wasn't a thought she'd had much before; how she ought to feel, so she discarded it fairly quickly.

No, she felt however she felt. She was what she was. And she was not in the habit of taking stances she had the slightest trace of doubt about. No, the feeling was little more than the side effect of spending too much time with Snape and Granger, the two of them always taking every thought apart and putting it back together again like clockwork. Why shouldn't she enjoy the bloodlust she felt? What would be served by not enjoying it, provided she didn't allow her judgement to be clouded?

No, Millie was a Pureblood witch regardless of the allegiances she'd made. She would wear her wrath like a fiery crown.

Hermione wondered, as she stepped off the ship and onto the entirely unmagic dock at Blackpool, why it was that every Pureblood she knew seemed to conform to some Muggle fairytale stereotype.

There, striding toward them from the Coffee-To-Go shop, were two figures that no one could mistake for Muggles, even in the light of dusk. The larger was closer to seven feet tall than six, dressed entirely in black with shoulders like twin boulders and breasts to match.

Her hair was pulled back into a single bun so tight her eyes squinted a bit. Her eyes were like two seeds. There was something beyond mere size that reminded Hermione less of a person and more of a monolith. It was as inappropriate and magical as seeing an escaped Avebury stone shambling along under the Blackpool lights.
Her companion was an old woman of middling height so stringy and angular she looked as though she'd been fashioned out of dried meat. Like the other, she wore her hair in a tight bun, and in addition she smoked a cigar as black as night. Unlike the woman of stone, she seemed nearly frenetic, as lively as a bird, even as the two walked side by side. Instead of black, her dress was a vivid purple calico. Her shoes were aged work boots and her socks, once long and presumably white, were grey and bunched about the top of her boots.

They had to be Millie's mother and grandmother. It was inconceivable they could be anything else. Still it was strange. Either one of them could slide into a copy of Grimm's fairytales undetected. Apparently they only had one thing on their minds. The huge stone of a woman extended her arms as soon as they were face to face.

Miss whined as they came into proximity, burying her nose in Hermione's robes.

"Give us see the new one, then, Mil," the large woman said, taking Phil up in her arms.

The bird woman cocked her head at the baby and puffed on her cigar. "Looks like a man baby to me," she said, as though she didn't quite approve of male children. "He looks like a little man."

The huge woman looked in Phil's nappy for confirmation and nodded.

Hermione had to grant that Phillip did look more like a tiny man than a real baby; still she wasn't quite comfortable with the tone.

"He's my boy, and I love him just the same," said Millie with a sharpness that made Hermione blink. She had rarely heard Millie emote quite that much at once.

The bird woman, presumably Millie's gran, shrugged. "If the one you've got in your belly now proves a witch, we could marry them off from the start."

"No," Millie said, simply.

"Why on earth not?"

"He's Draco's blood, from a potion." Millie squinted as she said it.

"All the better," said the old witch, "the Malfoys are good stock, doubling up focuses the magic."

"I dunno, the Blacks are dodgy though. Two thirds of the house of Black always have been nutters, and you don't want to double up on that," said the massive witch as she gave Phil what looked like a sincere kiss on each cheek.

"Phil's not a nutter; he's not one now, and he's not growing up to be one either," said Millie. Hermione could swear she was struggling to keep her voice level.

Millie's gran... well she cackled. Millie's mother softened even more and held Phil to her bosom.

"That's a little man, Phil, just like yer granddad," said Mrs. Bulstrode, practically clucking.

"Come along, you lot, Narcissa's likely worked herself into a frenzy waiting in the barouche," said Millie's gran, turning on her heel to lead the way.

From a distance the two older witches hadn't appeared to be moving quickly, but now Hermione and Millie both struggled to keep up as they wove between the clamour of the Muggle crowds.
"Granny," Millie huffed as she said it. "Granny, this is my friend Hermione. She'll be staying with us."

"Is she a real one?" the old witch said.

"A real one what?"

"Hermes... does she have both sexes in one? If she is, I'd like to see that. I haven't seen one of those in years," shouted the old witch over her shoulder.

"That's not what I said," Millie shouted over the crowds. "It's her name; Her- My- Knee. She's staying with us."

"Who's her family? Do we know your gran?" shouted Mrs. Bulstrode as they approached a coach and restless horses, waiting improbably on the beach.

"No, no, no, Prunie," said the old witch, stopping before the coach to light a new cigar "Don't you know? Our Millie's new chum is Snape's Mudblood bride."

Before either Hermione or the much out of breath Millie could find an appropriate reply, the door to the barouche flung wide and out stepped Narcissa Malfoy who immediately took baby Phil in her arms and kissed him from cheek to chin

As frustrated as Millie was by her Mum and her Gran, they were fairly pleasant to Granger in the coach.

When they came to the woods, Millie had to admit to being a bit embarrassed by the way her dad threw his arms round her neck and cried. Still she tried to be stoic about it. That was the way of dads, and who really wanted them to be more like witches, in the end?

"Have you seen your Uncle? You must go to London for a visit. He's been worried sick," Dad said as he poured Millie's tea.

Then being the broody type, he turned to Granger with both tea and smothering concern. "Have you told your parents where you are? You're welcome to stay in the wood as long as you like. Of course, any friend of Millie's is welcome as long as she likes, but do let your family know you're safe, dear."

So they went to see Millie's Uncle, Mr. Eye, the very next day.

Mr. Enoch Eye was not a name known by the rabble of the magical world, but in certain circles he was the stuff of legend. There had never been as much as a whisper of scandal connected with his name, yet it was said there was no pie, large or small, from which he did not take his discreet slice. One did not joke about Mr. Eye. Nor did one cast aspersions of any sort upon him. There was nothing humorous about him. He stood quietly and effectively over his domain. It was a serious mistake to underestimate Mr. Eye's power or well-mannered ruthlessness. It was said he had no tender feelings for any creature, or less than tender feelings for that matter. He was rumoured to
have lost all capacity for human feelings long ago and lived a life ruled by nothing but cool calculation. It befitted his calling, one supposed. It took a special sort of wizard to work as a tax attorney to goblins. They were a suspicious race, and for them to trust a wizard above one of their own the wizard in question had to somewhat out of the ordinary. No one had ever argued that Mr. Eye was ordinary.

The fact that Phillipus Bulstrode was not in Azkaban, was, without dispute, entirely due to Mr. Eye's influence. General opinion to the contrary, from what Hermione had heard in Millie's wood, Mr. Eye sounded very fond of his mother and his sister... and it seemed to Hermione sitting in his office, several over-large dogs.

"Uncle," Millie called with no decorum whatsoever.

Perhaps they should have brought Miss.

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Millie was relieved to be visiting her Uncle. It wasn't like home where she had to fight her Mum and Granny on everything she wanted. Her uncle loved her in a way that had less to do with seeing that she kept the side up and more to do with reveling in the glory that was herself. It was, all told, much more relaxing.

"Uncle!" she called again, louder this time. The sea of dogs moved at a boil. "Would you put those damn things out?"

Uncle laughed low. "Are they bothering you? I find them very soothing."

"It's like the inside of a kettle in here," Millie said.

"Am I right in supposing this isn't a social visit?" Uncle said, crossing his legs.

Millie hmmmphed. "Draco and Severus are in Azkaban, what do you bloody think?"

"They've no one to blame but themselves,"

"I don't care; I want them out."

"Have you considered a prison break?" he said, the corner of his lip curling.

"I'm serious,"

"So am I," said Uncle, smirking even harder.

"Stop it!" Millie said. Uncle being silly was one thing, but Draco and Severus's lives were at stake. "I mean it; I want to get them a new trial."

"Would you like them to be found innocent as well?"

"If you don't mind."

"Consider it your Christmas gift."

"You missed last Christmas anyway; I was in America,"
Uncle bent forward and frowned at Millie, which made Millie squirm a bit in her seat.

"Perhaps... Perhaps I can see to it that Draco is acquitted. Severus Snape is another matter entirely. The Mister for Magic has a special grudge against him, I understand, which does complicate matters, not even taking into account the fact that Snape laid quite an insult at my mother's door when he refused your hand," Uncle said.

"I'm married to Draco now, so it hardly matters," Millie said, searching for Uncle's understanding.

"Does it?" he said, his eyes flickering like candle flames.

"Not to me."

"You may be distracted by young Malfoy at present, but I remember how you sulked for months. From the moment of your birth, your grandmother has made a point to give you everything you've ever wanted. You've only to crook your little finger, and it is done. Snape broke precedent. He disappointed my mother and the only daughter of my only sister. You may be young and callow enough to take this lightly, but I cannot."

Millie couldn't help but frown; it sounded like Uncle was describing Draco, not Millie. She scrolled back through her memory trying to think of a desire, other than Snape, that had been denied. She was embarrassed to find nothing. Could it be true?

In that moment, Millie Malfoy came to two resolutions. First off she resolved that Draco was likely her soulmate, if such a thing existed. The bleeding wanker. Secondly, she promised herself that she would make a point to tell Phil so early and often.

Not sure what else to do, Millie put her feet up on the ottoman.

"It was good for me. Him saying no like that. Character building," Millie patted her belly for emphasis.

Uncle frowned. "Character is one attribute you have never been short of, precious girl."

"How about this, then, now that I'm grown, I prefer not being married to Snape; I like Draco, he does as I tell him. So you can't hold it against Snape that he knew he wouldn't be able to make me happy. Furthermore, if you are so interested in making certain I have what I want, you can see to it Snape gets out of Azkaban right alongside Draco," Millie said, not realising until the end how loud and shrill her voice had gone.

Uncle gazed at her across his cup of tea. "Anything else you desire, my liege?"

"Just the loo," she said, suddenly aware of the pressure on her bladder.

"Do you plan on visiting your paramours today? I assume you do know Wednesday is visitors' day at Azkaban," he called as she waddled toward the bog.

Hermione Granger was not a tender blossom. The first time she faced death, she had been, by any practical definition, a child. Throughout her adolescence, she had continually confronted horror and hardship, simply rolling up her sleeves and swallowing whatever fear or misgivings she was heir to and doing what needed to be done. It was what she did.
Still it was strange to her, as a former Auror, one who had locked up her fair share of miscreants behind the grey walls of Azkaban, that seeing Severus Snape behind bars would be more than she could bear.

She knew it was only temporary. She knew justice was apt to prevail in the long run.

She and Millie, with Phil in tow, presented themselves during visiting hours, surrendered their wands, and were led down grey corridor after grey corridor until the gaoler came to a dead stop before one cell just like all the others. And with a shocking clank, they were let inside the cell.

Had she been paying attention, she would have noted how despite his shackled hands, Draco balanced Philip on his hip and pressed his lips to the ring on Millie's hand. She likely would have been surprised to see while Draco wept both openly and loudly, Millie's cheeks were also wet. Fortunately for Millie's dignity, she wasn't paying attention to any of that.

Hermione on had eyes for the figure who stood, scarecrow like, in the corner farthest from the door. He stank. As she stepped closer, the acrid scent of unwashed male body hit her like a fist. The figure though, in prison stripes, with features obscured by a shock of unwashed black hair, remained perfectly, horribly, still.

"Do you by any chance happen to have my fags in that blessed handbags of yours?" the voice came rusty, as if he'd been silent for days. Who knew, perhaps he had.

For the barest instant she didn't know what to do or how to respond. Yes, her best judgement lost out to sentimentality for a moment, and she had taken his cigarettes from the dining room table and put them in her purse before leaving the house. But was that all he could think to say?

Her own tongue turned to stone in her mouth as she sought the right reply or even a reply more articulate that a closed mouth grunt. In the end, she narrowly managed to wordlessly wrest the cigarette from her purse and pass it to Severus's bound hands.

"A light?" he asked through his teeth, tipping one long white stick from the box and grasping it with his lips.

Ten days without a proper bath and Severus was all but transformed into Argus Filch. Hermione's skin prickled. It was the first time in her life she had been elated and heartbroken at the same time. How was one to behave in circumstances like that? Exactly what did one say when one's heart fluttered at the precisely the same moment as one's gut plummeted?

The best Hermione could come up with was a whispered, wandless, "Incendio."

Severus's hand shook as he exhaled.

"It's a filthy habit," she said listlessly.

"Thank you," Severus said, the smoke curling round his face. There didn't seem to be a trace of rancour in his voice.

"We're getting you a new trial; they can't convict you in absentia and expect it to stand. It's outrageous," she said, barely pausing for breath; she was so glad to have a topic of conversation she could speak to.

It would have helped had Severus done more than stare at her, expressionless.

"We're going to get you out," she assured him.
There was no change in his face; his black eyes remained as impassive as ice.

On pure instinct she closed the space between them.

"I'm not leaving you here to rot," she said, their faces perilously close. "I refuse."

Severus seemed quite prepared to go on saying nothing, but then, for no reason Hermione could figure, there was a strange and subtle shift and Severus, no longer focused on larger issues, like cigarettes, decided to look at Hermione rather than through her.

"I wasn't aware the powers that be had given you a choice."

"You know me, Severus."

"Yes, I believe I do."

"Then you know I tend to be somewhat relentless."

Slowly Severus raised his manacled hands between them. "Do you honestly believe you can do something about this?"

"I'll move heaven and earth for you if it comes to that."

"Heaven has precious little to do with Azkaban, my dear," Severus said.

Hermione wished she could disagree.

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"The trouble with Severus," Black Alice said, cigar clenched in her teeth as she applied a rolling pin to a lump of dough easily twice the size of her head, "isn't that the poor bugger is neither flesh, nor fowl, nor good red herring..."

"Not his fault, though, those Princes've gone all Mugglish for generations. Still throwin' out their daughter... mark my words, Millipede, that's what comes from spoilin' the male of the species, they get above themselves." Mrs. Bulstrode nodded in agreement with herself as she shovelled food into baby Phil's mouth. "They start lookin' for fulfillment. Getting' their own ideas. The mind of a wizard is a dangerous thing."

Hermione hadn't felt so much like a child in years, going from Millie's feather bed to the cottage's warm and cozy kitchen still in her nightgown.

"Gingerbread, girls?" said Mr. Bulstrode brightly, lifting up the top on the heavy lidded cake bell. Out leaped a dozen gingerbread men, each half as big as little Phil. Before Hermione could assess the situation, Millie speared half of them with a large meat fork. They continued to wiggle, but much of the fight had gone out of them.

"More tea, Hermione?"

"Thank you, Mr. Bulstrode," Hermione said politely; it was odd to her how, well, normal, Mr. Bulstrode looked in comparison to everyone else in the family. He was a medium height, medium colouring, medium weight, absolutely polite, and decidedly mild. She never would have taken him for a Death Eater if it hadn't been an established fact.
She twitched a bit as Miss made short work of a gingerbread man who thought he'd found safe haven under the table.

Black Alice brought all attention back to herself with the simple act of lighting a cigar.

"The trouble isn't that Snape's half one thing and half another, no, his trouble is that he's all wizard and all Muggle, both at the same time."

It sounded like bad maths to Hermione, but she could see the truth in it.

Hermione watched in sleepy surprise as the gingerbread in Millie's hand shuddered as she bit its head off.

"Granger and I need the tub first," Millie said, or at least that was what Hermione thought she said; she still had a mouthful of gingerbread.

"Ah, ah, ah, Millie," Mr. Bulstrode said patiently, "eat first, then talk."

"You lot had any dreams?" Mrs. Bulstrode said, addressing Hermione, presumably Millie knew better. "If you have, don't say anything. We'll tell dreams after we read the breakfast tea."

Millie yawned and rolled her eyes simultaneously. "We've work waiting for us at Uncle's."

Black Alice tapped the ash from her cigar onto the ornate saucer beneath her teacup.

"You're not heading into Enoch's labyrinth today, neither of you. Your baby's going to be introduced tonight."

Hermione watched as a shrug of acquiescence came over Millie. Whatever it signified, it meant something to her friend. Hermione had the feeling she was about to learn more about Pureblood society than she ever dreamed of.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
The Price of a Song

Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

--Noel Coward

Draco had difficulty sleeping that night. Not that Azkaban was well known for its guest accommodations, but that particular night, the one after his first visit from Millie, it was worse than it had been before. The floor was harder, the cold was colder, the straw was itchier.

He turned on his straw pallet, attempting to shift the bedding into a more comfortable arrangement. It was as useless, as Severus had taken to saying in Texas, as teats on a boar hog. No, it was quite impossible to make a sack of straw on a stone floor anything but bone-jarringly unpleasant. Not to mention cold. He turned, and then he turned again. Leaving his head unsupported made his neck ache. Attempting to cushion his head with his crooked arm caused his shoulder to hurt. He had no idea whether he was better or worse off for having had his shackles removed. He had no idea what to do with his feet. He wished Millie were here to tell him what he did with his feet. He wished Severus was here to tell him what he did with his feet when he slept. He turned again. He wanted to weep. He wished he were a child again, in the Slytherin dorms, the reassuring scent of Uncle Severus' cigarettes winding its way from the common room.

When he was a firstie, Uncle Severus would come if he called. One bad dream was all it took and Uncle Severus was there with a glass of water, and if he whinged hard enough, or if Goyle sobbed for that matter, Severus was good for a song too.

Not that the Slytherin firsties could stall bedtime with a song - Severus wasn't stupid - but in the middle of the night, late, when the head of house's breath smelled faintly of liquor, with the right sort of tears, it was possible to get a song out of him. It was one of his most comforting memories of Hogwarts: snuggling down in clean sheets and drifting back to sleep to one of his godfather's exotic tunes.

Draco elbowed Severus in the back with the arm that wasn't tucked under his head.

He didn't move.

He elbowed harder.

This time Severus answered him with a quick hard blow to the side. Swift as it was, it managed to avoid the place where the guards had kicked him.

"Merlin's hairy sphincter, Snape, I just wanted to ask you a question," Draco whispered.

"What?" Uncle Severus bit out.

"Can you sleep?"

"I could before you decided I deserved your harassment."

"Do you remember that song you used to sing?"
"What song?"

Draco could practically hear Snape's brow knitting, even though they slept back to back, even though it was pitch black.

"I asked you first."

"Perhaps if you could recall either words or melody I might have some inkling as to the song to which you are referring." It was the slow, clear-voiced whisper of a man about to assign detention.

Draco wasn't afraid. They were both in Azkaban; exactly what could Snape do here?

"Love something or other," Draco said, hoping that was vague enough, there had been so many songs; most of them had love somewhere in there.

He could all but hear Severus' glare.

"It went sort of dum dee dum dee dum."

Severus hummed softly, almost too quiet to hear. "Something like that?"

"Not sure, would you mind terribly singing... with the words and everything?"

In the dank, echoey stone of Azkaban even Severus' softest voice, which was soft indeed, carried. Here and there Draco could hear other prisoners in the dark sighing and snivelling in response.

"Love Hurts, love scars, love wounds and mars..." Severus sang. Draco was afraid he would stop, but he didn't. Just like when he was an ickle firstie, Uncle Severus kept singing until Draco drifted off to sleep.

Someone, fairly far off by the sound of it, sobbed hard.

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Severus had been enjoying the acoustics of Azkaban. Apparently, the old hellhole had something to be said in its favour after all. The lack of furniture likely played no small part. He never got this effect at Hogwarts. His thought trailed off and his voice with it.

"That you, Dingle?"

Severus didn't answer; after all they weren't addressing him.

"Whaddaya stop fer?"

"Yeah, what you stop for?"

"Who was it?"

"Yeah, whowazzat?"

A chorus of whispers protested.

"It was I," he hissed when he realised the complaints wouldn't stop otherwise.

"Who's I?" some voice in the dark asked.
"Snape," he answered against his best judgement. "Severus Snape."

There was a silence that seemed stunned, or perhaps that was wrong, perhaps he had frightened them. He certainly hoped so.

Then the silence ended.

"Sing Snape," whispered more voices than he could separate by ear, one on top of the other.

Severus Snape inhaled. He could feel Draco's backbone against his own.

Why hadn't he gone to gaol with someone fatter? Someone he could share a pallet with without feeling like he was being randomly poked with spare bicycle parts? Was body heat too much to expect from a cellmate?

Still the hissing continued, "Sing Sing Sing," growing louder as he waited.

How could he possibly turn this situation to his advantage? True, he enjoyed singing, but he wasn't going to give it away for free, not if someone wanted to hear it.

"Sing Snape Sing," came the sound of a thousand wizards begging under their breath. It was a bit heady.

What a dog buggering irony that he would have to go to prison to get his first real taste of power. "What's in it for me?" he asked back at the dark.

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One of the things Hermione learned that day was that she had been wrong about several basic things about wizarding culture. She didn't particularly like knowing she had been wrong, but still she counted it as preferable to being wrong and not knowing.

She had never thought of Pureblood culture as appreciably different from the culture in the rest of wizarding England. As a Muggle-born, she never considered that there might be more to Pureblood Wizarding society than she was aware of. She believed the explanation she was given, there were no "real" Purebloods, and of those who used the name their chief attribute was a belief in their own superiority. Very simply put Pureblood equalled Racist.

