Cantata for Three Voices in G Major

by Wirefish1

Summary

What if the Hallows never existed? What if the story is no longer about the Boy who Lived, but rather about the Girl who Carried On and the Boy who Muddled Through?

It's 1998. Voldemort has been vanquished. A battered Ministry attempts to prevent another rise of darkness while keeping the wizarding world limping along. In the shadows, the sympathizers of the defeated Dark Lord are hungry for vengeance against traitors.

Peace is not without price. Those who'd spent their lives focused on singular goals find themselves lacking purpose. Invisible wounds from a war where all are pawns emerge and heal slowly.

Amidst battle scars and a changing world, a romance of reluctant self-discovery begins.

Notes

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would
lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom, moral injury. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant USAian!
"I have you now," Morgana said, stalking from the dark niche where she had lain in wait, her long crimson robes billowing about her. He raised his wand, but she disarmed him effortlessly with a gesture of her pale hand. "There will be no defense, just submission." Her brunette locks swirled around her head, a Medusean mass that defied any sense of control.

The wizard cast about for a weapon, for an escape, but there was none. His office had only one door, and she blocked his access. "Please, I've done what you asked. Everything you asked."

The witch was upon him now, her amber eyes flashing. "Everything I asked for, till now." With a stroke of her wand, she knocked the wizard across his own desk and bound him to it silently. Her fingers grazed his robes and she grasped his neck, whispering the curse that made him flail in exquisite pleasure. He cried out, resisting her attacks, struggling to rally his considerable skill against her, shaking his fair, lank hair from his grey eyes so he could stare at her in fear.

Morgana laughed, her voice low and smooth as velvet. "There will be no defense," she repeated, vanishing his clothing piece by piece, until he was stripped naked before her. She drew the tip of her ebony wand across his leg, dragging a line of sweet agony upon him, inspecting his body with her cold gaze. The wizard groaned and quailed as she twisted his nipples, the dim light reflecting off her blood red nail polish. She loosed a heavy leather whip from beneath her robes.

"Yes," she hissed, causing his body to rotate into position upon the desk and re-bind him against the cool wood of the surface. He pressed his face against the desk, crying out as she trailed the end of the whip over him. "So responsive," Morgana purred, and he heard the whip whistle through the air and the sting of the strike against his soft, pale flesh. "I'll mark you as mine," she growled into his ear, her breath sweet and intoxicating.

"Hermione, where are you!?"

Startled, she dropped the magazine she was reading on the floor and kicked the stack over. "I'm coming!" she shouted back at Ron as she scrabbled to reassemble the magazines, trying not to gawk at the garish drawings and leering photographs. Her face burned and she tried to forget the story she'd been reading and ignore the heat rising through her.

She'd never seen wizard pornography. She'd guessed there must be a wizarding equivalent of Muggle smut, but she'd assumed it would consist of moving centerfolds, not stories. She shoved the stack where she had found it, hoping that whoever owned it wouldn't realize it had been disturbed. For a moment, she considered taking the one she had been reading, and she flipped through the worn pages. The few illustrations in this issue consisted of whips and other objects of punishment, most of them magicked to appear in motion. If she took it, she would have to hide it or else explain why she’d kept it. She pressed the magazine down on to the stack and decisively brushed the dust off her jeans.

She jogged off towards where she had heard Ron's voice and found him and Harry sitting on a pile of mud brown trunks. "Did you find anything?" she asked.

Ron pointed at a box full of bottles. "Harry and I found three boxes and picked out as many identical bottles as we could."

"Do we have enough?"
Ron made a face. "According to Seamus and Neville, we do. In fact, we have enough for a dozen extra bottles and a few for brokenes."

Harry grimaced. "We don't want any broken, not once they're filled."

"I guess that just leaves us with the potion," Hermione said.

Ron hefted a large cauldron with things clunking around in it. "I found this, and a bunch of stirring rods, all elm."

She peered inside it thoughtfully. "It'll need to be cleaned."