But here, in Millie's Wood, things seemed rather more complex than that. She wasn't sure what sort of chores she expected to be assigned in preparation for what was being referred to as Phil's "introduction", sweeping the snow from a forest clearing with a bedraggled old broom hadn't been on the list.

She hadn't had much call to build fires in her day-to-day life, still she'd never even seen one built by Millie's method: a tall tower of heavy logs laid cross one another, like a child's building set, and topped with a roof of loose kindling. Had they been Muggle, it would have been a near-impossible task, but since they were witches it was work, hard work at that, to notch the logs with a small ax and to levitate them until they locked into place. Under the circumstances, she was thankful it was the dead of winter. The thankfulness receded a bit when Black Alice appeared fresh as a spring daisy with Phil in her arms and made the next decree.

"You two need to wash yourselves in the stream," the old witch said, handing Phil to Hermione, "and take this one with you."
"You can't be serious," Hermione blurted as Millie prodded her hard in the side. 

"These are our ways, girl, follow them and you might learn something," Alice said apparently just to the side of bemused.

"Bathe? In the stream?" Hermione asked in the sort of amazement that was closely associated with horror. "Why not simply order us to strip and roll in the snow?"

Millie shrugged. "It's the way it's done."

Hermione must have wrinkled her nose or given some other show of disapproval because Millie gave her a hard look and said, "Look on it as...anthropological field work."

Hermione blinked, not that she thought the concept was beyond Millie but rather because it was a rather Mugglish term for her friend to pick up on.

"You think Snape was the only one sneaking a read at your text books when you weren't looking?" Millie said, turning away and setting off, baby on hip, toward the stream that cut a path through the thickest park of the forest.

And so, teeth chattering as the sweat froze sticky on her body, Hermione stripped. She couldn't help but stare at Millie, already naked, stuck between admiration at her resemblance to the picture of the Willendorf Venus in her mother's study, and horror at the way her body was being distended by pregnancy. Still, she noted in a dispassionate, completely unsapphic way, Millie did seem to carry it surprisingly well. Her eyes were bright, and her skin was clear and ever so slightly rosy. Millie glowed, which was quite a change from her usual affect. If she had ever glowed before, she'd done it rather darkly. Inwardly Hermione shook her head at herself a bit. Perhaps her admiration wasn't entirely asexual.

The whole string of thought took less than a second, and her teeth were chattering again.

She watched, still caught firmly between wonder and dismay, as Millie waded into the flowing water up to her hips, Phil clinging to his mother's neck like a little monkey.

Being an entirely different sort of person in some fundamental ways, Hermione decided she might as well get it over with and raced into the water.

It took an instant for the sensation to move from painful to exhilarating, but when it did, it was bracing, and she laughed with the sheer pleasure of it.

Millie's nostrils twitched, followed by one corner of her mouth and then the other. A second later Hermione was caught by a curtain of water that rolled across the stream the same way a ripple moves through bed sheets. When Hermione returned tit for tat, Millie erupted in a low growling chuckle.

As the sun bounced along the edge of the horizon, Hermione dressed like Millie, only in a thick wool robe, in the traditional Pureblood manner she supposed, returned to the clearing to find the area mostly empty.

The only ones in the clearing besides Black Alice and Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode were a pair of hags and a young boy of perhaps seven or eight. Millie acknowledged them with a tip of her head that Hermione had observed to be the standard greeting between Pureblood witches. She did her best to nod likewise but was left wondering whether her gesture had been too subtle or not quite subtle enough, since all either witch gave her in return was a flicker of eye contact.
Slowly, as night fell, when Hermione had very nearly decided it was to be an intimate family sort of gathering, people began to arrive in droves.

Then on the scene, arriving in the same gleaming black coach they had used to collect her and Millie from Blackpool, was Mrs. Malfoy. Accompanying her was, of all people, her husband, the wanted felon. She was also surprised to see both dressed in plain, though clearly well made, woolen robes. She was even further taken aback when, after a flickering nod between the Bulstrodes and the Malfoys, they made their way directly toward Millie and her.

"May I hold my grandson?" were the first words out of Mr. Malfoy's mouth. Up close he looked far older than he had last time Hermione had seen him.

"Are you up to it?" Millie asked earnestly.

"Your mother-in-law makes me out to be rather more delicate than I actually am," said Mr. Malfoy. "I will not drop him. You have my word."

After another concerned look, Millie passed Phil gently to his hands.

Mrs. Malfoy laid a strengthening hand on her husband's elbow as he cradled Phil in his arms. As usual Phil studied the object which was set before him.

The object in this case being the face of Lucius Malfoy and the expressions on the faces of grandson and grandfather mirrored one another perfectly. For an instant, Hermione thought they were both going to burst into tears and then, almost simultaneously, the two of them, one well into his adulthood, the other barely born, visibly steeled themselves. After that the baby seemed quite content to snuggle hard into Lucius' chest. Contrary to the maxims one heard about the revelatory nature of the battlefield, Hermione noted she knew nothing of Lucius Malfoy aside from rumour and innuendo. If she believed everything she'd heard she'd have imagined he preferred eating babies to cuddling them.

By the time Phil was back in his mother's arms, Hermione was startled to see how many people had made their way to the enchanted wood, with more making their way into the clearing every moment. The moon shone down brightly, and she realised she had missed the moment when night had truly fallen. By the time the rush of witches and wizards began to slow to a trickle, she estimated there were somewhere in the neighbourhood of a thousand magical folk gathered in Millie's wood, among them faces she never imagined she would see in such a place. Most of all, she was shocked to see Molly and Ginny Weasley, and behind them Percy and Bill, as well as Bill's wife, Fleur.

The Weasleys were off in a small knot, clearly avoiding, and being avoided by, a number of the other guests.

Hermione's reverie over the relative social position of the Weasleys was derailed by the sight of a tall figure made even taller by a rather forceful hat, topped as it was, by a stuffed vulture. The figure approached the thus far empty centre of the clearing, matched stride for stride by Black Alice beside her.

Hermione was struck by a sudden memory from third year Defense Against the Dark Arts. That figure cutting through the crowd could only be Augusta Longbottom.

"What're they..." Hermione started to ask before she noticed a general hush had fallen over the throng.
"It's starting," Millie whispered, elbowing her expressively in the side.

Without a word or bit of pomp, Hermione could recognise Black Alice sent a small ball of flame, issuing not from her wand but seemingly from her left hand, to the top of the wooden tower she and Millie had so carefully constructed.

Then Mrs. Bulstrode, whose previous movements Hermione hadn't been paying much mind, stepped into the circular clearing where she spread a blanket nearly the size of the Hogwarts staff table.

She watched as Millie seemed to gather herself for a moment before stalking out into the circle. She set Phil in the dead centre of the blanket. Phil, predictably, set to wailing the moment she set him down wearing nothing, not even a nappy. Millie meanwhile opened a small expandable trunk she had apparently been carrying in her robe pocket and with the help of her mother and grandmother began surrounding little Phil on his blanket with gold Galleons. Hermione hoped she wasn't goggling at the sheer bulk of gold piled about little Phillipus Malfoy, or at least she hoped she wasn't goggling any more than anyone else. She glanced to her left to see Mr. Malfoy wearing an expression of pride she would very nearly describe as fierce. When she looked back at Phil, the Galleons were being topped with gold ingots, strands of pearls, and loose cut gems in a rainbow of colours. Hermione was no goblin, but she knew that had to be at least one vault's worth of wealth surrounding Phil. What was it there for? It had to be display. The only question was: what came next?

She was certainly not expecting Augusta Longbottom to strip bloody starkers.

Hermione blinked, but it was still true; a witch who was, by reputation at least, more likely to don iron knickers than anything else, had stripped naked, her vulture hat standing serene guard outside the circle. The two hags who had been the first to arrive had also followed suit, beating an unearthly ringing rhythm on the side of their cauldron, the song to which Mrs. Longbottom danced. And dance she did. True, her arse sagged and so did her tits, but her presence was so commanding and the strength of her magic so clear Hermione thought she'd give up any amount of gravity defiance to be like Augusta Longbottom some day. When Mrs. Longbottom moved there was a grace in her spindly limbs stemming from the sort of power that only grows stronger and more fascinating over time.

Hermione watched, transfixed, as Mrs. Longbottom made a dancing circuit round the now raging fire to stand before Phil, who had finally stopped crying.

Mrs. Longbottom made a great show of squatting down and sifting through the jewels and gold with her hands before lifting a long strand of pearls from the pile, testing it cheekily with her large teeth, and placing the strand round her neck.

She then bent and took up Phil, dancing him in her arms as she circled the clearing a second time.

A cry of approval went up from the crowd, and Hermione could see that all round her, despite the now gently falling snow, witches had disrobed.

Hermione felt breath in her ear and realised Mrs. Malfoy was standing rather close. "As a close friend of the family, Mrs. Snape," she said so quietly Hermione was surprised she could hear her, "it is expected you will join during Phillip's first round."

"Of course," Hermione answered and feigning nonchalance pulled her robes over her head. She did her best despite the fact that she felt like a silly cow.
The most difficult part, she imagined, would be wondering where to look. She warned herself as she made her way to the circle, that it would be difficult not to notice who had a tiny penis, or a huge one for that matter, whose tits were different sizes, and whose arse was as square as a brick; nothing could have been further from the truth.

Instead the ringing of the cauldron swept over her, and she could barely think.

She had never been much of a dancer, but the minute she stepped into the circle, her body moved independent of her brain's direction, only faltering when she tried to consciously order her steps.

It was so hot, sweat flew from her breasts as she stepped in time with the other witches without even trying. She was glad for her nakedness. She didn't expect she would ever feel this way again, but naked seemed simply a different sort of clothed in this situation.

The ringing of the cauldron took on the sound of a human voice as she listened. A witch's voice, it spoke in words that she could very nearly have made out if she hadn't been keeping one eye on Phil, trying to parse out what the meaning of all this was.

She watched as little Phil was danced from witch to witch, noting that each witch who took the child in her arms did so only after taking something from the pile of gold and jewels. Many took several somethings.

It gibed perfectly with everything she'd ever read about matriarchal systems and the "gift economy" though her anthropology book had more examples of the behaviour among monkey colonies than human beings. By accepting a "gift" from Little Phil's family, the witches were accepting a debt and cementing a relationship with the infant. But how did the Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort fit into the puzzle? She thought back to the monkeys, recalling adolescent males living on the margins of the colony, depending on the social positions of their female relatives for power. That would explain why a threat to the Pureblood social order seemed so frightening to many Pureblood males. Frightening enough to die fighting against. Frightening enough to kill for. It also explained why those who had allied themselves with the Muggleborns were those with relatively little to lose positionwise; the Weasleys for instance. The Pureblood witches who got involved were to a woman either unhinged or protecting wizards from their own family.

And of course Severus would join the Death Eaters. It was the only way he could reject Toby Snape.

Suddenly the last ten years of her life made sense. If only someone had explained it to her before.

She laughed aloud at the ridiculousness of it all.

Magical folk were renowned neither for their self-awareness nor their study of anthropology. A solution was possible, but given the cultural differences between Purebloods and Muggle-born not bloody likely.

Not sure what else to do, she danced. She danced with a pleasure and abandon she'd only known in sex before. So close to the fire that as she leapt, she could feel her perspiration sizzle.

And then her turn came, all hedging her bets gone now she went by instinct as well as reason and took a jewel as big as an apple and as red as pidgeon's blood and tossed it onto her robes piled outside the circle. She watched Millie, outside the circle, heave a sigh of relief.

Little Phil laughed when she took him. He was probably glad to see a familiar face. This was a pivotal night in more ways than one, it seemed.
As the night wore on, the wizards joined the dance as well; so it came to pass that sometime past midnight, she found herself face to face with a naked Neville Longbottom. She had completely forgotten he was a Pureblood.

"Hallo, Hermione," he whispered, awkwardly gesturing toward the tables practically swaying from the sheer bulk of the food laid out upon them. "I'm on the brink of going weak with hunger. Would you care to join me?" Then for an encore he blushed making Hermione uncomfortable for the first time all evening.

Hermione noted that she felt less at ease with her robes on, picking over the buffet tables with Neville than she felt dancing naked with his Granny. She gave him the once over twice. He looked roughly as comfortable with his new position as Minister for Magic as he would be wearing his granny's knickers.

"How are you doing, Hermione?" he asked stuffing a piece of ham the size of a garden gnome in his mouth.

"Aside from my husband being in Azkaban?" she said as breezily as she could.

Neville's eyes bulged, but he managed to swallow everything that was in his mouth in one painful looking gulp without choking. There were some rather mundane advantages to being a wizard.

"That's just a vicious rumour!" he said emphatically.

Hermione couldn't help herself, she blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You couldn't... You wouldn't... You're convalescing from a traumatic kidnapping."

"Is that why none of my old school chums have been round to see me?" She smiled as she said it. "Nothing to do with marrying Severus Snape?"

"Because you didn't marry Snape," Neville said, nodding. "I checked. It's not registered with the Muggles or the Magical authorities."

Funny that, she had more or less forgotten it was pretend; she felt married to Snape. Perhaps a marriage was more or less a real as you made it.

"You've been through a lot," Neville said continuing to nod in agreement with his own words. "You'll need time."

Inappropriately amused Hermione popped a grape in her mouth before answering him. "What would you say if I were to tell you I held Severus' hand in a car park and vowed 'until Death do we part'?"

Neville's eyes were enormous. "I wouldn't say anything because you would never do that. Not the Hermione Granger I know. It's insane."

Hermione shrugged and bit into a shiny black fruit that turned out to be a plum. "Right."

"You win Neville, I'm not married to Severus Snape," she was surprised by how easily she lied. "But I do want to see that he has a fair trial."

She watched as the tension unwound from Neville's shoulders. "He had one."

"You know what I mean... lawyers, witnesses, evidence... that sort of thing," she said casually.
"This is like the business with the house elves, isn't it?" Neville said with a worried expression.

"Something like that," Hermione said, wondering at herself. She really had spent six months in a house with a man who would lie or steal without pause or conscience; it showed.

She knew she was getting somewhere when Neville gave her what was meant to be a stern and judicial nod. "Tell you what, you get seven witches to give witness before the Wizengamot that Snape should be given a trial, not that he'll found innocent, of course he won't because he's not, but I'll see that he gets his trial."

Quite spontaneously she leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Thanks Neville, you're a pal."

"Do you think we might get together in the future... next Saturday, maybe?"

"Sorry, Neville, I need time. I was traumatized, remember?" she smiled at him feeling genuinely happy all of a sudden, nearly giddy.

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Fruit.

Of all the things Snape could have asked for, he demanded a pile of fruit before he'd sing the next night.

And a bucket to put it in. Waterproof.

Had it been anyone else, Draco would have chalked it up to madness but he knew his head of house too well for that. It worried him all the more that he had no clue what Snape was planning.

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The next day it seemed reasonable to Hermione to call on Eileen Prince. And when she proved impossible to locate by other means, it seemed also reasonable to contact the Princes who were at hand.

Others would later note that Hermione tended to be the barging sort, particularly when aggravated, but then what else was to be expected from someone who had been raised by people who thought nothing of sticking their hands inside other people's mouths for a living. Others noted that an awkward sod like Snape was beyond the reach of any other sort of witch.

Still, Severus Prince, owner of a quill shop, seemed a rather obvious choice when hunting for Eileen.

Hermione never could say how it had gone so wrong so fast. It was a small but scrupulously orderly shop. She waited to approach him until only a witch replacing ink on the shelf remained.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you Severus Prince, the proprietor of this shop?" she asked the white-headed wizard who stood behind the counter.

"Who wants to know?" he asked in an ordinary sort of voice that suggested nothing of Snape.

If he was some relation of her Severus, and she was guessing grandfather, he resembled him in only the worst ways. The colouring was different, suggesting he likely had been blonde in his
younger days. His eyebrows met in the middle, though they had a curve very similar to Severus Snape's. The unremittingly squinty eyes were blue. Colour aside they were the same, though. Exactly the same.

She hoped Severus wouldn't have the tendency to jowls when he was older, but genes were clearly not on his side.

None of it would matter if she couldn't get him out of Azkaban.

"My name is Hermione Snape, sir, and I am trying to locate an Eileen Prince," she said, ignoring his brusque manner.

"I don't know anyone by that name," he said, his expression that of someone who had just caught wind of a foul odour.

"Are you by any chance familiar with my husband, Severus Snape?" she asked.

"Never heard of him," he said, his eyes never leaving her face.

Hermione looked down. On the counter between them lay a copy of the Daily Prophet. The headline read "Severus Snape Captured" in huge bold letters.

"Are you going to buy anything, or are you just going to skulk about my shop all afternoon?" the old man asked peevishly.

"Thank you for your assistance," Hermione said primly.

She was half expecting it when the witch who'd been restocking shelves followed her out onto the street, a bottle of ink still in her hand.

"My aunt lives in Suffolk," she said.

"I beg your pardon," Hermione said; she hadn't even introduced herself.

"My aunt, Eileen, she goes by King now," the witch said. "She married the King who bought out Eeylops."

She was tall and thin and dark headed. Pretty; she was pretty in an exotic way that was not even vaguely reminiscent of Severus; hair dark unless you contrasted it with ebony like Severus', eyes a pale brown that a more poetic person would compare with gold, skin that was more olive than chalk white.

"But don't let on I told you where to find her," she said with a grimace, "And before you ask, no, I won't testify on his behalf. It's not worth losing my inheritance over."

"Thank you for the information," Hermione said. "No one seems to be very interested in helping Severus."

The witch shrugged casually. "He killed a very powerful wizard, and he wasn't very popular before. To tell the truth, it did surprise me a bit."

Hermione nodded in agreement and leaned closer. Perhaps this witch knew something important to freeing Severus.

"Not as much as him making head of Slytherin, mind you, he is HALF-blood after all," the witch said with a vaguely familiar smirk. "But he's always been more yellow than green if you know
what I mean. I didn't know he had murder in his heart."

She looked proud. A shiver went through Hermione.

Meanwhile at Azkaban prison, Draco watched studiously as Snape stuffed two days worth of mouldering bread rations into an unwashed sock, knotted it, and added it to the bucket of fruit.

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The witch who opened the door in Suffolk was undoubtedly Eileen Snape.

Large serious brows, wide scowling mouth, outsized nose, she looked enough like her photo in the Hogwarts annual that she wasn't likely to be anyone else; besides as a witch, ageing had done its work slowly, and as she neared sixty she could pass for a Muggle at a fairly ill-tended 40. Still she was small, surprisingly small, surprisingly Severus-like in her gestures. Having met Toby Snape and now Eileen Prince, it was clear that while Severus couldn't rightly be said to resemble either of his individual parents, he did look quite a bit like both of them. His thin delicate lips were Toby's, Eileen's mouth, while hardly what one might call attractive, was so wide it seemed to reach all the way across her face. His nose was a combination of both, sporting some of Toby's fine-ness of form and Eileen's contribution of sheer size. It was strange for Hermione, standing at the door, to look at this tiny woman and realize she had given birth to Severus Snape. The greasy black hair was achingly familiar.

Eileen King let Hermione in, made her a cup of tea, sat her in a comfy chair in the parlour, then proceeded to lie through her teeth all without ever quite looking her in the eye.

"I don't believe I'm acquainted with any Snapes," Severus' mother said, addressing a point a few millimetres to the left of Hermione's face. She was as pleasant as a person could sound without going so far as to smile. Her black robes were close tailored, except for an outrageous puff at each shoulder, revealing a body not unlike that of a child. She had no breasts, and it would appear the bustle on her gown was only there to give an illusion of hips where none existed.

It was a typical middle class wizarding home. Hermione noted Floo powder on the hearth, wizarding wireless set on low, kitchen bubbling away on its own in the background, needlepoint cushions on the settee. Doilies on the arms of the chairs. In other words, a world away from Spinner's End. But still something about the whole place, something about the witch herself fairly sweated joylessness from beneath the cozy surface.

Still the witch who'd once been known as Eileen Snape was also wary, worried in a way that seemed fairly unconnected to anything Hermione was doing.

It was difficult not to catch anxiety with someone glancing round every few seconds. Finally, with Eileen constantly staring over her shoulder, Hermione turned round to see a clock like Molly Weasley's directly behind her.

There were three arms. Eileen. Justinian. Maximus. Justinian's arm read WORK. Maximus' BACK GARDEN.

Before Hermione's brain could respond to the implications, the arm shifted and sound clattered, doors flung open and the pounding of muddy boots echoed through the house.

"Mummy, Grunt's caught himself again." It was a boy, in heavy robes, with a small dog under his arm. The dog appeared to be choking on his own tail alternately gagging and growling.
With a perturbed frown, Eileen pulled a forked tail out of the dog's throat.

"That animal is too stupid to live," she said in an exasperated but not entirely unaffectionate tone.

"Hello," the boy said suddenly, taking notice that his mother was not alone.

Apparently, he was accustomed to finding his mother sitting alone in the parlour.

"Maximus," Eileen said, reproving. "This is Mrs. Snape."

"Maximus King at your service," the boy said, clicking his heels together with an unctuous politeness. "How do you do?"

His somewhat grubby little hand gripping hers, he paused, his small dew bright eyes gleaming under heavy black brows. He looked like a small over-stuffed version of Eileen, and thus not entirely unlike Hermione's own prince.

Eileen sat on the edge of her seat as if she were on the brink of bursting, as if she feared for nothing in the world so much as this boy.

Hermione realised at that moment that whatever help she managed to enlist for Severus Snape would not come from the mother of Maximus King.

"Snape? Like the chap that killed Albus Dumbledore?" the boy said, brightening. "You know the Aurors caught him all the way in California. The Aurors always get their man. Before the war they used to have Dementors in Azkaban that would suck a condemned wizard's soul right out of his body. They called it 'The Kiss'. Too bad there aren't Dementors in Azkaban anymore. If anyone deserves to have his soul sucked out, it's this Snape. It's a disgrace he has the same name as my Granddad."

Hermione forced herself to smile. "Perhaps the people who know him feel differently."

The boy wrinkled his nose. "You some sort of relation?"

"No," Hermione said.

"I didn't think you were. He probably doesn't have any relations, going about murdering people; he was probably hatched from an egg by a bugbear or something," the boy went on, enthused. "If he hadn't killed Albus Dumbledore, I would have got to meet him when I go to Hogwarts next year."

"Maximus!" Eileen said. "Would you please take your mud and your dog and your theories about the criminal mind outdoors where they belong."

"I'm going to be an Auror," the boy said, with a swagger.

Hermione forced a smile and nodded, uncertain what to say. She sincerely hoped he achieved his goal and found himself up to his nostrils in paperwork.

"Maximus, there are cakes on the stove, take one on your way out. Now shoo." She motioned for him to go, desperation bare in her eyes.

Eileen and Hermione did nothing but stare at one another until well after the door banged shut.

"He's bound to learn the truth eventually," Hermione said, finally.

"But not today," Eileen said, her lips pinched.
"Severus needs your help," Hermione said. "If I can find seven witches willing to speak before the Wizengamot, Severus will be allowed a new trial."

Eileen pressed her lips so hard they met in a thin line. For an encore she looked at the floor but did not answer.

"Severus is also your son," Hermione said, hoping to arouse some sentiment.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eileen said.

"It means, Mrs. King, that everyone has turned their back him and..." Hermione said.

"Is that my fault?" Eileen shook her head. "He's not a child. He's dug this hole, and he can lie in it for all I care. I was barely more than a girl myself when he was born. Now I've done my best to correct my previous errors in judgement.

Unfortunately I cannot erase Toby Snape... or the years I wasted with him. I would if I could, believe me. But I'll not ruin all I've made for myself since on his account."

Gooseflesh raised itself on the back of Hermione's neck.

"Severus isn't his father," she said.

"No, he's worse," Eileen said.

Hermione breathed in sharply. "What if I could find some proof he killed Headmaster Dumbledore at his own request?"

"I wouldn't care," Mrs. King said, her voice growing louder by the second. "Do you know... Do you know when your precious Severus was still in school, the day he took he-who... Voldemort's mark, and that very day he came home to Spinner's End. He came home proud. Proud to show me his Lord's mark and so drunk on his own arrogance at having sworn himself to that other stinking half-breed he kissed his own mother on the lips."

Hermione knew her mouth was hanging open. It was unfortunate that she had no idea what to say. She did her best to shut it quickly. Frankly, fond as she was of him, she knew Severus was rather perverse, in the emotional sense.

He was also impulsive and many of his attempts at affection came out skewed. Dead awkward, were the truth told.

She wondered what he meant by it. It was a demonstrable fact that what Severus intended by any given act was usually quite different than what it would mean to anyone else.

She had also come to the conclusion she could argue all day with Eileen King and it wouldn't make a bit of difference.

"I don't know what lies Severus told you to gain your sympathy," Eileen said with quiet intensity, "but he's a dark wizard. As far as I'm concerned my only son was born ten years ago."

Later, in the privacy of Millie's childhood bedroom, the two witches declared Eileen King a bloody cow of the first order.

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Hermione wasn't sure why she hadn't thought to go to Minerva McGonagall in the first place. She
had worked for years alongside both Severus and Headmaster Dumbledore. The Wizengamot was sure to listen to her and so was Neville, both as Headmistress of Hogwarts and as an interested party. If she had never been particularly fond of Millie, she had certainly made up for it with warm feelings for Hermione.

So they went to her office.

It was strange.

It hadn't been that many years, all told, since they'd been in school themselves, but the simple knowledge that both Dumbledore and Snape were gone made the place seem like a lively, well-populated vault. It occurred to both witches independently that the headmaster and the potions master had occupied such polarised positions during their childhood, it had been impossible to see either of them clearly. One had permitted everything; the other forbade everything short of breathing. And yet there had been a kind of careless sadism to Dumbledore's approval of everything under the sun and a secret underlying protectiveness to Snape's eternal "no".

Little Phil wiggled on Millie's lap.

"Come in," Mistress McGonagall called out sharply, and they obeyed. She was standing when they entered.

"Mrs. Malfoy, Mrs. Snape," she said, as if the names tasted bitter in her mouth. As if the names themselves were an accusation.

Millie responded as graciously as she could, "Headmistress."

"Headmistress, we would like to talk to you about events leading up to the night Headmaster Dumbledore died," Hermione said sombrely.

"To what end?" the Headmistress asked.

"To clear Draco and Severus," Hermione said.

"Exactly how, Mrs. Snape, do you propose to do that, in light of the fact that they are both guilty as sin?"

"You know Severus; you know he was loyal to Dumbledore. You know he would have done anything the headmaster asked of him..."

"Correction; I thought I knew Severus Snape. I thought he was loyal to the headmaster. I was clearly mistaken."

"Headmistress," at a loss, all her well-crafted plans dropping away as she faced the one person whose approval had mattered most to her child self, Hermione asked plainly, "How can I convince you?"

"Tell me the truth of what happened, and don't spare my sensibilities by glossing over the uncomfortable bits."

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The law of averages being, as usual, allied with whatever forces stood opposite Severus Snape, the day his prison wine was ready for swilling would be the day Granger would come to call.
It was difficult to keep track of the time of year, much less visiting day in a windowless cell on an island in the North Sea, so he did have a very good excuse for being blissfully pissed when his wife came to keep him apprised of her struggle to free him.

He’d downed most of the bucket, and feeling somewhat celebratory, he lay down on his pallet a few moments before gravity compelled him. His largesse was such that he felt moved to serenade his musical aficionados free of charge, confident in the knowledge that drink had not affected either tone or pitch of his delivery. Not seriously at any rate.

Deep in the act of illuminating the inmates at Azkaban as to the lesser known works of Black Sabbath along with a smattering of selections culled from his granny’s stereo cabinet for the sake of variety when the cell clanged to admit someone, and he opened his eyes to find himself looking straight up Granger’s robes.

He had married a lovely witch, hadn’t he? It was exceedingly clever on his part. Not that that was surprising, clever was his middle name. Sonny Clever Snape, that was him. No, wait, he hadn’t been Sonny for nearly thirty years.

Severus, now that was a name for a wizard, not some half-baked Mugglish child’s name.

The song in his mouth shifted without thought, and his voice dropped to the bottom of his range. "That old black magic has me in its spell, that old black magic that you weave so well, those icy fingers up and down my spine, the same old witchcraft when your eyes meet mine." He could keep it up no longer and dissolved into debilitating laughter. Fuck! A sharp pain roused itself in his side.

"Severus?" she asked and he struggled to pull himself to sitting without letting go of his suddenly tender side. Granger really was quite kind, allowing him to steady himself with a firm grip on her calves.

"Severus, you’re to be allowed a new trial if I can convince seven witches to speak on your behalf to the Wizengamot," Granger said, peering down at him.

It was only fair to note that Severus tried to count out seven possible witnesses on his behalf before his mind drifted and hands began to wander to Granger’s dimpled knees. He inhaled her scent; she was only a few days from her menses. He rubbed his face against her skin, noting from the stubble on her legs that she likely hadn’t shaved them since he was taken. No doubt about it, Granger was the best girl in the world. He ought to lick her cunt.

She stiffened a bit when his left hand reached the wild nest of curls hidden under her utilitarian knickers. He nuzzled at her legs, allowing the hem of her robe to fall over his head. Good, he liked to see what he was doing.

"I believe we should waste no time coming up with a list of witches to contact. Minerva was resistant at first, but she seems to be coming ‘round, so that’s one. Draco’s mother offered to speak on your behalf as well, but Mr. Eye feels that her public support might do your case more harm than good in the long run," she said evenly though he was doing his best to get her knickers off.

Apparently she felt nonchalance was best.

"Let her buy off a couple of witnesses then," he said as he buried his nose in her fragrant curls; he wondered if Granger heard. This was the perfume of the immortals. When he was free, he would douse himself with this scent every day.
"Yes, well," Granger said in a tone that suggested Narcissa's own solution was something to that effect. "That makes three, which means we need four more," she said, and Severus was delighted by the wetness that met his forefinger's exploration.

"My cousin Sophronia?" he muttered absently, tsking at himself a bit; he really did need to remember his diction, as he circled Granger's clitoris with the tip of his forefinger. He noted Granger's knees shook in response. He decided he could well take up residence under Granger's robes.

"I asked," Granger answered, her voice strained but distant. "She said 'no'."

It was dark and warm under Granger's robes, like a womb. They were going to have to kill him to get him out. He buried his lips between the labia majora and licked like the dog he was. The taste of her set all the hairs on his arms on end. Long upward strokes with the flat of his tongue, he lapped up the moisture that flowed like sap from a fragrant tree. He wasn't sure if it made him less drunk or more. The little bite of flesh practically pulsed on his tongue.

If he was a dog like Black, so be it, as long as he was Granger's dog. It was an established fact she was unusually kind to dumb beasts.

He was dimly aware that Granger was speaking, but he'd be buggered if he knew what she was saying. All he could do was growl in response in any event.

It was a wild cur of a thought, but he wondered if he was doing it properly; he wondered how it felt to be Granger at that moment. He wondered if he could..."Legilimens," he slurred against her labia, clutching her buttocks.

Bulstrode. He'd completely failed to notice that Bulstrode had come along with Granger but he could see her quite clearly through Granger's eyes now. He closed his own eyes and sought out Granger's clitoris, the size of single sweet from Honeydukes. He rested his weight on her. He had no choice; he could balance no longer.

Bulstrode and Malfoy were standing, side by side at the far side of the cell, holding hands and taking furtive glances at Granger.

Severus resisted the urge to stop what he was doing and go wave his cock at them. But he settled for smiling as he licked Granger. Good god that felt sublime. Her pleasure sent quakes from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. So he did it again. Three more times. Lessening the pressure made him shudder at every stroke; Granger staggered backwards until she hit the stone wall.

He sucked at her in earnest now, her right leg wrapped round his back.

He knew the moment when her orgasm began because he spent himself against the rough cloth of his prison uniform.

Hermione, her head swimming, watched Severus emerge from under her heavy winter robes.

His face was glistening wet, and there was a dark spot on the front of his striped prison gear. Even later she wasn't sure how a small show of affection had gotten so out of hand so quickly. Still she smelled the telltale stench of alcohol as soon as she entered the cell, and she had her suspicions.

It confused her a bit that she had just experienced one of the most intense orgasms of her life. Some things were easier to control than others. Sex was definitely an "other".

Severus never had stopped clinging drunkenly to her leg. His eyes were closed and his hands
shaking almost imperceptibly. Despite the filth and the stench, his expression was nearly beatific.

She'd have felt better to see him swearing and swaggering rather than clutching at her robes, mouthing her surname like a prayer. On his knees, as if the act of cunnilingus was incidental to his supplication.

She tried to comfort herself that drink played some large part in his current state. Still he could ill afford even that weakness.

"Severus?" she called down to him. "Severus?"

"Granger," Severus said in a way that teetered between a purr and a gurgle.

"Severus," Draco said nervously.

That seemed to break Severus out of his haze; he turned round and squinted in Draco's general direction, a sneer rising to his lips. "Buzzoffyaknob."

Hermione felt compelled to ask Draco the obvious question. "How did he manage to get liquor?"

"He didn't get it; he made it," Draco said, shrugging helplessly.

Potions master indeed. She reached down to stroke Severus' head; his hair was so greasy it was becoming stiff in spots. He was falling apart, and it was up to her to save him. He was not going to last much longer at this rate.

Half a world away Toby Snape met the end of his life at wandpoint. Upon hearing the news, Severus' only regret was that he wasn't there to see it first hand.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
The Night Visitors

Chapter Summary

The Story is getting stranger and darker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Night Visitors

by Bloodcult of Freud

"O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep;
Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
The traces of the smallest spider's web,
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone; the lash of film;
Her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not half so big as a round little worm
Prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid:
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel or an old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love; This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage:

This is she—"

— excerpted from Romeo and Juliet

Prison was dull. At least if one was lucky prison was dull.

And Severus, for one, was grateful, or as grateful as one could be, for the tedium. While adventure was not all it was cracked up to be in daily life, Severus' estimation was that in prison it was deadly. If Draco knew what was good for him, he was grateful for a bit of boredom as well, the over-privileged little sod.

Still the mind tended to wander.

Which was remedied to some degree by the application of liquor. It also filed the sharper edges off the desire to curse the sky and wail against fate until one passed out blue in the face. This came in fairly handy whenever Severus was reminded that he had been sentenced to spend the rest of his long life in this small stone cell with Draco Malfoy.

The only solution was another drink from the pungent bucket of strong wine he'd managed to concoct. Two more and he no longer winced to recall the original use for the bucket in which it was brewed. Another two and he was lazily recalling the sensation of Granger's tits in his hands, her soft lips on his while Draco, poor little Draco, the dunderheaded brat, snored beside him.

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Draco meanwhile dreamt of his own wife. Millie was strutting about their bedroom in the shiniest, blackest boots, with the tallest heels he'd seen in his life and nothing else.

Her breasts jutted out like two enormous sweets being offered to him. His only problem was which to choose first. Her soft body beckoned him with a luxury beyond reckoning. It took only the slightest movement on his part to suck her nipple into his mouth.

Milk white skin and swirling black hair like a cloud of silk surrounded him.

Without awareness of the moment of being taken, he was possessed by her, swallowed by the sensation of skin on skin, cock in cunt, and the coup de grace — a delicate little finger plunged expertly up his arse.

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Severus was lying back with Granger's lips tracing his collarbone, barely able to contain himself as he fumbled with his trousers.

Hermione could taste the cigarette smoke and sweat on Severus' skin as she licked her way down his sternum. It struck her that she had never ached for him, physically, the way she did at this moment, as if even as she touched him, she could not quite catch hold of him. As if she was filled throughout with the lack of him, even as she pulled him tighter.

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Millie did not know how she was managing to stand up in bleeding shoes like that, much less managing to shag Draco, standing up, in bleeding shoes like that. And Draco's todger was about an inch longer than usual; not that there was anything wrong with that.
And then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Snape and Granger. Granger with Snape's cock nearly as big as a centaur's in her mouth.

And it occurred to Severus that Draco and Little Millie were there, and they were also fucking, and it made a sort of drunken sense to him when Granger reached out her hand and Little Millie took it. And he said to them, without saying a word, that this was a very interesting turn of events indeed. Possibly for the first time in his life, Severus Snape wished for a mirror. Lo and behold his wish was granted, and a mirror the size of a small elephant hung on Little Millie's bedroom wall, and he knew in a flash that he was dreaming, and his drunken brain noted, with something akin to glee, that if he was dreaming, he could do anything he liked. More than that, everyone else could do anything he liked as well.

Severus looked once more at Granger. And then he looked at Little Millie. And as he watched those two young, but powerful, witches reached toward each other. And then those two young, but powerful, witches clasped hands.

It was quite the sight; Granger with her mouth stretched wide with him as it had never been in waking life, and Little Millie, her belly teeming with magic, riding young Draco while wearing nothing but a pair of tall boots, and the two witches holding hands.

It was most likely a symptom of Hermione's pragmatic nature, but she knew a dream when she had one. She knew it was not a very serious complaint compared to being sentenced to life in prison, but having daily sex so rudely yanked out from under her was a rather sizeable thorn in her comfort. Frankly, she needed a sex dream like this. She wasn't sure what the Pureblood position was on group sex, but not even the harshest critic could fault a woman for her dreams. There were no repercussions; she could do whatever she liked.

Severus was still pondering his options when Granger slipped his cock from her mouth, glistening wet, and pulled Millie to her. Both he and Draco stood, bereft cocks waving wet in the air as the witches kissed.

Millie arched her back responding to the kiss, and Severus was aroused beyond measure at the raw magical strength of the two witches together but at the same time involuntarily shamed by his own lechery. Millie. Little Millie.

He had known her since she was a fetus, and here she stood, the rough-pricking flower of Pureblood witch-hood. He felt like the dirtiest of dirty old men for wanting a woman he had known in nappies, the most ungrateful of ungrateful husbands for wanting to slip his cock into another witch while his wife held her in her arms. His gut coiled tight in him; he was his father's son after all.

He had no idea what to do.
It was strange to him that Millie should choose that moment to twist loose from Granger's embrace, her narrow blue eyes full of fearful confusion.

"It's only a dream," Granger said, then kissed her again full on the mouth. "We can do whatever we like," and then, surprisingly Granger kissed Draco, "it's only a dream," then came round to kiss Severus again. "It's only a dream."

Something in Severus relaxed. Who could fault him for the wanderings of his unconscious mind; besides it wasn't like anyone was ever going to find out.

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Millie Malfoy knew some things as well. She knew, despite what Granger said, this was no ordinary dream. Snape was a powerful Legilimens, unhinged by drink and confinement. She could feel, though she could not say how, the presence, the real mental presence of all three, Draco, Snape, and Granger in the dream; which meant that, though only Snape was experienced, she and the others had some as yet untapped ability to learn the art of Legilimancy.

Some latent ability that had been affected by physical closeness and the magical ties that bound husband to wife. She'd only heard stories about this sort of thing, but it was potentially very useful. Far more than "only a dream."

And yet, as she considered it, it was, despite the fact that it was mutual, only a dream in the end, and one might do whatever one liked.

She kissed Granger back, wondering what it would be to fuck without the possibility of hurting someone lurking in the back of her thoughts.

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Normally Draco would be terrified of the notion of going to bed with two witches at once. And those two witches? One of them Millie and the Other, Granger?

They were both the tip top of their races. It was like the loveliest, most fragrant wild rose side by side with the finest cultivar ever grown, each complementing the other perfectly. It sounded like a perfectly charming way to commit suicide, but he was young yet.

As a dream it was delightful. And Uncle Severus was magnificent. It didn't make him a poufter to admit that. In Draco's waking mind that sort of thing was for wizards too selfish and skittish to submit to witches as nature intended, wizards like Longbottom and Dumbledore.

Without fear for safety, or the future, or awkwardness the next morning, he could do what he liked, and the possibilities seemed delightful.

~~~

Hermione noticed, with them naked before her, the similarity between Snape and Millie, their paper white skin, their tar black hair, their small slanty eyes.

"Severus, I want you to fuck Millie. I want to see you fuck Millie."

Severus coughed. Hermione laughed; it was so like the real Severus, her sleeping mind amused her; so shy beneath all the bluster.

Millie cut her eyes at him and her mouth turned to a hard line.
"He doesn't have to if he..."

Hermione was delighted by the way Severus reached one long arm, as if in slow motion, to grasp Millie by the back of her head and draw her to him.

"Co-operate, child," he said sternly.

"I don't want you to do it just because Granger asked you," Millie said, half struggling against him.

"I am not," Severus said, pulling her close enough to speak into her thick hair. "As you put it, 'doing it because Granger asked me', I desire you because you are the epitome of Pureblood perfection. I desire you for your own sake. Granted, I only act having been permitted to do so by my wife."

"I've always wanted to fuck you," Millie said, her jaw still set.

"I am aware of that," Severus said gently, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Why didn't you want me?" she asked, her voice beginning to sound the closest to sorrowful Hermione had ever heard from her.

"I swear I did not see you as a grown witch until this very minute, Millicent," he said, and Hermione knew he was telling the truth; there was none of the usual sarcastic armor in his tone.

"I love Draco," Millie said, her eyes closed. "But I still want you."

~~~

Draco could not say he blamed her on either count. He was infinitely lovable, and no one could deny Uncle Severus was like a towering monument to what a wizard should be.

He leaned close to listen as Uncle Severus' lips parted, seductively curling at the corner. "You don't love me, even a bit, Millie? That is disappointing," he said, squeezing her nipple harshly between his thumb and forefinger.

Draco watched as Granger came to position herself behind Millicent, her breasts pressing deliciously against Millie's back, Millie's earlobe between her lips, one lithe arm coming round to finger his wife's cunt.

He thought for a moment he was going to swoon.

Millie's pupils had dilated so wide that her pale irises were nothing but thin rings.

"I do not love you in exactly the same way I love Granger, that is true," Uncle Severus said, laying one large knife-scarred hand on Millie's high-domed belly. "But do not mistake me, I would lay down my life for you, Millipede."