"I tried Scourgify on it already," Ron said. "It got some of the stuff out, but...."

Harry joined Hermione examining the inside of the vessel.

"Any suggestions, anyone?" asked Harry. "Scourgify is usually enough to clean up even Neville’s potion mistakes."

Hermione shook her head. "We'll have to research that. My guess is, whoever ditched it in here must have tried to clean it. Hopefully, whoever it was didn't try very hard."

"Should we take it to the dorms like this? Or work on it here?" Harry asked.

"Let's leave it," Hermione replied. "I'll come back down and work on it this evening."

Ron shoved the cauldron under a pillow and tucked the elm stirring rods under his arm. They left the Room of Requirement, chatting quietly about the upcoming feast and the last attempt for Gryffindor to claim the school cup.

The surviving students had almost all returned for their NEWTs since their scheduled seventh year had been subsumed by the vicious war. For Hermione, this was an obvious choice, reasoning that the NEWTs scores would give her an edge in employment. Most of the rest saw the return to school as an opportunity to rest after the trials of battle. Eager to settle the dust, the Ministry and Hogwarts' staff and board of governors had agreed to make accommodations for the returning veterans.

Years of conflict had ground down the will of the Ministry. The war had thinned the ranks of combatants and civilians alike. The wizarding world craved peace. Tolerating the less prominent sympathizers seemed a minor price to preserve the stabilizing power of government bureaucracy. Consequently, the public had little appetite to hunt out the leaderless shreds of the Death Eaters. Instead, make them help shore up the civilization they'd tried to topple.

But as the summer wore on after Voldemort’s destruction, it became evident that the dark wizard’s followers were set on prolonging the chaos. Small acts of sabotage got one-sentence coverage deep in the back pages of The Daily Prophet. No killings, no Muggle-baiting, but just enough to cause local concern.

Harry hit on the idea first. Devise a way to help identify and locate the remainder of the Death Eaters who had gone guerrilla without overtly involving the Ministry. The Order of the Phoenix members and Minister pro tem Kingsley Shacklebolt rejected his suggestions, either vocally or by simply refusing to speak with Harry or any of the other students who had been part of Dumbledore's Army. Remus Lupin alone cautiously supported their plans but advised that they should keep all Dumbledore Army plans secret from the Order members. After hours of arguing in secluded locations, Harry and Seamus presented a plan to the rest of the DA and split responsibilities amongst them, structuring their team into discrete cooperative cells.
The secrecy suited the students just fine. Most of their elder relatives and the Order simply wanted ordinary life to return. No more heroics. No more anxious watching at windows. The more canny of the Order members suspected the DA might succumb to recklessness. Few argued this point louder than Severus Snape, who scrutinized each DA member as if he intended to interrogate them personally regarding covert plans.

Snape remained as an advisor to the Order and the Ministry on the inner workings of the Death Eaters and on staff at the school. He’d declared for Dumbledore when he’d dueled the Death Eaters that Draco had smuggled into Hogwarts. Harry and the headmaster witnessed the skirmish but neither of them could confidently relate what had gone down, except that Draco had reacted in confusion and had wildly attacked everyone who moved and Snape’s first strike had amputated the headmaster’s withered arm at the elbow. By the time Draco was stunned unconscious, both Alecto Carrow and her brother Amycus had been killed and the remaining two Death Eaters had been fatally wounded. The Order had subsequently whisked both Draco and his mother into protective cover. Snape had gone into hiding at Hogwarts for the duration of the conflict, furthering the war effort as he could while evading execution attempts by a seething Voldemort. Both Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey credited the Potions master’s work with prolonging and restoring the headmaster’s life. Without his brewing and knowledge of the Dark Arts, Dumbledore would not have lived.

After the war ended, the Potions master had been quietly honored by the Ministry of Magic with an Order of Merlin for his role as a counter agent. Word leaked out about the award. The resulting minor scandal was quickly hushed by the Ministry’s press agents. Nevertheless, according to letters to the Prophet’s editors, much of the wizarding public wondered whether he might try to peddle his espionage services to the next powerful wizard.