Draco wasn't sure why, but he had to fight the impulse to burst into tears, so instead he reached out to Severus. Wizard to wizard, he wrapped his arm around his shoulder and... and... and... they kissed.

It was not like kissing a girl.

Uncle Severus' face was rough and so were his lips.

Granger's eyes were gleaming with a strange light as she released Millie from her snake-like
Uncle Severus pulled away and turned his gaze to Millie. Taking her hand in his, he kissed each fingertip, one by one.

Draco shivered, his spine as tingly as if it had been plunged into ice water.

Even if Millie had been able to force language from her lips, she would not have had words for Snape's head at her breast as he suckled her tender nipple.

Two fingers on her own clitoris, Hermione lay back against Millie's wide headboard and watched as Severus slowly penetrated Millicent. Dimpled thighs, round belly, breasts, and bum aside, Millie was small and Severus was not. In their months together, Hermione felt satisfied he had learned quite a bit more than sexual competency. Millie didn't deserve any less.

Slowly he pushed himself in up to the hilt. Hermione couldn't help but notice that milk was flowing from Millie's breasts. Severus lapped it up with his long tongue between soft love bites, leaving crooked teeth marks on her white skin.

Draco beside Hermione sat with his own cock in his hand.

For the first time since she'd known him, Hermione recognized him for what he was, a lovely, sheltered, almost naïve, hedonist. He was beautiful, and as he turned to get a better look at Severus and Millie, his hard cock rubbed against Hermione's hip. Hermione shifted to her side to give him a better view, burying her fingers deep between her labia as she watched Severus' thick cock slide in and out of Millie. Millie arched her back and moaned, and her belly shook. It seemed natural to feel Draco hard against her buttocks, his lips on the back of her neck. He warred with her hand for a moment as he gathered lubricant from her slick vagina, and then, in an instant... she was buggered.

And her body was trembling in orgasm almost instantly, but Draco continued, reaching around to touch her clitoris, and the shuddering began again, seconds after it ceased.

Severus looked down to the most exquisite sensation, Granger with her beautiful face where he and Millicent were joined, licking every bit of skin in sight, licking his cock as he drew it in and out of Millie. Licking Millicent's vulva, causing her to squirm and convulse around him, and there behind Hermione, buried in her, was Draco, looking like some young god.

Millie snaked her hand down Granger's belly to feel her cunt, and Granger groaned out load, the hum sending shivers up Millie's clitoris.

Severus reached out to feel where Draco's cock slid in and out of Hermione's arse, then joined Millie's hand at Granger's cunt. On impulse, he slid two wet fingers into Draco's arse and watched him thrust into Granger all the harder.
Draco didn't know how much more pleasure he could bear, but the least he could do was return Severus' favor. He sucked his index finger until it was thoroughly slippery and pushed it gently into Severus' arse.

~~

Somehow Millie kissed Granger and Draco and Snape all at the same time.
All of them shaking in one enormous pile. Semen squirting everywhere.
Hands, everywhere. No orifice left unfilled. No nerve ending unstimulated.
After that her sleep was deep.

~~

Draco awoke in the cruel hours before dawn to the dulcet strains of Uncle Severus snoring hard enough to rattle the windows, or rather he would have rattled the windows if they had windows instead of stone walls and iron bars.

Draco wondered if there was some conceivable way to quiet him down without getting throttled. After tossing aside pinching his nose, the way Millie would, or rolling him over, the way Draco imagined Granger might, he gave it up as a bad job and stared into the darkness wondering where his life had got to.
And then he remembered his dream and felt both gratified and embarrassed.
It was good some things were private.

~~

Millie woke up with a dicky tum for the 12 millionth time in the past month. Her teats were sore and starting to leak in a way that reminded her of sap running from a wounded tree. Though she couldn't imagine it hurt the trees more than this hurt her now.

Something was knocking at her head; she'd had the most intense dream. Now that she was awake, she didn't quite believe that inkling she'd had that it was a folie a deux. Or folie a quarte or whatever you'd call it. Besides how would she even ask Granger? It wasn't exactly casual conversation, was it? She could just imagine it.
"I dreamt you licked my cunt last night, Granger, don't that beat all?"

Granger continued snoring as Millie peeled her nightie off her nipples. If she told her granny or her mum, they'd give her some sort of salve or another, but she didn't feel like discussing it with them. She might be the one breeding, but she knew the future belonged to Granger and her kind. Millie wasn't sure if it made her sad or not. Not that it made a difference; the future would be what it would be. There were a hundred Mixbloods and Mudbloods for every one of her kind; nothing was going to change that. Not only that but what Purebloods there were, Millie herself included, saw plenty of advantages of casting aside most of the old ways in favor of something less like what you'd find in the back of an old cave.

Not that there was a solution that worked out to the Purebloods' advantage.
If you married another Pureblood you were, inevitably, marrying your own cousin three times over. Black Alice might have climbed over the rim of the world from some other place, but the identity of Prunie's father was an open secret. A fool could tell by looking at her. Which made Millie herself third cousin to the Blacks. Her Bulstrode granny was Abraxas Malfoy's own sister, and both of them were cousins to their mum. They might say that kind of thing doubled up the magic, but it did other things too. Everyone knew even if they didn't like to talk about it.

But the thing was, if you took up with a Muggle-born you weren't out of the woods either. It was, in the end, impossible to entirely bring them round to Pureblood way of things. Not that they did it on purpose, but they had a different way of seeing the world, different at its core, and unless you wanted to perform an Obliviate and erase a lifetime of non-Pureblood ways, there was no help for it. They couldn't change completely, and as you accommodated them, you found yourself changed without even trying. In the end, if you got entangled with a Mudblood, you wound up in Mixblood society. It was the way of life. You couldn't avoid change even if you wanted to. In five hundred years Millie doubted there would be any Pureblood society left to speak of.

And while Millie didn't doubt the wisdom of acquiring whatever valuables the Mudbloods had on hand, she didn't much like the notion of abandoning who she was in order to do it.

A year ago, the thought wouldn't have phased her, now that she had Phil and whoever was on her way, she felt a bit wistful about the whole business.

Millie coughed as whoever she was jumped up and down hard on her cervix, the brat, and she nearly made water. She was about to Scourgify the oily crust off the front of her nightie when a racket from the kitchen Floo brought her running. She didn't realize she was starkers until she saw the witch in the Floo, bun tight enough to pull the skin at the corners of her eyes taut.

"Granger?" the witch said in a tone there was no mistaking for anything but officially bureaucratic. "Floo for Hermione Granger."

Millie decided not to be embarrassed; if you went round Floo'ing people in the middle of the night, you could bloody well expect them to be naked.

"Granger!" Millie called over her shoulder, sticking out her chest and daring the head in the Floo to take offense.

When she turned back, a second head had joined the first.

"Snape?" said the second head, this one had an American accent. "Is this the residence of Hermione Snape?"

Millie grunted and nodded.

"Sign here." A hand with a clipboard joined the American head.

Luckily, Hermione stumbled into the kitchen a moment later.

"It's for you," Millie said, gesturing to the crowded fireplace.

"Package for Hermione Snape," the American head insisted, thrusting the clipboard forward.

Granger squinted at the board before signing. A moment later two hands thrust a basket through the flames. The basket screamed.

"What in the Hell is going on?" Granger squeaked.
"Your husband's brother," said the head.

"Where is his mother, umm... umm... Suzette?" Granger said, still not taking the basket.

"Jurisdiction has yet to be determined," the head said.

"Jurisdiction?" Granger asked.

"Both the victim and murderer claimed British citizenship, but the crime was committed on New English soil."

"Someone killed Suzette Snape?"

The American head blinked. "Suzette Snape committed Avada Kedavra on her Muggle husband, one Tobias Snape two days ago."

Millie wasn't exactly surprised, but Granger hadn't given up yet.

"What about the mother's family?"

"Under the circumstances they have declined custody."

"What circumstances? I thought Suzette was a Pureblood."

The American head looked a bit embarrassed.

The British head, who had been very nearly forgotten on account of the queue jumping by the American head, cleared her throat. "Read between the lines, dearie. The mother committed an Unforgivable while pregnant. The poor thing's tainted now, and her family doesn't want to take in what is likely a squib. Still if the father was a Muggle, he's probably got some sort of relation you can dump it off on. Now if you don't mind, I believe I was here first."

"You signed for it," the American head said, "you have to take it."

Hermione's head swam; her feelings about children were rather vague. She didn't hate them. She wasn't exactly a baby aficionado like Millie either. Even if she was, even if she desired an infant above all else, which she clearly did not, this was perhaps the least convenient time possible for one to show up.

"What was it you wanted?" Hermione addressed the British head, which she was fairly sure was attached to an entire British witch; she wasn't so sure about the American.

The British head looked about the room archly. "I was here for the infant, but since you signed their paperwork accepting responsibility for the child before my paperwork naming the magical government in loco parentis you'll have to bring it round my office tomorrow morning, nine sharp. I was hoping to avoid this. It's much more paperwork, this."

"Why didn't they just give it to you in the first place?" Hermione asked

"Because we plan to file paperwork seeking financial recompense from the New English government for the child's upkeep, I suspect," the British head said.

"Some families do want them, you know, even the squibs," the American head said defensively before popping out of the Floo.

"Nine a.m. sharp, Department of Motherless Children, Knockturn Alley," the British head said
before it, too, disappeared from the flames.

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Hermione had no idea what to do with a baby, Severus’ brother or not.

But there he was all the same.

He continued to cry.

There, in the basket, was a carbon copy of the form she'd signed; it listed no name for the child but "Infant Snape." Perhaps with his father dead, and his mother in prison, there hadn't been a chance to name him.

"Sounds like he needs a nappy and something to eat," Millie said, peering into the basket. Roughly five seconds later Baby Phil let out a sympathetic wail, and Millie strode down the gingerbread corridor.

The baby Snape wasn't difficult, all told, once he had dinner and a change of nappy. He drifted off to six hours of uninterrupted sleep, which was more than Phil ever gave anyone. He was much easier than Phil all around, Hermione reckoned, and nearly as big as Phil as well.

So it was that Hermione felt something of a twinge as she approached the Ministry headquarters for the Department of Motherless Children. As an Auror she'd heard it mentioned, of course, but it wasn't the sort of place that piqued her interest, her off duty hours had been so limited, and there were so many other facets of the Ministry to explore. She sincerely wished she had taken the time to learn more about the DMC when she had the chance. Especially now that the great grey building bore down on her, Infant Snape in her arms and Millie beside her quiet as death. Or rather as quiet as someone glowering disapproval but unwilling to say a negative word.

Inside the building was just as grey as outside. There was a desk covered in papers and a witch with a tight frown whose look did nothing to reassure Hermione either.

"Have you a quill?" asked the witch.

"Not on my person, no," Hermione answered, taken aback by the greeting, if you could call it that.

"There are forms. Don't expect you can dump your little problem off here without filling out the proper forms. I may be able to find a quill you can use, but there will be no buggering off quill in hand," the witch said, ringing a bell.

A sister, or a witch who appeared to be a sister at any rate, appeared and took the Infant Snape without so much as a by-your-leave and made to bugger off with him. Hermione might not be a baby aficionado but she rated human beings, even babies, even squibs, somewhat higher than quills.

"Where are you taking him?"

"What do you care?"

"Just because I haven't the inclination to care for..."

"The baby room."

"May I look? If I am going to turn him over to your care, I would like to know something of the
conditions in which he's to be kept."

"Suit yourself."

Hermione followed the sister; turning back to Millie when she stayed rooted.

"Coming?"

"No stomach for it," was all Millie said.

Hermione blinked. It was one of those cases of Pureblood overreaction. The rest of Wizarding society may not make little kings and queens of their children but not obsessing over children didn't mean you mistreated them.

As if in premonition the infant Snape let loose a scream, and she stepped into the "baby room"; a lingering ammonia odor hung in the air, and the sound of at least six babies crying at once hit her as they passed some sort of muffling spell causing her to shrink back. She could hardly believe her eyes.

Rows of babies hung in sacks from the ceiling, only their faces visible.

"Those are all new ones; they stop crying eventually," the sister said brusquely.

"When is that?"

"When they learn it's no use," the sister answered, laying Infant Snape on a single wooden table and fitting him efficiently into a sack of his own despite his screams.

Hermione looked round the room. It was hygienic. Brightly lit. But no, just bloody no. No, she was not leaving Severus' brother, or any child within her power, for that matter, to hang in a sack until he realized no one cared what he wanted.

It didn't mean she was going to make herself his mother; it meant something of the girl who fought for House Elves remained. She was not turning a defenseless person over to the care of mindless bureaucracy.

Besides, Severus surely had some Muggle relative who would take the baby in.

"I've changed my mind," she said quietly, so quietly that the sister didn't appear to have heard her. "I've changed my mind; I want the baby," she repeated, louder.

The sister sighed. "Like I said, suit yourself," she said, handing the baby back to Hermione. "I get paid the same no matter how many we got."

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"I knew you didn't have it in you," Millie said as they stamped down the lane, Infant Snape still screaming his head off.

"Nice to know, because I certainly didn't. I still do not want a baby, not now, this is the worst possible time for added responsibility," Hermione said. "I'm sure Severus has some Muggle relative who would take him."

"How 'bout his granny? I never heard him talk bad about his Muggle granny,"

Millie said. "Pro'bly the only relative of his I can say that of."

"Have you any idea where she lives?"
"Cuntal... counta... tendency? Something like that?" Millie said, trying to recall what Snape called the place.

"Council Tenancy?" Hermione asked. "Snape said his grandmother lived in a Council Tenancy?"

"That sounds right."

After a pause Granger turned to her seriously. "Have you had any peculiar dreams lately, Millie?"

Millie nodded. "I dreamed the same one as you, I think. But it was only a dream, wasn't it?"

They were silent the rest of the way back to the woods.

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In the gingerbread cottage, Black Alice sat at the table with a cigar clenched in the corner of her mouth, peering deep into a plate full of black ink. She cackled when she saw the two of them, infants in tow.

Chapter End Notes

for Lora
Chapter Summary

in which things return to normal...ish

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If

If All the World Were Apple Pie
And All the Seas Were Ink
And All the Trees Were Bread and Cheese
What Would We Have to Drink?
—Nursery rhyme

All in all it seemed for the best that Hermione head to Severus' grandmother's on her own.

She didn't quite know how she felt about the muddying of the waters of dream. While it seemed perfectly acceptable and harmless, and above all blameless on her part, to dream about having sex with Millie, even to dream about Severus and Millie having sex.

But for Millicent to experience the same dream at the same time, only from her own perspective, of course, made the whole occurrence something other than pure unconscious fantasy. There was also a high probability, as far as Hermione, at least, was concerned that if she and Millie had shared the dream, Severus and Draco had as well, which made it something more than a dream. Less than sex. Certainly more than a dream, though.

Hermione didn't like being unclear and yet the entire situation was as transparent as mud, inhabiting as it did, the border between the real and unreal.

She had never in her life been as close to another female person as she was to Millie. She would be extremely hard pressed to say that she didn't love her.

And yet the knowledge that Millie and Severus both desired and felt affection for each other as well as for her, twisted jealousy like Sectumsempra in her chest. Jealousy which both titillated and horrified her.

And Draco. Oh god, Draco, she never imagined she would find herself feeling such tenderness toward Draco Malfoy of all people. It seemed like such a ridiculous, yet glorious, betrayal of her friendship. She couldn't picture him now without wanting to kiss the wrinkles out of his brow. But and the same time he didn't op her nose one iota less. The whole mess gave her a splitting headache. Hermione shook her head and did her best to focus on the business at hand.

The council tenancy looked so Muggle-ordinary that all the madness of the night before seemed
just that, mad. Pulling herself to attention and rapping on the door, Hermione put her dream in a neat corner of her brain marked: later.

The Muggle woman who answered the door was... well she was... tall, slightly— all right somewhat more than slightly — ...beaky, bottle blonde, in a cheap garish kimono, with a cigarette in one hand and a racing form in the other.

She carried herself like a queen despite the fact that she was pushing a zimmer-frame with an oxygen bottle clipped to the side and had plastic tubing running up to her wide nostrils. In a state of base panic, Hermione looked again to the cigarette and back to the oxygen bottle.

~~~

Both baby boys fell asleep in the spare metal washtub at Millie's feet while she was hanging their nappies on the line.

She levitated the two sleeping pups into the house and was greeted by the smell of her granny's cigar but no sign of Black Alice herself. She took a gander in one bedroom after another but both her Mum and her Granny were nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Gran?" she asked her dad, sitting at his usual place by the fire in his shirt sleeves.

Her dad shrugged, not bothering to look up from the carving he was doing.

"I've no idea where she and your mum are off to, but they left somethin' for you." With his pen knife, he gestured vaguely toward the table.

Millie stepped closer to the kitchen table. At first glance it appeared to be set for a meal, but on closer examination five silver plates had been set, with wooden spoons dipped in mud and cups full of ashes. In each plate stood a puddle of black ink, shining like a full moon.

On the rim of Millie's own plate was a sign meaning "what could have been, but was not".

She straightened her spine and looked into the pool, determined not to be cowed.

She saw herself. Her younger self but a younger self she had never been. The age she had been when she set off on the train to Hogwarts, more or less, she figured from the size of her bubbies. But her belly was big with babies.

Her hair had been pulled into a top knot like her gran's, and it didn't suit her at all. The most foreign thing was the look on her face. She looked... miserable.

Worse that miserable, blank.

Lurking behind her was Snape, but not the Snape she knew. He looked even more unhappy than she did. His shoulders were stooped, and his expression was feral but submissive, like a whipped dog or some unsuccessful predator, as if he had been robbed of all his Snapely dignity.

In the liquid of her plate, her double's hand went to her jumping belly, and Snape's shoulders slunk lower.

This was what would have come of it, had she got Snape for a husband when she asked for him, instead of a set of school robes and a ride on the Hogwarts Express.

She tried to imagine it.
She tried to wrap her brain around the notion of a life without Draco and Baby Phil. A life without Granger. A life without even the most basic knowledge of Muggles and Muggle things.

Millie couldn't look at that plate any longer.

At the top of Granger's plate was a sign best deciphered as "Was to be but No More".

The first thing Millie saw was Snape dying alone in a sea of his own blood.

Then Draco in the arms of a very pretty Daphne Greenglass. Millie glared, and in the smooth black surface Granger dandled two babies on her knee, both red haired.

Millie looked away to avoid seeing herself.

That was bleeding unacceptable on all counts.

Millie went to her Granny's place at the table.

The ashes painted on her plate told a straightforward: "Was".

Dumbledore getting a letter out of the air. But how? And from who? A second later her question was answered as she saw Draco and Snape in a laboratory she had never seen in life, with a device whose purpose she could only guess at until she saw Snape insert a tightly-rolled length of parchment into a flask at one end and replace the stopper. It looked identical to the parchment that appeared in Dumbledore's office.

So Dumbledore received the message and then, afterwards, Snape wrote and sent it.

Under normal circumstances Millie would say they were a couple of tossers for even attempting to build a time machine. But these were not normal circumstances.

As things stood they were fucking brilliant, and she would have baked them each a cake if they hadn't bollixed it up. Clearly they had bollixed it up somehow or they would be free.

The next plate, her mum's, was marked in ashes with a squiggle that translated as "The direction the wheel turns" which meant, presumably, what would happen unless something was done.

In the placid black ink two nearly skeletal figures so dirty as to be grey in both hair and flesh, a terror she had only rarely glimpsed rose in her chest as one screamed like a mad thing behind iron bars and the other struggled hard with the first's filthy hands around his throat and then no more. She wanted to think of a joke to make. Maybe something about how she didn't need to look in a scrying bowl to see that coming, but it fell flat.

Millie rubbed her face with her hands and tried to sort it out in her head.

They already managed to circumvent one set of completely buggered possibilities, now all that was left was to avoid the next.

The last plate then was her dad's, the symbol on its rim, "yet may be".

These images seemed less dire but more confusing. Some old hag she didn't know with yellow hair and a brightly-colored robe. The North Sea. Grey stone blocks she knew well as Azkaban. Then Mountains. It didn't look like the Alps or the Himalayas, those she'd been to, so some other mountains, then.

She was surprised by three figures, running in the distance. Frolicking, Granger would probably
say, though Millie thought "playing silly buggers" summed it up better.

As she peered closer, the figures grew until she could make them out clearly.

One was a wizard, medium height, thin-ish with a very pointed nose and foxish face. His thin hair was as white as Muggle butter.

Millie looked away at Baby Phil sleeping in the wash tub then instinctively back at the inky plate.

A second wizard, larger, broader with skin the color of curry, chased after the first, laughing.

Millie looked to the Infant Snape curled beside Phil and back at the plate.

The witch she had been dreaming about for months appeared, periwinkle robes swirling. The witch neither as fat as Millie herself nor as thin as Draco.

The witch with light brown hair and pale grey eyes.

The witch who was kissing Snape's brother in the black mirrored surface.

And Millie had no idea how to bring any of it about.

Utterly stumped she went to the door and not sure what else to do sat on the threshold of the open door way, her chin on her fist.

Whack appeared and switched her tail furiously.

Miss, who had obviously been close behind her, galloped up and looked expectantly at Millie.

Not sure what else to do Millie broke a bit off the door and tossed it to the dog.

A dog, at least, she knew how to satisfy. They might look as though they wanted something more, but in the end if their bellies were satisfied they would let it go. Not unlike most witches and wizards she knew.

Still Miss waited, cocking her head for effect.

"He's in prison," Millie said "He's not here... it's not like I've got him in my robe pocket. Scat!" she said, tossing another piece of door at her tormentor.

Miss caught the gingerbread handily and gulped it down, nose pointed to the sky and went back, straight away, to her reproachful gaze.

Bugger.

Millie concentrated and sifted through the images in the final plate with her mind's eye. Mountains. Seas. Stones. But the real point of divergence was the hag. She focused on the hag's face, Millie was sure she had never seen her before, dead certain, but her face remained somehow familiar.

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In a narrow cell meant for one occupant, in Azkaban, Snape, Severus so-called, awoke, screwing up his face and clenching his eyelids against the harsh light of day.

He reflexively tucked his arms and legs close to his body, forming something like a misshapen ball as his brain staggered into conscious thought, sorting last night's depraved dream from the more
mundane crumbling mortar and cold bricks of reality.

Reassured that Draco in all actuality did not slide a slick finger up his arse, Severus opened one eye and tentatively stretched one arm.

That was a bloody extraordinary dream.

Even knowing it had been imaginary, he blanched a bit at the idea. He had not only pictured Little Millie with her finger in her cunt like a delectable sexual dumpling, he had pictured himself fucking Little Millie and enjoying it bloody thoroughly. There was a quality to her quim that, while wholly unlike Granger's, was equally brain bending. Where Granger's was deliciously soft and clinging as a kiss from the wettest of mouths Millie's was muscular and aggressive. Like a fist. He sneered at himself. That was probably precisely what it was; a fist. He was probably abusing himself in his sleep and imagining it was a cunt. Still it horrified him that he had imagined it Millie's. He was going to have to get hold of himself soon or he would be barking by summer. If not sooner.

On pondering what could possibly be worse than spending the rest of his days, barking mad, in Azkaban Severus' imagination failed him, spectacularly.

Logically he knew there was a worse fate; he could not, however, think of it.

Oh well, he would simply have to wait until destiny in its infinite sadism made an appearance and supplied a clear-cut example of worse.

He went over the ingredients in his improvised wine wondering if perhaps he had accidentally added an aphrodisiacal substance.

"Buttle, where, pray tell, did those desiccated figs of yours originate?" he called.

"Me wife give 'em to me," came the reply.

"Would you happen, by any chance, to have a vague notion as to where your wife procured them?" he called back, folding his arms across his eyes.

"Her mum's garden," Buttle answered.

"Would I be acquainted with your Mother-in-Law, Buttle?"

"I reckon, Sir, everybody knows Pomona," Buttle called jovially.

"Thank you for the information, Buttle," Severus called, tightly, recalling Pomona Sprout's figs renowned for linking witches with the objects of their sexual desire. They had been contraband at Hogwarts but Pomona had done a brisk business selling the fruits to certain Diagon Alley charm purveyors.

Surely Pomona's daughter, Severus could not for the life of him recall her name, had given a basket of the damn things to her husband as a love token.

Buttle, in turn, had given four to Severus for a song, literally.

If he was profoundly unlucky, and experience told him that he usually was, Severus had unwittingly reached out in his dream, legilimantically — to coin a phrase, last night to both Hermione and Millie. He had betrayed Hermione and violated a witch who might as well be his own daughter. If he hadn't done it physically, the intention and desire had been real enough.
Unsure whether or not punishment was warranted for a wizard already in prison, Severus cradled his still-aching head in his hands and wished with all his heart for a cigarette.

He peered through his laced fingers to see Draco standing uncomfortably at the opposite end of the small cell.

Dog buggered bloody shit smear of the worst of all possible worlds.

Draco knew. If Draco knew, they all knew. Severus had certainly fucked the dog, hadn't he? Actually now that his memory was coming round, it seemed the poor beast was the only one he neglected to have intimacy with last night.

Good god.

He supposed this was his punishment for believing that prison was the worst thing that could happen to him.

Calming down from his abject panic, Severus realized that simply because Draco had the same dream it didn't necessarily follow that Draco was aware said reverie was the product of anything other than his own pent-up brain.

Narrowing his focus on the boy, he was reassured that Draco was as innocent as a lamb as to what had truly transpired.

Thank heaven for small bloody mercies.

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Millicent's arse was starting to get sore from sitting on the stone step when she heard the distant clatter of hooves on soft dirt and the strike of wooden wheels on stone.

~~

Severus wasn't hungry when his breakfast came.

His stomach was still soured with the idea that he could desire Little Millie so.

He recalled the day, ten years ago give or take, trying to laze beneath a tree in the enchanted wood despite his thoughts spinning hopelessly as he tried to project every possible way Harry Potter's arrival at Hogwarts could go wrong when Millie interrupted him with a tug at his sleeve.

"What?"

"You don't have to go back, you know," she said, her head down as she went back to sweeping the pink boiled-sweet steps.

It seemed odd, her refusal to meet his gaze when she was, by nature, bold as brass.

"It is, if you will remember, my work. I am compelled to return to Hogwarts or find some other way to support myself. We are not all of us heirs," he said with no idea what the future might hold, but well aware he was not free to hide from whatever misfortune was his due.

"But I am," she mumbled, clouds of dust rising from her broom like conjury.

"Which doesn't do me any bleeding good," he said, attempting to close his eyes but quite arrested by the fact that Millie had stopped sweeping and was standing glowering before him like a sullen
little troll. Actually she didn't resemble a troll so much as a miniature version of her not-to-be-named-aloud maternal grandfather.

"You could marry me... that would be the same as being an heir," she said.

"You know I do not enjoy jokes at my expense, Millicent." He did his best to chastise her as he would a student of his, but she remained immobile, broom in hand.

"What makes you think I'm joking?" she said as he jumped to his feet to inform Black Alice of the child's impertinence.

Unfortunately Black Alice was in on the joke, except that it was no joke.

"Your granddaughter... the girl... she... she... made the most extraordinarily obscene suggestion..." he managed to huff out as Black Alice meticulously separated a silver fish from its scales with a short sharp knife.

"I told her to save that for after the wedding," Black Alice said, sucking her teeth loudly.

"You can't be serious," Severus shouted. "She's a child."

"You're both children to me," Alice said, straightening the line of scales with her knife blade and tossing the fish to the cat that wound its way round her boots. "Besides she's been bleeding regular for two years now. That's old enough."

"Twenty-nine is hardly comparable to eleven," he shouted, his heart pounding madly in his chest.

Black Alice looked taken aback. "What've you got against our Millie?"

"That's not it," he managed to choke out despite his rage. "Little Millie holds the distinction of being one child I do not despise. Nonetheless I do not...desire her. I have no sexual interest in any girl of her age."

"Oh come off it, that's no excuse, you know as well as I do there's potions that could make you randy for your own grandmother," Black Alice chided.

"I do not wish to... desire a girl of her age," Severus said, his head starting to ache.

"Breaks my heart to see Millie disappointed," Black Alice said, resuming her work on a new fish.

"I am hardly a Christmas kitten," Severus said, "to be presented to a little girl with a green bow fastened round my neck."

"I shouldn't think that would much suit you," Alice said clearly considering the possibility. "Your complexion's far too sallow."

"Yet you would relegate me to roughly the same status as a pet," he fumed.

"Look, Snape, a change is coming; our kind are losing ground."

"Losing ground? Perhaps you are late in receiving the news, Madam, but we lost the war some ten years ago."

Black Alice looked for a moment as though she was on the brink of ripping a strip of flesh from his hide. "I would like to know Millie has allies... outside our little circle."
He remembered clear the cold blast of fear that shot through him, fear that Black Alice knew him for a traitor. Voldemort might be deposed, but that wasn't to say the land wasn't full of wizards itching for a place to target their vengeance.

"What did you say?" he whispered.

But Black Alice didn't answer.

"What did you say?" he whispered twice more.

But Black Alice kept her eyes on her fish and her lips closed tight around her cigar.

Unsure what else to say, he tried to reassure both Black Alice and himself. "Of course I will protect the girl; she is the closest thing I have to a child of my own."

But the only indication that Black Alice heard his words was when the child boarded the Hogwarts Express that September.

Back in his cell, Severus had the sickening feeling he had crossed a line into depravity.

The closest thing to a child of his own indeed.

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It was to Millie's credit that she fully expected what she saw next. Her mum climbed out of the Malfoy's barouche, and as soon as the shaking stopped, out lumbered a goblin with a book the size of a beer barrel.

It was THE BOOK. The fabled, or perhaps not so fabled, book containing the image of every known witch.

A golden chain ran from the spine of the book and looped itself round the goblin's throat.

"Look here," her father's voice called behind her. She turned round to see he had carved two poppets no bigger than one of her mother's fingers, one dark and one light "This way I can keep them safe as houses," he said, tucking the dolls in his leather apron.

Millie wished she had that much faith in her father's magic.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
The Common Problem

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Common Problem

The common problem — yours, mine, everyone's —

Is not to fancy what were fair in life

Provided it could be; but, finding first

What may be, then find how to make it fair

~Robert Browning — The Common Problem

For the barest fraction of an instant Hermione stumbled in her mind, trying to superimpose Severus' face, and then the face of his father, Toby, over the rouged cheeks and lipsticked mouth of the old woman before her then wondering exactly how to word the question about to come out of her mouth.

"Mrs. Snape...?" was all she got out before she was cut short.

"Miss Snape, if you please... I'm a bachelor girl. Never been married. 'Sides you forgot your clipboard," the woman said, tapping her ash. "If you're getting signatures for something or other you gotta have your clipboard or else there's nothin' t' sign."

Hermione looked down at her Muggle clothing. She supposed it was a reasonable assumption under the circumstances.

"No, I am looking for the family of one... Sonny Liston Snape. My name is Hermione," she paused, feeling flustered to say it aloud. "Hermione Snape."

The old woman raised her chin and her left brow in a unified expression of scepticism. "He prefers to be called Sev'rus."

Hermione couldn't help it, she had been so anxious about this not being the right place or the woman being more like Toby that the mere fact that she addressed Severus as he wished to be addressed gave Hermione untold pleasure. It seemed to imply that she knew him and loved him and several other grandmotherly things that had been sorely missing from interactions with Severus' parents. She reached out and took the woman's cigarette-free hand in hers.

"I'm Severus' wife," she said, squeezing the old woman's bony hand in hers.

"You're a witch, then?" she asked, taking a drag from her cigarette, training a sharp gaze on Hermione that was more curious than anything else.

Hermione nodded.

"Good, you can help me with the racing forms" she said, reversing the Zimmer frame in an odd little motion and beckoning Hermione to come in. "There's Jaffa cakes on the table and...." A whistle sounded. "The tea's ready or the water for the tea's ready at any rate. Would you mind? I'm not at full power at the mo.'"
Hermione pulled the wand from her sleeve and managed two cups of tea in short order. Severus’ grandmother meanwhile sat at the table, her eyes closed, while Hermione levitated the cups to the table. It was strange to Hermione, as most Muggles seemed to want to watch that sort of thing closely.

Hermione sat down in the kitchen chair opposite Miss Liz Snape.

"What'd they get 'im for?"

"Excuse me? I... uhhmm... I..." Hermione faltered, several steps seemed to have been foregone.

"Sev's in the nick, idn't he? I read it on your face the minute you passed over the threshold. Worse than bad, I'd reckon by the look of you."

Hermione had no idea how to begin with all the things she needed to tell Liz Snape, things no other witch or wizard would think to inform a Muggle of, even if the Muggle had every right to know.

"Mrs... ehh... Miss Snape. Your son Tobias is dead," Hermione said, trying to be gentle.

"It was bound to happen one day." Liz Snape grimaced, her cigarette hand forming a makeshift lid over her steaming cup of tea. "Did Sev do it?" she asked quietly.

"No," Hermione was quick to answer, shaking her head. "It was your son's wife, Suzette. She's in prison in America. Miss Snape... she was a witch. Did you know of her? Had you been in contact with your son?"

Liz Snape shook her head. "Not a whisper in more than a year."

"There was a child. A baby. A newborn, really."

"Was?"

"Poor choice of words on my part. Is a child," Hermione amended in a rush.

"He's quite well actually. Under the circumstances the mother's family isn't interested in custody."

"Who's got him?"

"I do," Hermione said. All the plans she had made of foisting baby Snape off on some Muggle relative went up in a sudden poof. Sitting there, across from Severus' grandmother, something fundamental shifted in her brain. Hermione looked at her closely. She was old, and she was ill; the tenancy had the look of being inhabited by someone too infirm to keep up properly. She needed help and none of the family, if she had any, cared enough to give it to her. The baby needed help, but if Liz couldn't get it there was no use even asking on the baby's behalf. Yet Hermione had it in her power to give that help and so she would, to both Liz and the baby.

There were even arithmantic principles behind altruism as a plan, even though one's good acts were frequently intersected, influenced, and acted upon by the bad and neutral acts of oneself and in the good, bad, and indifferent acts of both friends and strangers; there was merit to the argument that good acts were in ones' own ultimate self-interest.

"What's Sev in for?"

"The Murder of Albus Dumbledore, multiple terrorist acts, espionage, and seven separate counts of treason."
"It's the wizards got him, then?" Liz Snape said, shutting her eyes again.

"Yes, the wizards," Hermione answered not sure what else there was to say but wanting to give Severus' grandmother something more. "We were living as Muggles in Texas. Severus was tending bar; I think we could have gone on as we were indefinitely, but he... went to visit his father in Tennessee. Tobias turned him in to the authorities for the reward money."

The old woman's eyes shut reflexively, and her brilliant red lips curled into a snarl. "Killin' is too good for some people. Grassin' on your own son." She shook her head in disgust. "So Sev got life? Any chance of appeal?" she said, taking a sip of her tea.

"Yes, we have to convince seven witches to testify on his behalf and he'll be allowed a retrial. Considering they tried him in absentia before he was even arrested, this will give him a fighting chance at least."

"That can't be legal, can it?"

"It is among wizards," Hermione said with disgust. "Apparently with us anything is legal if the Minister for Magic says it is."

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Millie Malfoy had a dirty little secret.

Early on in her Hogwarts days, Millie had learned that if you kept your mouth shut people would ascribe no end of virtue to the ensuing silence. Millie liked to imagine she gave the impression of possessing infinite patience, but the secret was that Millie was by nature painfully impatient.

She saw her mother and granny and the Malfoys and the goblin lay the massive book on the table beside the plate with the strange witch's image.

Each turn of the pages, thin as onion skin, covered with images of witches, made Millie's skin itch as though covered with insects.

On fear of madness, Millie lifted a babe in each arm and walked out into the garden. After a quarter of an hour or perhaps it was longer, it felt like years to Millie though she'd have to be tortured to admit it, Hermione came home.

"It's Wednesday," she said reprovingly to Granger.

"It is? I completely lost track of the days of the week. Let me change and we'll be off," Granger said.

"My in-laws're in there," Millie said by way of warning. "Besides it's not like Snape hasn't seen you in trousers. Unless you'd like to spend two hours in there bickering with my father-in-law..."

"That's an exaggeration..." Hermione whinged.

"Slightly," Millie snorted, shifting the babies.

"You do have a point," Granger admitted.

"Here, take yours," Millie said, passing off baby Snape to her. "I've got a stiff shoulder from luggin' this lot about."

Granger tried to laugh at that but couldn't quite so the expression died on her lips. "I suppose he is
mine, isn't he?" she said, adjusting the baby in her arms and wrapping his blankets more tightly around him. "It's high time we introduced you to your brother."

"So how did you find Snape's Muggle Gran?"

"I'll say this, she's more like Severus than either his mother or father, but I'd forgot how quickly Muggles age. I had half-hoped she would be interested in taking the baby, but she's hardly in a position to care for herself properly, much less an infant."

Millie wasn't sure how she felt about that. She didn't like hearing Snape's gran was ill, but she was glad the baby wasn't going anywhere.

"Could you answer me somethin'?"

"If I can."

"Snapes house, why doesn't she live in Snape's house? Shouldn't it by all rights be her house?"

Granger drew a sharp breath. "It's a Muggle cultural thing, a rather old-fashioned one at that. The house came from a great uncle of Severus' father. He left the house to Severus when he was a child because Severus' father was born outside wedlock and he didn't approve of Severus' grandmother's profession."

"Muggles are strange, no denying that," Millie said as if there hardly needed to be more said on that subject.

Halfway to the apparition point at the edge of the forest, Hermione worked up the nerve to say something that occurred to her on the way back from Liz's house.

"About the other night," she started.

"Yes?"

"A dream is just a dream... even if it's shared," Hermione explained. "I once dreamed I garroted Madam Pomfrey with a yard of Chinese noodles."

Millie snorted.

"So it doesn't mean anything."

"I don't think that's right, it not mattering," Millie said peering at Hermione out of the corner of her eye with a look that was barely more than a flicker. "It means we've a way to communicate with Snape that not even the Ministry can track, and that bloody well matters; it bloody well matters a lot."

Hermione nearly stumbled. She has been so distracted by the sexual context of the dream she had entirely missed its true value.

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Severus Snape was busy feeling sorry himself when the visitors arrived. He was torn, both dreading seeing Hermione and looking forward to seeing Hermione, the way a poisoned man looks forward to an antidote. As usual she was both his savior and personal torturer. He wondered just how things had got so utterly fucked. There had been a spark there for a few months, a lack of misery he could only think to call happiness, but it slipped through his hands like water, leaving a
twist in his gut and a washed-out sensation in his chest.

He imagined it was something like what stone under a waterfall must feel, missing its own centre. What was he to do? Drink himself to madness? If he made serious work of it, he might accomplish the task in another month's time. Pin all his hope on Granger's being able to wrest justice out of the Wizengamot? That would be the day. Not in his wildest imaginings could he picture Longbottom allowing such a result. Not in his bravest dreams could he visualize a happy ending. And yet the creeping voice of Granger in the back of his mind told him that his indulgence had been just that, indulgent. But what else was he to do?

Then the doors clattered open, and the guard grunted and closed Millie and Hermione inside the cell. That first moment or two was exceedingly awkward. He and Draco backed themselves against the cold stone wall and the witches nearly clung to the bars, keeping their distance. That was when it struck him, Hermione had something in her arms. It appeared to be... but it couldn't possibly...

"What is that?" Severus didn't know if he was asking a question or not. He felt as though he'd gone from half mad to certified nutter.

"It's a who not a what," Granger said earnestly.

"That should be he's a who, shouldn't it?" Millie's brow knit.

"Yes, of course, you're right," Granger said.

"Is someone going to answer the question, or are you two going to stand there playing silly buggers?"

"Severus," Granger said, suddenly growing serious. "A great deal has happened in the last week."

"Well?" Severus said, gesturing for her to continue. "Go on."

"Your father is dead," Granger said.

"What finally got the old cunt? Botched robbery? Gross incompetence of some variety, no doubt."

"Avada Kedavra," Millie said bluntly.

Severus blinked.

"According to the Auror's report, Suzette discovered your father was the one who turned you in to the British Ministry, the two of them argued, your father struck her, and Suzette..." Hermione said, breathing in sharply. Severus knew when she was trying to be unemotional.

"So she ended it once and for all. That fails to explain the object you are presently holding in your arms," Severus said as sternly as if she were his student.

"He's your brother," she said as if that explained it all.

"My father impregnated females the way other Muggle men play weekend footie. It means nothing to me." He knew he was hissing despite his best intention to remain calm.

"No one else wanted him, and they were going to put him in the home for motherless children," she said, all the emotion suddenly flooding back into her voice.
A wave of silence passed round the cell as they all considered the glories of growing up in the loving arms of the indifferent state. Curiosity got the better of him, of course it did. It was inevitable.

"Give it here," he said, gesturing for the lump in Granger's arms.

"He's a person... not an it," she said, holding it to her bosom.

"What is it called?" he asked, attempting to concede without conceding too much.

Granger shifted uncomfortably where she stood. "He hasn't a proper official name...yet. We've been calling him 'Baby Snape',"

"He was born in Arkham, the New England wizarding prison," Millie piped up. "They've still got Dementors. His mum didn't feel up to naming him under the circumstances."

Severus held out his hands for the child once more, the fire of curiosity stoked to blazing.

Without further argument Granger handed over the infant. He was very warm.

Severus touched his tiny face... but not feverish. Simply warm. Wavy yet silken black hair lay close against his skull as though specially coiffed. His nose already gave signs of not quite being the proverbial infantile button. He stared at Severus' face with large dark eyes that seemed somehow luminous in their darkness. His skin was like gold. No doubt Granger would care for such a boy. He was shaken to realize he had been stroking the infant's cheek without intending to. He glanced up at Granger.

"Cassius," he said. "Call him Cassius."

"Have you a middle name as well?" Granger asked sagging, her back against the bars.

"Mamillius," Severus said confidently.

"Oh please, have you read that play?" she said, all but rolling her eyes.

"It means 'young prince'," he warned her.

"Shakespeare's Mamillius pines to death when he's separated from his mother," Hermione said. "If I've ever heard a bad omen, that's one."

Severus wanted to argue with her, but he couldn't quite manage it so he folded his arms across his chest.

"Solomon?" Millie interrupted from where she had cuddled up with Draco and baby Phil in the corner of the cell while he wasn't paying attention.

"What of it?" Granger asked.

"As a name, it's only fitting, and it might shame his mother's people into contributing to his introduction," Millie said.

Severus looked at her puzzled. "Stop talking nonsense, Millicent, it's unbecoming."

"Didn't you know? Suzette's family's from Jamaica by way of Ethiopia; they count themselves descended from the queen of Sheba."
"I'm not naming him after people who don't want him no matter how much money they've got," Granger said.

"It must be marvelous to be able to afford such scruples," Severus said with a sullen sneer.

Granger rolled her eyes. "I think we've rather more pressing priorities than a Jungian baby party."

Severus straightened his prison uniform as though it was a set of finely tailored robes and looked earnestly at Granger. "The boy must be properly introduced for his own sake and for ours. Not only will he be positioned within society by his introduction, you will have added to your own standing and prestige which will, in turn, be necessary if I am to have the merest whisper of a chance of ever leaving behind the stone walls of Azkaban."

"Cassius Severus Snape," Granger countered.

"Absolutely not!" Severus answered; clearly she had taken leave of her senses.

"Cassius Albus Snape?"

"Too obvious," Severus sighed.

"There's a Gryffindor mistake if I ever heard one," Draco said. He wasn't speaking much lately, and it heartened Severus to know he recalled some of his early training despite, or perhaps because of, life's travails.

"Cassius Aberforth?"

"Cassius Percival Brian Wulfric?"

"That has... possibilities," he admitted. "The Percival is bit much, but Brian Wulfric has just the right touch of..."

"Sucking up?" Granger said skeptically.

"Don't think the Old Bugger didn't appreciate a lip or two applied judiciously to his weathered arse every now and again," Severus said, feeling almost amused.

"Cassius Brian Wulfric Snape it is," Granger said, reaching out to take the boy.

Severus couldn't help himself, he reflexively held the boy closer. In response Granger wrapped her arms around both of them. For a moment it was suffocating.

"Breathe, Severus," Hermione whispered in his ear. Slowly he inhaled and the effect was immediate. He was tolerable until he got dizzy again.

"Now exhale," Hermione told him.

If he kept that up he might survive, but still he looked and he knew what he saw: a man, a woman, and an infant. It horrified him past all reason. Logically, he knew it was no different than seeing Draco and Millie and Philip, but the fact that he and Granger were involved made his knees start to tremble. Still he couldn't let go of the child. It was the most bizarre sensation.

With the oddest look on her face, Granger wiped the hair away from his eyes.

"There was nowhere else for him to go."
Severus nodded "You will care for him. You will..." He couldn't quite find the word. "You will..." He mumbled the rest.

Granger pulled them closer, tucking the baby's head under her chin. "I'll love him, Severus. But you're going to have to do something."

"What?" he whispered back.

"Pull yourself together," Granger said. "I've got one chance to get you out of here and the circumstances are getting more difficult by the day, and when I come to visit I need you to be sane. You're going to have to testify and you're going to have to be convincing. You must, do you hear me? Because you might not care what happens to yourself, Sonny Liston Snape, but I do. I'll love your brother because I love you. I'll take care of your brother because I take care of you, like you take care of me when I need you."

Severus or Sonny or whoever he was felt as though his entire being had turned to stone.

"I bleeding excelled at that, didn't I?" He couldn't keep the rancour out of his voice.

"You did. You do, when you're not drunk off your arse."

"You want me to stop drinking?" Was that what she was leading up to? If he wasn't careful, she'd have him singing with the Sally Ann next.

"I want you to stop wallowing," she said. "I want you to buck up and do what needs to be done."

Severus didn't know what to make of that. "You bring my fags, by any chance?"

Granger pulled away, the baby in her arms, easing her handbag off her shoulder. "You'll have to find them for yourself."

Passing him the beaded bag, she leaned forward and pecked a kiss beside his ear hissing, "Don't open the packet until we've gone."

It was, by his count the last packet of American cigarettes left, but the cellophane was already ripped and the golden pull tab nowhere to be seen.

"No smoking in front of the baby, Severus," she said loudly.

"Heaven fore fend, dearest," he said, feigning far more sarcasm than he felt.

She smiled warmly at him. In the words of the late unlamented Toby Snape, he didn't know whether to shit or go blind.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Chapter 30. Constancy Alone is Strange

This is the third time; I hope good luck lies in odd numbers…there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death.
Willie the Shake
Merry Wives of Windsor

Draco didn’t even know he’d been asleep until he wasn’t asleep any longer. It was as though he’d been under a Confundus charm since the aurors nabbed him and he was just waking up.

“What have you got there, Uncle Severus?” he asked as the Uncle in question peered inside his packet of cigarettes as if it held the secrets of the ages.

“Appears to be a message from Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Snape,” Uncle Severus said tilting his head and squinting one eye in an attempt to see more clearly “It seems they would like a reprise of our group’s shared reverie, though they would prefer it were the proceedings perhaps conducted in a more businesslike manner… at least that’s what I gather from the fact that they have seen fit to include a written agenda.”

“It went pretty well last time, as far as I’m concerned,” Draco admitted.

Uncle Severus blinked for a moment, as if uncertain of something “Don’t take a piss with me, boy, or do you forget I’ve seen what you’ve got in your pants and am thus keenly aware of my advantage in that regard?”

Draco rolled his eyes “That was not my intent, but if you’re going to put it that way there’s nothing you could do here that’s much a threat, is there? So what if you kill me? I’ll be out of Azkaban, won’t I?”

Severus took a step back and narrowed his eyes like the slot where you put the money in a muggle vending machine. He was jumpy and irritable, well jumpier and more irritable than usual. Draco was frankly bored of it.

“Granger is right, you need to pull yourself together. It occurs to me I might know how to help our cause,” Draco said, feeling like himself, more than that, nearly feeling like his father. He pictured himself in his father’s pale blue satin robes and smiled.

“By all means, go on,” Severus said with the sort of gesture he would extend to an adult who had piqued his interest.

“Granger’s got no idea how introduce a baby to society and I doubt even the Bullstrodes’ clout alone is enough to convince people to attend a function held by a... Muggleborn with a husband in prison. I’m sure Millie will help her, as best as she’s able, but it won’t be anything like what we need. I’m thinking I ought to I begin by writing some letters. I have some money of my own, some
my mother kept put aside for me, I’ll write asking her to release it to Granger, and I’ll ask her to help Granger and Millie with the arrangements, food, music, and the like. Then I am going to take my stationary and the quills Millie keeps leaving for me and I’m going to invite all the most powerful witches I can think of, leave no stone unturned, that sort of thing, to attend the introduction when my mother will make it worth their while to testify on our behalf,” Draco said in what he hoped was a Lucius sort of tone “Merlin know what sort of invitations Mill would put out. Probably something misspelled.”

“I take it your stationary is perfumed?” Severus asked, drawing up his mouth into an expression Draco didn’t quite understand.

“Of course, who do you think I am, a green grocer?” Draco replied.

“What does it smell of, may I ask?” Severus asked.

“Money,” Draco answered, not quite understanding Severus’s point.

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Meanwhile the candy decorations on the interior of the Bulstrode family cottage were beginning to sweat.

Whack paced the room switching her tail. Miss laid on the floor and whined. Black Alice Eye sat at the head of the table in a rough kitchen chair, her cigar nothing but a glowing black stump clenched in her teeth, a huge pyramid of ash at her feet.

At the other end of the table sat Lucius Malfoy, probably for safety sake, thought Hermione, on an armchair cushioned with extra pillows, with one shawl over his knees and another draped over his shoulders. His eyes were blazing bloodshot red.

To one side of him sat Phillipus Bulstrode, puffy and sleepy with stubble on his cheeks. On the other was Narcissa Malfoy, back ramrod straight, but hair beginning to escape from her coiffure despite all her charmwork.

Between her mother and husband sat Prunie Bulstrode on her special made extra large chair, she’d fallen asleep and was snoring loudly.

Millie sat in the chair opposite her mother, constantly jerking awake and rubbing her eyes. Under the table the Goblin chained to the book had curled up and gone to sleep. He gave every appearance of counting coins in his sleep.

Hermione had been charged with watching the babies while the rest combed through the book. She would have been offended if she weren’t aware of the premium pure bloods placed on their offspring. Still they were both asleep now, snoring in Millie’s bed like a pair of tiny pigs, so she could come attend to grown up business now. It was surprising how much less daunting babies were now that she knew what to do with them, it did not mean, however, that she didn’t have other things she’d rather be doing.

She looked at the group’s progress…they were less than halfway through The Book. Ready to take her place at the table Hermione peered into the ink of the bowl and was shocked.

“That’s not a witch,” she said “That’s Severus’s Muggle grandmother.”

Millie shook her head “And we’ve been payin’ to borrow the bloody book by the hour.”
The only thing for it was to head to Uncle Enoch’s first thing in the morning. Millie decided to bring Miss along, that dog needed out of the wood. She was already too smart by half, Millie had caught her reading twice in the past week. Uncle Severus’s dog definitely needed to breathe some fresh, unenchanted air. Chase a squirrel. Gnaw a bone and be reminded she was a dog.

Millie hated to admit it, but she hadn’t thought that one through all the way. Bringing Miss had been a terrible idea.

What was normally a happily boiling cauldron of Labrador retriever good humor had been turned into an angry ball of flying fur and foam.

“‘Where did you get that dog, Millipede? Hecate?’ Uncle Enoch said shoving the tea trolley in the general direction of Millie and Hermione as the furious ball of dog rolled through the doorway and out of sight.

Millie noted he was using his favorite tea cups, the eggshell thin ones shaped like little iridescent skulls “No, Santa Claus.”

“Minor quibble,” he said “A difference that makes no difference is no difference.”

“She’s normally very well behaved,” Granger said, wincing a bit “She and Whack are best chums.”

Uncle Enoch didn’t see fit to comment on Granger’s assertion, simply darted his eyes in the direct of the vortex of canine fury “Have you rethought my suggestion?”

“The one about naming the new baby Lark?” Millie asked, that was the only suggestion she could think of off the top of her head. It still seemed a bit insulting to the unborn in question.

Enoch scowled and rolled his eyes, as though Millie was being tiresome.

“No, Millicent, the prison break, that one,” Uncle Enoch inhaled slowly and Millie watched as the steam curled itself into his nostrils.

“No,” Millie said, that was a worse idea than naming the baby Lark, just because he thought breaking into Azkaban would be fun, or more likely finding a way to keep them all out of prison themselves when it went tits up would liven up his day, didn’t mean she had lost her mind as well.

“I would be wise not to rule it out,” Enoch said “It’s exceedingly difficult to know what turns fortunate may yet take.”

Millie suppressed the urge to roll her eyes, and in spite of herself decided to humor him, it would make him more tractable, for one thing, for another she would get what she wanted quicker. “I won’t rule it out then.” Which was a lie. What sort of nutter planned an escape from Azkaban?

“Good,” Enoch said while Granger looked anxiously toward the other room where the dogs had gone ominously quiet “I would also like to know who told Draco he could have his post sent to my address?”

“Not me,” Millie said suddenly hungry “Where are the good biscuits?”

“Eaten,” Enoch said shuffling through the papers on his desk, he was certainly in a mood, Millie
thought looking hard at his neatly trimmed...everything. Not a hair out of place, same as always, fit as the forces of darkness, same as always, he looked the same as he always did, exactly like his unnamed father or at least identical to the portrait of him at Hogwarts, she couldn’t find a single sodding clue as to what species of bug had crawled up his arse.

Then she saw it, under Enoch’s desk, was what looked like a Muggle’s high heeled shoe. She knew it was Muggle because it had a Muggle label on the inside. Why would a witch, or a wizard for that matter, wear clothing from a Muggle shop? A year ago she would never have known the difference but now she knew. She wondered if she ought to say anything. The only way she could think of for a shoe to wind up under the desk was for someone to have kicked it off while they were having an unplanned shag. Try as she might she couldn’t think of another possibility. An unplanned shag in Uncle Enoch’s lounge. Millie tried to balance the likelihood of someone else having the sheer brass to get it off in Enoch’s lounge against the likelihood of Enoch having a shag...anywhere. She was his favorite niece, the only niece he claimed, and she’d never heard of him having it off with anyone. As the only son of Black Alice Eye any witch or wizard he brought home would necessarily face a certain amount of scrutiny but he was feared and respected, surely if he’d wanted someone he’d had found someone before now.

But either way why was the shoe still in Uncle’s lounge? Either someone had left without shoes or...they were still some where about the premises.

Millie’s curiosity felt as though the desire to know definitively might do her in at any moment. Did Uncle Enoch have some sort of...girlfriend? If it was a wizard who preferred witches footwear he had tiny little feet.

Millie had so many questions. She blamed Granger. Once upon a time she wouldn’t have had any problem burying the question for a later examination.

“Accio shoe,” Millie whispered and Hermione’s eyes went wide as Enoch whirled to face them, just as the shoe came flying and Miss barked twice in announcement of Enoch’s Labradors walking in single file into the room and laying down in a neat row on the floor. Millie had never seen that before. Miss had tamed them.

“I’ve seven letters, from seven witches,” Enoch said his hands full of paper.

“Seven?” Granger asked.

“I narrowed them down,” Enoch said his eyes following the line of dogs as Miss barked and they all rolled over, one after the other, in a sort of wave of black dog “How much for the dog, Granger?”

“She’s not mine to sell, Mr. Eye,” Granger said while Millie waved the shoe.

“So the dog belongs to Severus. He trained her? It is a bitch, isn’t it?” Enoch said narrowing his eyes and effectively ignoring Millie and the shoe. She was starting feel a bit mad. Her Uncle Enoch usually gave her anything she wanted and now he wouldn’t even give her a sodding acknowledgement that she was holding a shoe that had no reason to be in his lounge under his desk.

“She’s female, yes,” Granger said betraying her anxiety in her quavering voice. Millie supposed she ought to have told Granger that Labrador Retrievers were a close second to money and power in Uncle Enoch’s book.

Millie couldn’t help but watch as Miss took six biscuits off the tea trolley and carefully laid one on
the nose of each of Uncle Enoch’s dogs. Uncle Enoch’s dogs looked from side to side, trembling a bit but unwilling to disobey their new mistress.

Apparently satisfied Miss laid down at Hermione’s feet and barked once before baring her belly to Granger for a good scratch. In unison Enoch’s dogs showed some glimmer of their usual insanity as they gobbled down their biscuits.

Uncle Enoch gave Granger a look that couldn’t have been more intense if he’d been holding one of the magnifying glasses he used for examining fine print but what ever he would have said next was lost as a very small, very round, very perfectly dressed witch stepped out of Uncle Enoch’s back rooms.

The witch strode, despite her short legs, through the lounge, pausing in front of Millie, which was when Millie realized the witch in question wasn’t wearing any shoes.

“A pleasure working with you, as always, Mr. Eye, but I must get back to my own office, despite billable hours being what they are, I have a meeting with the partners and I don’t quite trust them without an adult present,” the witch, who was dressed in a Muggle business suit, said giving Uncle Enoch a short sharp nod “Oh, I see you’ve found it, how helpful,” she said taking the shoe without giving Millie space to reply “Thank You.”

“Millicent, this is my paramour, Rowena Jones, we met while I was attempting to discover where you and the Malfoy boy had buggered off to,” Uncle Enoch said “Rowena, this is my niece and her companion, Miss Granger. Miss Granger is in possession of the most unusual Labrador.”

As if to make certain no one mistook one of the other Labradors for the topic of conversation Miss barked twice and laid her head on Granger’s foot.

“Not that sort of companion,” Granger said “We’re just friends, mostly,” as Millie wondered how many sorts of companions there were.

Enoch shrugged and kissed Rowena’s hand.

“I must be off, Enoch, you’ve no idea what sort of toads they are down at the office,” Rowena said fondly.

“No, my dear, but I know precisely what sort of toads they could be,” he said with an impish grin that Millie knew to be an earnest threat.

“Not today,” Rowena said “Perhaps next week. We’ll see how the annual employee evaluations turn out.”

“I wait with bated breath,” Enoch said as though he was imagining the mayhem to follow.

The witch threw him a kiss and was off.

Enoch was still slightly dreamy-eyed when he turned to Millie “Please don’t tell Mummy.”

“Tell her what?” Millie asked, surely at his age Uncle Enoch was allowed to have a girlfriend if he liked, even if he’d never had one as far as Millie knew.

“Your uncle’s girlfriend is a Muggle,” Granger said.

“They should have a separate word for Muggles like that,” Enoch said his eyes still focused on the woman who had left him for some sort of work meeting, and then with the smallest shake of his
head the look was gone “Here are the letters from the seven witches willing to testify on behalf of Malfoy and Snape. Each of them asks for something. I do recommend you make a gift to each of them, though some of their requests are a bit double-edged in my opinion. What do you say?”

Millie took the papers from Uncle Enoch.

“I say, thanks for the letters, and if you like this Muggle that’s good enough for me. Now that I’ve spent time among them I’ve found they’re not much different to magic folk, at least in as much as they’re all different to eachother,” Millie said with a shrug.

“You don’t know how much this means to me, Millicent,” Uncle Enoch said with a sigh of relief.

“How about 1,000 galleons? Pandora Marr wants 1,000 galleons for her testimony,” Millie said going through the letters.

Granger looked alarmed.

Uncle Enoch waved his hand dismissively, he cleaned up dog vomit with hundred galleon notes “I’ve also a canister of graveyard dust in the cupboard you can give to Arthurina Lipscomb.”

“Aurora Sinistra wants a single hair from a child, preferably male, who has never seen his father,” Millie said sharing a worried look with Granger, fully aware they were both thinking of Cassius.

“Whatever you do, give her something else,” Enoch said.

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Deep in the Enchanted Wood five extraordinarily strange and powerful beings pored over tome after tome, desperate to uncover the significance of a 70-some year old bleach blonde Muggle in a cheap polyester kimono.

An Empty cauldron sat at the ready

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Chapter 31. All Good Things And Some Bad Ones, Too
Collapse

Warning: Not Precisely Explicit But Strong Sexual References

Ipse docet quid agam, fas est et ab hoste doceri
He himself teaches what I should do; it is right to be taught by the enemy.
Ovid

In her letter Pandora Marr asked for 1000 galleons, so Millie and Hermione walked straight into her Diagon Alley shop and handed her 1000 galleons.
To Arthurina Lipscomb they brought a glass jar of graveyard dust.
To Hypatia Baptiste they presented a pair of perfectly healthy, and to Hermione’s mind, cloyingly sweet, marmalade kittens conjoined at the side of the skull. To be perfectly honest Hermione was relieved to be rid of them.
For Atlanta Rosen they procured and delivered five gallons of fresh hippogriff milk.
Hannah Abbot wanted the hair and nail parings from a vela. They got them for her but it worried Hermione. She kept her misgivings to herself, she knew what Millie would say.
Pomona Sprout wanted to have the two of them, Hermione and Millie both, over for tea and spent a long time fussing over both babies. Though she hadn’t asked for any tangible gift Hermione presented her with a lace hanky with a brilliant red apple embroidered in the corner. Millie had made it herself. Sprout had cried when they gave it to her.
The whole business left Hermione feeling of being torn between the vague notion she was caught in a fairytale and the thought that she might be starting, just starting to understand Pureblood culture. It was an overture on the part of the seven to be willing to accept a gift and incur a debt to Hermione and Millie. Essentially each gift made for a relationship. An obligation.

They stopped by to see McGonagall, but she refused to name a gift, or even receive any token “No, You’ll owe me,” she said.
In her letter Aurora Sinistra had asked for a single hair from a child, preferably male, who had never seen his father. Millie gave her 1000 galleons from Enoch Eye’s coffers. Sinistra had scowled dramatically, but in the end she took the money.
All the while Black Alice and Prunie Bulstrode cooked the days away, preparing for Cassius’s introduction. According to the plates he would someday marry Millie’s daughter, it wouldn’t do for him to make a poor showing.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt would have come anyway, at least he thought he would have come anyway. Old time introductions were rare these days and some of the old ways deserved to be kept up. There had been perhaps 6 in all of the British Isles so far this year.
That was the trouble. Some traditions deserved to be continued and some didn’t, of course no one agreed which traditions fell into which camp. And then there was the solid majority who were ready to wipe all things old-fashioned off the map. Their trouble was most of them had no idea what the old ways even were.
So Kingsley liked to think, even if the child in question hadn’t been the brother of Severus Snape, improbably on his Muggle father’s side, and a distant cousin of his own on the distaff, he still would have come to the enchanted wood to accept him into magical society, even if he didn’t have something very important to tell Hermione Granger. Or Hermione Snape depending on who you spoke to.

As the music from the cauldron rang out something very old took over and quite frankly he would have joined the dance for anyone.

The turnout was better than he expected, he hadn’t reckoned on more than twenty, but he counted a bit over a hundred in attendance when Hermione laid out the boy’s fund. Not exactly impressive, but not shameful either, as these things went. Older, but the Pureblood crowd did tend to run older. A ruby egg winked at the top of the pile.

Kingsley watched as Millicent Malfoy nee Bulstrode and Black Alice Eye entered the arena shoulder to shoulder but their gazes straight ahead, neither sparing the other so much as a glance.

The Mother and the Crone, but looking around this way of life was dying, drop by drop, there was no maiden here.

Kingsley dropped his robe and entered the circle. Taking the ruby egg in his fist he extended his arms and took the boy from Black Alice, kissing his head as he danced him close to the fire. The boy had begun in murder, but that was hardly his fault, and he was far from the first. He kissed his head again and raised him up above his head to be admired. That’s what a boy like this deserved, admiration, adoration, and get the grandmums thinking now what sort of blood he’d bring to the family.

Half calculated, half inspired, Kingsley was the boy Cassius’s godfather now and the bond went both ways. He was a fine little chap and Kingsley had officially committed to help him grow into a fine wizard.

He was honor bound to aid the family in whatever way necessary since he was part of the family now. It was no longer disloyalty to let Granger in on Longbottom’s plan. Kingsley was drenched in sweat but he had no idea if it was from dancing too close to the fire or from knowledge of what he was about to do.

Millie Malfoy stomped and the ground shook with her pregnant weight, her white haired baby son naked in her arms. He found himself thinking, as a back-up plan of course, she could do worse than him as a second husband. He might be mixed blood, but he respected the old ways more than most. On reflex he looked at the ground respectfully, letting her know he recognized the power of her gaze. Not long enough to indicate true humility, simply to plant a seed in her mind.

His eyes welled up as Minerva McGonagall stepped in rhythm to the cauldron’s ringing, sweat flying, a coin between two fingers, and took the boy from him. He found he didn’t want to leave the boy or the dancing.

He could dance more later, for now he needed to speak to Hermione.

His robes felt entirely too hot when he put them on. He drank four glasses of punch before he dipped one for Granger and one for Narcissa who was sitting uncomfortably beside her.

It didn’t take long to reach her, like all mothers at these things, sitting nervously while her baby passed from hand to hand.

“Mrs. Malfoy, Mrs. Snape,” He said offering each witch her cup.

The food and the drink was exactly what you would expect from Black Alice and her kin; unassailably delicious and inarguably, down to the smallest crumb, tinged with magic.

“Auror Shacklebolt,” Narcissa said.

“Hermione informs me you protected my daughter-in-law and unborn grandchild from the other aurors during my son’s arrest,” Narcissa said coolly, with a sort of grudging gratitude. The fact that thanks to Kingsley her son was now in Azkaban remained unspoken but hung over them like a cloud. “We’re family, now,” Kingsley said, flashing her the egg once the punch was safely in her hand.

To her credit Hermione only choked a bit.

“How droll,” Narcissa said with an expression she had surely picked up from her husband “You are aware, of course, that Severus is our Draco’s godfather, as dear Hermione is godmother to our beloved Phillipus.” She said this as though she was working very hard on thinking of Hermione as anything close to dear.

“I know, Narcissa,” was all Kingsley said. He knew what it meant and who he had allied himself with. The humor of it was at the present moment they seemed to be in the moral right, or at least less wrong than Longbottom.

“Oh, thank you, Kingsley,” Hermione said and actually took his hands in hers. She was still the same girl she’d always been, too straight forward and effusive to ever blend into pureblood society. He liked that about her, that she remained herself, still he didn’t know how much good it did her.

Careful to keep his expression casual Kingsley cast a silencio over the three of them. “As your boy’s godfather,” Kingsley said choosing his words with all the care he had in him “I feel compelled to tell you…the Minister’s offer of a trial is a trap. Longbottom’s located a source who has put him in contact with Dementors. If Snape and Longbottom are tried I guarantee they will be found guilty, and if the Minister has anything to say about it after the trial they will be kissed.”

Narcissa fumed “Typical.”

“Our first move should be…” Hermione started but Kingsley held up his hand.

“My first loyalty is to Cassius and his family but I am still an auror, it would be best if you kept your plans to yourself,” Kingsley reminded her.

“Yes, of course,” Hermione said “I understand.”

Kingsley knew she did, he’d worked beside her for two years. “If you don’t mind I’d like to leave my robes here. I did come to dance, afterall,” Kingsley said folding his robes neatly and setting the egg on top as a notice to all comers who had taken responsibility for the upbringing for the new wizard.

Near the fire he could see Millie Malfoy, both her boy and Hermione’s in her arms.

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Severus managed to brew his wine just in time to be clued in on the plan, all the bits that Millie and Hermione felt were pertinent on their end, at least. Under the circumstances time and efficiency were of the essence. Hermione accused Severus of pouting a bit because he wanted a blow job, as well. Draco on the other hand felt they were both rather stoic, all things considered, about the lack of sexual release. Millie said Draco’s opinion didn’t count.

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Millie thought some place with “cunt” in the name would be nicer, but the cuntal tendency was a ratty old tip.

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Hermione was beginning to wonder why she ever bothered to have expectations in the first place if they were never going to bother being met. Life seemed intent on surprising her in the most inconvenient ways.

That being said it shouldn’t have phased her one bit that the instant the lot of them apparated into Liz Snape’s flat Liz started shouting angrily at Lucius Malfoy.

“Owww You! I shoulda known you had summat to do with Sonny bein’ in t’ nick,” it seemed that rage thickened Liz’s accent considerably and robbed her of either the ability or the desire to speak in a formal register.

“Madam,” Lucius said nostrils flaring.

Liz Snape remained undaunted, and pointed one long bony finger at Millie’s father-in-law, it was easier for Hermione if she thought of the Malfoys that way, as Phil’s grandparents and Millie’s in-laws, rather than Voldemort’s followers who’d tried to kill her more than once.

“You lot was always talkin’ him into doin’ summat stupid,” Liz said dropping her hands to her hips and taking on a voice Hermione could only describe as mockery of all things posh “Oh Sev…lets all drop fuck ton of wizardy LSD or mescaline or some shit, dress up like boogey men, and set the neighbors wash afire.”

“I was in no way involved in that particular incident. That lies squarely on the shoulders of Regulus Black,” Lucius said archly.

“That particular one wasn’t his highness,” Liz said airily “The other seven hundred forty two times you lot got Sev’rus in a fix Lord Lah’di’dah might’a had summat to do with.”

“We befriended Severus when he was an outcast among Muggles and Wizards alike. My friends and I took him to our bosoms when his own blood relations were unconcerned about his basic welfare,” Lucius snarled.

“I never allowed no one to raise a hand to that boy in my presence,” Liz shouted, rattling her zimmer frame.

“And out of it? You know as well as I do there are dogs better off than Severus was in the home of his so-called parents,” Lucius screamed right back.

“He wouldn’t be in prison today if it weren’t for you and your friends,” Liz bellowed.

“Stop it, Stop it, stop it,” Hermione shouted, she couldn’t stand any more and she didn’t want to imagine where further escalation might lead.

“We didn’t come here to assign blame,” she said straightening her blouse “The time for that is long since past. The reason we’re here, all of us,” She pointed out each member of the party ‘Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, My friend Millie, she’s married to the Malfoy’s son Draco, and he’s in jail with Severus, Millie’s Mum, Prunie and Prunie’s mum, Alice, is that, well, we thought we had a chance for Severus and Draco to be found innocent, but it turns out it’s all a trap. The Minister for Magic wants to have their souls sucked out their bodies.”

“You’re planning a prison break, aren’t you?” Liz said, the asking was rhetorical.
Hermione nodded she was surprised by a voice behind her.

“My divination says you are the key to our success,” it was Black Alice.

“My? Fucking Hell! We’re all buggered, then, the doctors give me six month with these lungs,” Liz said “Be a dear and hand me me fags.”

Hermione didn’t think she ought to, not really. But she didn’t think she ought to say “no” to Severus’s granny either. It was a conundrum. Before she could puzzle out an answer Black Alice came round the dining table, lit a cigarette for Liz and an awful black cigar for herself.

“I’ve an idea about that…” Alice said gravely.

Hermione hadn’t been privy to this part, and as Black Alice explained and Narcissa blanched, whiter than white, she understood exactly why. Unfortunately she had no better plan to offer.

Liz Snape and Lucius Malfoy would give up their lives and their freedom for Severus and Draco.

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All in all there were worse things than setting off on the North Sea during the worst storm in the last 20 years. Phil and Cassius were warm and dry and unsinkable thanks to her best spell work and there were advantages to not being able to see Azkaban on the horizon gliding toward them like a dementor.

The rain was coming too hard to worry over anything but keeping the rudder steady and her hand over Granger’s as they focused on the Finder and aimed the boat at Azkaban. It also meant she didn’t have to listen to any fighting. It was a good thing for all concerned that Lucius Malfoy and Snape’s Muggle Granny would be locked up soon, or they might do each other some damage. Too bad they were being locked up together.

Logically she knew Mrs. Snape was an elderly Muggle and ought to be the vulnerable one but somehow her gut argued that her father-in-law was the one in danger. Muggle or no Lizzie Snape seemed the sort who could lay waste to whole palaces full of Nouveau Riche power brokers armed with nothing more than the cap from one of Granger’s Biros. Tough old Bird, Millie thought admiringly. Millie felt a strange sort of gratitude to the old woman. Snape had done his best to teach sixteen years worth of Slytherins how to get on in a world where they were an increasing minority. Millie got the idea that his most useful advice came straight out of the old bag’s mouth. It made her an ancestor of sorts and as such due respect.

Still that didn’t mean Millie wanted to listen to her trade insults and threats with Lucius Malfoy, it only distracted from the matter at hand.

As Mrs. Snape and Mr. Malfoy bickered despite the crashing waves and howling wind, not to mention the pounding sheets of rain, it occurred to Millie that neither one could hear the other, they just swore on and on oblivious, arguing with what they imagined the other was saying, and she didn’t know whether it was bellyachingly funny or just bloody sickening.

Either way her stomach hurt.

She felt her gorge start to rise but willed it back down. She was in charge here and she wasn’t about to get sea sick in the middle of rescuing her husband.

Fuckin’ Draco. She’d known this was going to happen. Not pregnant with one babe and another babe in arms as she rowed toward Azkaban to rescue Draco specifically but something bloody inconvenient. She should have killed him herself when she was lucky enough to have both the chance and the inclination. In future she would keep his leash short enough that he’d never have
the opportunity to get into trouble like this again. The wanker.

She’d have a baby every other year just to make sure he spent the rest of his natural life up to his elbows in shit. She’d never felt so angry or so fearful in her life, as soon as Draco was safe in her arms she was going to strangle him with her bare hands.

In the meantime she’d hold the rudder true and ignore the tightening of her belly. It seemed the height of dunderheaded shitforbrains thinking to bring one baby along for something like this, let alone two, but she had no choice.

They would have to leave the country as soon Draco and Severus were out of gaol. She couldn’t exactly leave Phil waiting in the boat with the brooms until the prisoners had been sprung, could she? Five months old seemed like a tender age, even for a Malfoy, to take part in his first criminal act but it couldn’t be helped, he wasn’t exactly independent at this point. Draco would probably enjoy telling the story of how little Phil helped break him out of Azkaban for years to come. The arse.

She was surprised by a jolt that nearly sent her tumbling backwards.

“We’re there,” Granger said, she must have screamed it in order to be heard over the commotion.

Millie was a good flyer, always had been, but it was all she could do to get her broom up the face of the cliff and to the portcullis without smashing herself, her baby, and her unborn to bits. The wind and rain forced her back so hard it felt like blows, pelting down as she pushed on. She was glad she’d trusted Granger to carry Snape’s Granny on her broom, despite her lack of flight experience. She was even more glad she had Mr. Malfoy to trust with Phil and Cassius, they were the future of wizard-kind and there was no way he’d let harm come to that. Water streamed down her face, her eyes smarting from the wind and salt water.

Once they were all accounted for, Granger took Cassius, she took Phil and helped strap the brooms to Granger’s back.

“When we’re inside, I don’t care who said what to who you’re both of you got to shut the fuck up or this is all for naught,” Millie yelled.

“Understood,” Mr. Malfoy said through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Snape nodded sharply in a way that showed no matter how much of a wanker she thought Lucius Malfoy was she wasn’t going to let it get in the way of springing her grandson.

Granger looked a right fright. Her hair had been whipped into little swirls and knots and strange twists. Like a Gorgon. On second thought it suited her.

It was a good thing the old Dementors were gone and the new one hadn’t arrived yet, for one thing Millie would never have brought Baby Phil to a prison full of Dementors. That was one line Millie could not, as a self-respecting mum, cross. And for another not one of them could pass for a Dementor, not even on their worst day. Well perhaps Mrs. Snape.

The air of sorrow over the jagged stony fortress did not feel entirely natural. Surely some bit of Dementor misery hung on, with nowhere else to go. Still it was a good thing the new guards took their wardrobe cues from the old moldies. The hood and loose black robes were big enough to hide a cauldron under, or, as in Millie’s case a pregnant belly and an infant to boot.
The troop of them stepped down the cold stone corridor, each of them trying, in their own way, not to sound like they were part of a prison break. It was not the right block of cells. They turned left twice. That wasn’t it either.

And neither was the next row.

They walked on in silence, their hoods pulled forward. Inside Millie’s skin the new baby turned and in her robe Phil made a cooing noise. Looking down into her robe she could see him smiling at the new strange thing mummy was up to. Millie wondered if it was as loud as it seemed to her ears. Was it possible to smile loudly? As they turned into what promised to be yet another fruitless turn she stopped short. There before her loomed a hooded figure silhouetted in the dim light tapping his wand against his thigh in the dim light.

Bugger.
And just beyond him a flash of pale hair inside the iron bars. Draco.

Hermione had been mentally prepared for a good many things, she was not prepared to have Neville Longbottom waiting for her when she got to Severus’ cell. Was she going to be forced to hex Neville? Would anything short of death stop him? While Hermione thought she might have it in her to kill Neville in order to set Severus free she bloody well hoped it didn’t come to that. Surely there was a way around duty and honor and loyalty that would keep everyone safe and sane.

She wasn’t ashamed to be thankful she’d had these last few months to learn a thing or two about Slytherin thinking.

When in doubt be polite.

“Hello, Neville,” she said dropping back her hood. She tried not to stare over his shoulder too hard at Draco pressing his face against the bars, fairly straining to get to Millie, Severus, looming behind him, arms folded against his chest. Severus’ mouth was closed but Draco seemed to be speaking. At least his mouth was moving, but no sound seemed to be forthcoming. Neville must have cast a selective silencing spell.

“Hello, Hermione,” Neville said as casually as if it were a social visit “Nice to see you again.”

“I brought friends,” Hermione said, as brightly as she was able, she would ignore the twisting in her chest simply because there was too much riding on keeping her spine straight and her manners light to do otherwise.

“I’d offer you tea but I don’t imagine you’re interested in drinking after me,” Neville said almost imperceptibly more grim as he brandished the never-ending-thermos she’d given him two Christmases ago “I think I know some of your friends but would you care to make introductions?”

“I believe you’ve met Mr. Malfoy “ Hermione didn’t mention she and Neville were on the same side then, fighting against Malfoy in the Ministry “You know Millie, too , I believe. Her name was Bulstrode when we were at school.”

Millie was never dainty but with a pregnant belly as well as a baby under her robes she cut a decidedly odd figure, nearly as wide as she was tall.

Hermione and Neville both stared at her robe covered shape.

Hermione was as surprised as Neville to see a puddle of water form on the floor beneath Millie.
“I’m buggered,” Millie hissed, her knees buckling.

Hermione put her arms around Millie, doing her best to keep Millie from sliding onto the stone floor.

“What the fuck?” Neville said more surprised than any of them.

Trust Lucius Malfoy to leap in “Perhaps it is not clear that my daughter-in-law is in labor.”

“As in giving birth?” Neville said, his eyes wide.

Hermione thought Neville was going to faint when he saw Liz Snape take Baby Phil from where he was strapped to Millie’s chest.

“You brought a baby to Azkaban?” Neville asked looking like he was going to vomit any minute. Hermione was glad Cassius was still under her robe.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Millie said, her jaw clenched, “It was that or leave his daddy to rot.”

“How long’s it been goin’ on?” Liz Snape said, joggling Phil on one hip.

“Started last night but I thought it was the liver and onions,” Millie said to Liz Snape.

“Is that Black Alice?” Neville asked with a shudder.

“Not even close,” Hermione said keeping one ear to what Millie was saying “It’s Severus’ Muggle grandmother.”

“And here I mistook that fer a naturally sunny disposition.” Liz Snape said snidely.

“If it’s any consolation I’ve lived with her since last August and didn’t notice any difference,” Hermione said.

“That’s Severus Snape’s granny?” Neville said in a tone of voice suggested his potion master’s grandmother might be a bit scarier than Black Alice, in his mind anyway.


Neville blinked “Excuse me?”

“This girl’s been in labor since last night. She needs a lie down,” Liz Snape said briskly.

Millie made a muffled noise, half-grunt half-groan but from her it was a shriek.

“For fuck’s sake, Millie, why didn’t you say anything?” Hermione losing her grasp on her temper. She could hardly have imagined an escape going off worse.

“I thought it was the bleeding liver and onions!” Millie bellowed.

Neville stepped back fumbling with his pockets and did as he was commanded, allowing them into an empty cell beside the one where Draco and Severus were housed.

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It was at this point that Millie’s perception of things started to get a bit dodgy.

Her knees, which had been threatening to give way since her water broke, finally won out against her will and someone, she thought it was Mr. Malfoy, barely managed to catch her in time.
Then she was laid out on a pile of scratchy robes like cakes on the cooling board. At first she could feel the cold floor through the lumpy layers of the robes under her but soon all she knew was pain.

Her last coherent thought was that if Granger was going to let everyone gape at her cunt like that the least she could do was sell tickets.

Also she wanted Draco so bad she could taste it and as soon as he was in arms reach she was going to wallop him.

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Hermione Granger had studied a great many things but childbirth was something of a blind spot. That was the sort of thing she preferred to leave to people who were interested in it.

It seemed jinxed. As if studying up might make it happened to her, despite any potion she took. All things considered it wasn’t completely irrational on her part.

She bolstered herself, though, with a thought. Walking upright had buggered human females when it came to childbirth, that was an established fact. However bipedalism didn’t mean women didn’t have babies on their own all the time. She and Millie and every other homo sapiens sapiens on Earth were descended from upright walking females who’d managed to give birth, some repeatedly, before the advent of modern midwifery.

Somewhere in the back of her mind her mother’s voice pointed out the large numbers who no doubt died in the process.

Hermione steeled herself, one hand absentmindedly stroking Cassius’s perfect waves of hair. She was neither midwife nor mediwitch but she could help Millie. She’d done many difficult things in her life for the people she cared for, she could do this as well.

Steep learning curves were her forte, Cassius could attest to that.

And once this baby was delivered she would get them out of Azkaban, all of them. She didn’t want to hurt Neville but if her hand was forced she would.

Lucius Malfoy held Millie’s hand as she looked between Millie’s legs. Hermione was glad for him, and had just enough spare humour to find it amusing.

Draco and Severus both had moved to the press themselves against the bars closest to Millie.

As for Millie herself not so much as a word passed beyond her gritted teeth.

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Neville sat beside Snape’s Grandmother on the bed too narrow to lay Bulstrode.

“So who are you when you’re at home?” Teetering old woman asked the dough soft saviour of the wizarding world.

“Ne…Ne…Neville Longbottom ,” he said suddenly afflicted with the stammer he thought he’d left behind when he was fifteen “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself earlier, Mrs. Snape.”

“I’m not Mrs. Snape,” she said stretching her long legs out before her, even as she held Baby Malfoy tight, ” I’ve never been married a day in me life. Call me Liz, I’m a bachelor girl.”
“Pleased to meet you, Liz,” he said.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Liz answered looking at him with squinty blue eyes.

“Is that Malfoy’s baby, then?” Neville asked.

“That’s what they tell me,” Liz Snape said, wiping the drool from the corner of baby’s mouth.

“So,” Neville said uncomfortably “What was the plan? How were you going to get them out?”

Liz Snape looked at him skeptically.

“There’s not much point holding out now,” Neville went on, with a shrug he gestured to Millie lying on the floor and then at himself and his wand.

“Me and the platinum blonde arsehole over there were ‘sposed to take their places. Hermione came up with some kind of potion that’s ‘sposed to turn us into ‘em so no one could tell the difference,” Liz Snape said.

“Polyjuice only lasts an hour,” Neville said, off hand.

At that Lucius saw fit to set the record straight “But it is permanent if one dies while the potion is still in effect.”

“You were going to take their places and commit suicide,” Neville repeated, his forehead wrinkled.

“I thought I said that,” Liz said rocking baby.

Neville looked astonished but didn’t reply.

“I’m an old woman. I haven’t got too long left anyhow and Mr. Fancypants should’ve been here anyway so what’s the harm if ours go free?” Liz said.

“Snape is a murderer,” Neville said.

“And a right wanker, too, when he thinks he’s been slighted, but that’s beside the point,” Liz said her mouth tight “Innit?”

Neville shrugged.

“I could be wrong but the way I heard Sonny boy was a soldier like, doin’ what his general ordered. What landed him in here wasn’t crime so much as bein’ an awkward sod,” she said.

Neville swallowed. Snape was, as far as he knew, an awful person. The thought that he might, despite being terrible, have been following Dumbledore’s orders meant only one thing to Neville; Snape should go free. Still. A granny’s word wasn’t exactly ironclad proof, was it?

The whole thing was a bit of a moral jumble. Letting prisoners free was wrong but, all in all, less wrong than holding an innocent wizard for murder. He’d take his own granny’s word over anyone’s and while Snape’s gran was hardly Augusta Longbottom, she wasn’t yesterday’s kippers either.

The skin was different but the spine was unnervingly familiar. It was also clear she wasn’t blind to her grandson’s faults. She’d called Snape a wanker in the same tone his own Gran told Neville to “grow up and stop wibbling”.

“Do you think Snape is innocent, Hermione?” he asked, impulsively.
“Define innocent,” Granger said, never taking her eyes off Bulstrodes privates, which was unnerving.

On his side of the bars Snape mouthed something Neville chose to ignore.

“Does he belong in here?” Neville asked.

“If Severus belongs in Azkaban so does every other member of the Order who killed because Dumbledore suggested it, myself included,” Hermione said.

Neville thought about that one for a bit, picturing them locked up in a neat row, Mrs. Weasley at the corner cell.

“So why is Snape such a prick?” he asked Liz Snape at long last.

“Why are you such a tosser?” she shot back.

“I asked first,” Neville said.

“Poor parentin’ I imagine,” she said sharply ”His dad, My boy Toby, is and was as useless as teats on a boar hog; a drunk, wife beating thief with no concern for anyone but himself. And that mother of his, witch or no, she had her head so far up Toby’s arse, most people give a spaniel more mind than either one of them gave Sonny. Toby is probably my fault. I’ll be livin’ with that mistake for the rest of my days. Mind you, I was all of fourteen when I had him.”

“Didn’t you have a contraceptus?” Neville said goggle eyed.

“Muggle, Remember?” Liz Snape said.

“Oh, I forgot,” Neville turned the things she’d said over in his head, but something didn’t add up “You were young, but you still had your family to help you.”

Liz Snape laughed, and it wasn’t pleasant “I had shit is what I had. Me mum died when I was eight. Dad tossed me out on me arse as soon he figured out I was up the duff. I walked nineteen mile to town from our farm and the only ones who took pity on me there was the whores.

“I had to keep body and spirit together some way, didn’t I, but when my father come to town and seen me with a couple of girls on the corner he beat me so bad me and Toby both come close to dyin’ ,” Liz Snape said, the wrinkles in her face looking like they had been set in stone.

“Your father hit you? When you were pregnant?” Neville couldn’t believe it, it argued against all the claims he’d heard that Muggles weren’t as bad as most Purebloods said.

“And kicked,” Liz Snape said, nodding” That’s why Toby came at seven months. Me dad beat him out of me.”

“And Toby hit Snape, I mean, Severus?” Neville said.

“Never in my presence,” Liz said fiercely “He wouldn’t dare.”

“But out of it?” Neville asked.

“Out of it…. I reckon he gave Sonny and Eileen both the back of his hand whenever the mood was on him,”

“Did you hit Toby?” Neville asked trying to piece it all together.
“I didn’t but there were them that did,” Liz said closing her eyes.

“Who?” Neville asked.

“A pimp or two,” Liz said caressing the baby’s tiny finger “a few customers."

“What’s a pimp?” Neville asked, because it wasn’t a word he’d ever heard before.

“You people do live in a different world, don’t you? A pimp, is a fella who, well he takes a cut of a whore’s earnin’s,”

“Why does the horse give it to him?” he said, he wasn’t aware Muggles paid animals anything at all. Hermione always did claim they were morally superior.

“Cause she hasn’t to? Doesn’t she?” Liz Snape said.

“Why does she have to?” Neville asked.

“Because he’s bigger and stronger and he’ll beat her arse half to death if she don’t, and sometimes even if she does,” Liz Snape said, as if it were obvious, which it wasn’t to Neville.

“The magical world isn’t like that,” Neville said trying piece it together and picture a Muggle man bigger and stronger than a horse, they’d have to be almost as big as Hagrid. Perhaps it wasn’t that kind of horse.

“So I gather,” Liz Snape said.

“What’s a horse anyway? It sounds like some kind of code. Or did you live in a stable?” Neville asked.

“‘Scuse me?” Liz Snape said, looking as puzzled as he was.

“You said the horse took you in,” Neville said.


“What’s that?” Neville asked, Hogwarts needed better classes on Muggles.

She looked at him as though he was simple, he recognized the expression.

“A whore is a woman,” Liz said slowly “A Muggle woman who has sex with men for money.”

Neville thought about it. He supposed, if one was a Muggle and weren’t worried about having one’s magic drained away it made a sort of sense. Still it seemed odd that the woman got the sex and the money both when everyone knew females had naturally stronger desire. He looked at Snape’s gran in light of what he was able to put together. He knew Muggle women didn’t gain power from sex the same way witches did but he found himself awed just the same trying to imagine wizards paying a witch to take their power and what such a witch would be like. Liz Snape was a venerable Muggle indeed. He wondered how much stronger she’d be if she had a daughter instead of a son. Did it work the same way for Muggles it did for witches; with a daughter worth seven sons?

“I don’t think the magical world has anything like that,” he said, finally.

“Good for them,” Liz Snape said in a bitter way that reminded him of nothing so much as her grandson.
Neville shuddered, silently agreeing with her as he imagined armies of Black Alices, wizards strewn like empty husks in their wake.

“DeathEaters hexed my mum and dad,” Neville said presently.

“What’s that?” Liz asked.

“You asked why I’m such as tosser. When I was a baby DeathEaters, you know, Voldemort’s followers, hexed my parent until they went mad. I go see them once a week in hospital and they haven’t recognized me yet,” he said “That’s why I’m such a tosser.”

Liz slowly raised her head to look him in the eye “Was Sonny one of them that done it?”

“No,” Neville shook his head” No, her name was LeStrange, Bellatrix Lestrange. She was Draco’s Aunt.” He shook his head in the direction of the bars ” His mother’s sister.”

“You lock her up in here some place, too?” Liz Snape asked.

“No, I killed her,” he said.

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It was bad enough listening, helpless, as Liz turned his entire family history inside out for public inspection but it was a fresh hell indeed where Severus Snape was forced to sit, less than two meters away while Longbottom tried to give his grandmother a pull.

There was no doubt that was precisely what he was doing. He sat thigh by thigh with her, patted her knee repeatedly, gazed into her eyes, while Bulstrode labored practically at his feet. The perverse little shit.

He didn’t know which to look away from, Longbottom getting friendly with his granny or a witch he’d bathed as a child with her legs spreading wide enough for him to see bloody sodding Christmas. Good god, there was something coming out.

Millie’s belly, cunt, and sphincter bulged as though she were about to be ripped open from stem to stern. Severus gazed on in horror as a sound like the roar of a minotaur rent the air. A moment later the blood speckled dome of a head emerged far enough that a pair of eerily aware blue eyes were able to look dead at him. He’d never been sized up by anyone with labia wrapped around their ears before.

Millie growled again. Something like that would have made him shit his pants if he’d heard in a dark alley but it didn’t seem to be for effect alone because the rest of the baby slipped out of Millie in one quick greasy push.

The umbilical cord reminded him of intestines.

A witch then. Draco had sired a witch on one of the most dangerous witches of his generation.

Now the power of Black Alice’s granddaughter was increased seven-fold.
He wondered if the old bitch knew. Although he was robbed of the power of sound he laughed silently. Of course the old bitch knew. Probably knew as soon as it was conceived.

It was the first real glimmer of hope he’d had all day. Perhaps Black Alice would come cackling and swooping to the rescue.
Or Millie, once she was recovered from the ordeal of childbirth, would live up to her reputation as a terror and finish what she started.

Or perhaps Longbottom would decide to simply let them all go free.

That was a good one.

Perhaps he had gone mad from Azkaban.

Severus Snape sat down on the cold stone floor of his cell and laughed more.

Liz Snape didn’t give much to indicate surprise but she was perfectly aware how the young fella was looking at her. The young fella who was all that stood between them and freedom.

An ol’ girl like her didn’t have to be a retired whore to add up a situation like that. Still there was a way to approach a first timer, so as to avoid scarin’ ‘em off their feed and makin’ things worse than they was to begin with. There was a subtle science to whorin’.

Sure any dunderhead with a fanny could sell it on the corner but it took a certain something to make it to sixty-nine on nothin’ but brains, a lucky horse now and again, and the piece of meat between your legs.

Liz moved closer to the young fella’, it wasn’t what she expectin’ at her age but she’d be damned if she couldn’t improvise. Lookin’ innocently in the opposite direction she slipped her hand under his robe.

No doubt about it. She’d felt limper flag poles.

Some things not even Severus Snape could laugh about, his granny giving Longbottom a handjob in the darkest recesses of Azkaban was one of them. If it weren’t for the silencing spell he would have screamed himself hoarse.

“Liz Snape, will you marry me?” the young fella said, fairly on the brink of tears as Liz wiped the cum with her handkerchief.

Liz was surprised but in her life quick thinking had been an important skill “What for?”

The young fella cleared his throat “Clearly,” then he cleared it again “Clearly, you are the most venerable and powerful Muggle I have ever seen or heard of, I want you for my wife. I want to be your husband, you know, those two things.”

“You got a job?” Liz asked, it seemed like the obvious first question. Prison or not she could be flint well enough on her own.

“I’m, I’m Minister for Magic. Ask anyone, they’ll tell you, and I’ve got a bit of an inheritance,” the young fella said, getting more handsome by the minute. Sure he’d been planning revenge on Severus like a twat but he was young and male, he could be molded a bit.

“Look, I’ll not dance around the question; I’ve two grandsons I’m concerned with. Severus and
Cassius. I want Severus out of the nick and Cassius is just a little ‘un. I’d like him to grow up in a proper family, with a proper father, one who’ll give him his name. Love and money, too, all of it,” Liz laid it all out for him.

The young fella’s eyes went wide “You mean, you mean, you want me to adopt him? You’d let me to adopt your grandson? Not Snape, I mean, not Severus, but the baby? You’d let me adopt the baby? This is the greatest day of my life. Of course I’ll let Malfoy and Snape free. I mean Severus, Severus. I’m minister for Magic, I can pardon them too if you like. Anything for you, Liz, darling, anything,” the young fella said “I can’t believe it, I’m going to be a husband and a father, and I haven’t lost my powers.”

Seeing the young wizard so beside himself sobered Liz a bit, she had to be honest “I oughtta tell you, though, I’m dyin’.”

The young wizard looked at her earnestly “No, you’re not, not for a good long while.

Chapter End Notes

For Lora
Seven Preposterous Things: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seven Preposterous Things : Epilogue

His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern Tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally

-Thomas Hardy

Severus Snape stood, once again lean but now well washed and clearly cared for. His clothes were an amalgam of his old and new uniforms. His trousers were tight and black with silver buttons running from his ankle bone to his bony hips. His leather jacket, which had seemed seedy to Hermione at first now seemed terribly authentic. The only thing that was truly new, the thing that added the element of chaos to the mix was the electric guitar slung across his back. It made her think of a gun fighter in an old muggle film for some reason. Nevermind that it wasn’t plugged in. Severus had worked out that he needn’t bother with electricity. He was a wizard after all.

His hair? Well Severus’ eternally greasy hair, that looked horrid, lank, and dirty when he tried to style it after Lucius Malfoy was naturally suited to being combed into a pompadour. It had been sheer bloody-mindedness that he kept at the other style so long.

“What if the audience doesn’t like me? What if I’m absolute shite?” he said nervously lighting a cigarette.

“They’ll love you. They have to. And you know you’re not ‘shite’,” Hermione said carefully turning up the collar on his jacket.

“They do not ‘have to love me’ my own mother doesn’t even love me and that’s very nearly a requirement for the post,” he inhaled sharply “People dislike me on a personal basis with shocking regularity so they certainly are capable of disliking me on stage en masse, it has been shown.”

“Normally, on a one-to-one basis, where you’re apt to insult people, I would tend to agree with you but you’re very good at this, they’ll be putty in your hands,” she tried to encourage him.

“There is that,” he said preening a bit “but that’s no guarantee.”

“You deserve it,” she said fiercely but this was the wrong tactic in this particular situation.

“What utterly meaningless claptrap,” he said smoke curling from his nostrils like a dragon “I’ve never got a thing I deserved in my thrice acurse’d life. In fact deserving a thing is practically a bleeding guarantee I’m not to get it.”

Hermione folded her arms across her chest and tried another tactic, brutal honesty and repetition.
“People dislike you personally because you’re incredibly rude and off putting but where music and or magic are concerned you’re magnificent,” she said.

“You think so?” Severus asked.

“Not even a question,” Hermione said “Now go play for your supper.” She swatted his bum.

“Easy for you to say, you have a profession,” Severus said clearly stalling.

Since they’d immigrated to magical California, her position as Enoch Eye’s overseas representative had proven both interesting and rewarding. It was a good fit and it thrilled Severus a bit to be married to, as he put it, “a terrifying attorney.”

Talpa, aside from being the oldest Magical city on the continent, was still far less stodgy than Hogsmeade and good place for Severus to start his musical career. What the first European wizards had thought of as a remote mountain hide away had been a Magical hub for Native wizards before Spanish wizards even knew the continent existed. It was a Magical hub still. Sooner or later everyone in California came to Talpa.

“Yes, so I can pay for your supper regardless, but you need to get out there and play or the last year will have been for nothing,” Hermione said.

“It will probably be for nothing whether I take the stage or not,” he said taking another drag from his cigarette.

“Go. Now,” Hermione said “I’ll be in the audience.”

“And that hardly adds any pressure at all,” he said flicking his ashes.

Nothing more to say Hermione physically shoved him toward the stage.

Severus only stumbled for an instant before clearing the curtain and recovering to saunter sexily toward the microphone. Hermione took a quick whisky at the bar to settle her nerves, downing it in a single swallow and miraculously managing to avoid coughing like a novice. Apparently being married to Severus had had an effect, after all.

There he stood, in front of the microphone, in the middle of the stage, band behind him. All of them Muggleborn and well familiar with Rock-n-Roll. All of them talented enough to meet Severus’s standards and all of them tolerant enough to overlook his sometimes less than delightful disposition.

A year of rehearsing and coming up with a set list. A year of more or less inventing a format combining music and magic. And now came the moment of truth.

There he stood, straight and tall and once again whip thin. She wondered if he was going to launch
into some sort of introduction but instead he cradled the microphone in one spidery hand and leaned forward.

The other hand he raised in the air and whipped his guitar round to rest across his chest. He leaned back on his heels staring at the ceiling, mock casual like he did before his speech about stoppering death at the start of first year potions.

“My name is Sonny Liston and I’ve come here to sing,” he said his voice as sinuous as ever even as he stared fixedly at the upper left corner of the ceiling.

There was a smattering of applause. Severus glared at the offenders as if he found polite anything insulting.
His voice started out so low and smooth the sheer beauty of it felt like an electric jolt.

“Late at night and you're sleeping
You'll hear my lonesome call
And you'll feel my waiting lips
Barely touching you at all.”

Hermione felt the words run like a shiver up her spine. She pivoted on her stool to watch the crowd begin to squirm. Still Severus sang.

“But it's only as real
As any dream can seem
I'll see you
In your wildest dreams,” a magical green mist began to stream from Severus’ guitar. For the record it was carved of yew wood, with a peacock’s heart at its core, carved by one of the premier wand makers in California and had cost a pretty penny. Not that anyone in the audience was thinking of anything but Severus at the moment.

“A thousand miles though I may be now
I'm before you on my knees
But a million miles can't erase
The love you have for me,” his voice dipped and swelled snaking around the audience as the green mist coalesced into a dozen Severuses, a dozen apparitions, all undulating hips vanishing in puffs of smoke and reappearing, fairly teasing the audience into a frenzy. Hermione watched as Draco glanced at Millie with microscopic carelessness. Millie meanwhile made a point of stoicism, but still her foot tapped.

“A million miles it seems
But you can feel my love light beam
I'll see you in your wildest dreams,” Severus sang and the audience shuddered as one, as the dozen Severuses dissolved to a hundred ghostly hands here a hand stroked a witches cheek, there it traced a lower lip at random in the audience.

“I'll see you
You'll see me as though I were real
I'll see you
You'll see me as though you could feel

My breath on your neck
The touch of my hand
You'll awake in a room of steam
I'll see you in your wildest dreams,” he sang and the hands, too, faded the mist turning a shade shy
of fuschia.

“I’ll see you
You’ll see me as though I were real
I’ll see you
You’ll see me as though you could feel

My breath on your neck
The touch of my hand
You’ll awake in a room of steam
I’ll see you in your wildest dreams,” Severus sang as the mist poured like a funnel back into his guitar.

Witches began to scream.
Severus grinned the grin of a vicious shark and raised his arm in the air, hitting the strings once, twice, three times.

The crowd howled and surged forward.

“This song is for the dead boys, past, present, and future,” Severus said silkily.

Hermione wasn’t sure how the microphone wound back on the stand but there it was. Severus leaned toward the surging crowd his voice feral.

“I don’t need anyone,” Severus accused his voice a rumbling growl.

“Don’t need no Mum and Dad
Don’t need no pretty face
Don’t need no human race
I’ve got some news for you
Don’t even need you, too
I got my time machine
Got my ‘lectronic dream
Sonic Reducer
Ain’t no loser,” Severus sang all his bitterness welling up.

The audience screamed, here and there a few of the more excitable type fainting. Among wizards a time machine was far more transgressive than any sort of sexual reference. Severus was such a dirty boy, it was a large part of his appeal, Hermione knew that first hand.

“People out on the street, they don’t know who I am,” Severus sang, his black eyes gleaming.

One by one Severus’ boogey men appeared overhead with real physical presences; Toby large enough to touch the ceiling, his fist raised.

An infant’s cot and a flash of horrible green.

“I watch them from my room, They all just pass me by but I’m not just anyone, no, I’m not anyone,” Severus sang as though the music were being torn from his throat.

The crowd was wild, Dionysian, on their feet and begging for more. Over their heads were all the jeering faces of Severus Snape’s old life, taunting them. In turn Severus and the audience shook their fists back. He controlled them as surely as if they were under an Imperio.
“I will be Pharoah soon,” Severus threatened and the individual faces of the audience began to glow with a satisfied light.

“Rule from some cosmic tomb
Things will be different then
The sun will rise for me,” The audience shrieked with delight when a sun of Severus’ conjuring illuminated the room. Hermione closed her eyes. She knew Severus well enough to know he meant it, every bit of pettiness, every rage and disappointment. He didn’t articulate the self hatred that lived on the other side of his bitterness, but it was palpable all the same.

“There I’ll be ten feet tall
And you’ll be nothing at all,” he sang on.

Hermione didn’t know if it was a good or a bad thing but she knew for certain, in a year he’d be the Magical world’s Elvis Presley.

On the face of it, it was ridiculous; Severus Snape son of a witch and a Teddy Boy, wizard without parallel, spy, murderer, and unrepentant shoplifter, high strung half-blood who as a boy had dreamed of being an astronaut would be the Magical world’s first rock star.

But then so were they all, Millie, Draco, Phillip, Lark, and Hermione herself all absurdly unlikely.

Even little Cassius a world away in England with his doting grandmother, and even more doting adoptive father was preposterous. Perhaps that was the way of things, to be a witch or a wizard, or perhaps even to be alive, was to be a preposterous thing. The world was too ripe with contradictions and confusions, too wild and unpredictable, too big with simply too many variables to be contained or controlled or even accurately described. You were deluding yourself to imagine otherwise.

For the first time in her life Hermione not only understood these things but the understanding sat surprisingly well with her. The World was a vast adventure. Severus was an adventure. Strangeness and unpredictability weren’t just the order of the day, they were the order of the world, but given the friends and lovers chance had dealt her she could live with that.

Chapter End Notes

Note the First: For Lora who first gave this fic a home at Digital Quill before the site was taken down by hackers

Note the Second- The songs in this epilogue (In Your Wildest Dreams by Reverend Horton Heat and Sonic Reducer written first by Gene O'Connor and David Thomas before being rewritten by Stiv Bators of the Dead Boys), like the other songs in this fic, are used lovingly, but without permission, much like Mrs. Rowling’s characters. Some of those stains may never come out. But it is well meant.

Note the Third- thank you, kind readers, for your indulgence- this most cracky of crack!fics takes a great deal of overlooking. If you're interested in taking a look at my original work it can be found at weyodi.com
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!