Despite the fact that he’d seen Snape turn against his colleagues during the battle of the Tower and had fought alongside him, Harry still distrusted the man and claimed personal dislike and Snape’s unclear motives. Ron followed suit for the same reasons as well as out of simply loyalty to his friend. Most younger Order members tended to agree with Harry and Ron, but they had all learned it was best not to voice any outright distrust of the former spy to the adult members of the Order.

Hermione wasn’t sure who she believed, really. She knew what she had seen in the dungeon under Malfoy Manor when Snape had arrived with others from the Order to storm Voldemort’s stronghold in the final battle. He’d taken on Bella himself and had broken through the dungeon’s defenses, freeing Hermione and the other captives. She tended to trust the adults’ assessment although she readily admitted that the students’ bias against the acerbic professor wasn’t without merit. She tried to not let his bitterness color her impression of him, but there had been days when she wanted to cave to popular opinion and she was uneasy about returning to his classroom.

At the center of their plans was an explosive compound that Seamus grudgingly admitted only Hermione was qualified to create. Given how long the complex potion required to be safely manufactured, they needed to start the process of gathering supplies the day they arrived at school, before the start of year feast. They’d had agreed to Apparate at the Hogwarts Station and slip into the school early in the day to gain the time they needed.

Hermione had gotten most of the ingredients via owl post or from the apothecary shops at Diagon Ally, being careful to spread her purchases around to avoid any direct link back to her or to Harry. But one of the items was restricted and could not be obtained without the direct involvement of a registered Potions master, and none of those they approached were willing to work with a bunch of teenagers, seasoned warriors or not. She remembered seeing a phial of the crucial component in the Potions class room store, and she intended to take it, if she could figure out how to get past Snape’s watchful eye.
The bewitched ceiling presented a perfect late summer evening and the pre-feast assembly seemed more raucous than usual, the loudest clusters inevitably comprised of returning veterans. Hermione found herself mentally listing the faces she knew she’d never see again, both those who she had fought beside and those she’d struggled against. The Slytherin table seemed to have thinned the most, decimated both by casualties and shame at affiliation with the losing side. A flash of brightness at the entry way caught her attention and she watched as Draco slouched in, his blond hair catching the light, with Pansy Parkinson at his side. His hair, usually neatly trimmed and sleeked back, had grown shaggy and he appeared to have stopped shaving. He’d also abandoned both his walking stick and his black tailored suit and was dressed instead in simple school robes.

“Look at Snape,” Ginny hissed at her, digging her elbow into Hermione’s ribs and nodding towards the door.

He stood just inside the door, hands folded at his waist, robes pooled around him, and the stream of students spilled around him as he just … stood. No, not quite just — he was gazing around the Great Hall as though he’d never seen the space before, head and eyes moving slowly as he visibly drank in the scene. When he seemed to have satisfied himself, he took an indirect route to the High Table by way of the far side of the Slytherin table, the students of his house greeting him but receiving no obvious response as he strolled leisurely along, still contemplating the Great Hall itself more than the people gathered there. Once he reached the High Table he took a place at the end closest to the Gryffindor side of the room and busied himself with arranging his napkin and place setting as the rest of the teachers chatted.

The Sorting and headmaster’s welcoming speech proceeded with few surprises. Dumbledore introduced the auror from the French Ministry, Francois Thomas, who had been assigned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hermione sat up at this, staring at the newcomer. Thomas had vivid white hair and was dressed in custard yellow robes, resembling a reversed fried egg. At the announcement, a golden water goblet fell from the Gryffindor end of the staff table and clanged
noisily on the stone floor. Heads swiveled towards the sound and Dumbledore stopped mid-sentence to watch as the vessel rolled under the students’ table. A Gryffindor First Year retrieved the goblet and set it carefully on the edge of the table before Snape, who regarded the small girl impassively. The disruption over, the headmaster concluded his remarks and the tables filled with food and drink.

“Think he did that deliberately? Snape?” Harry asked Hermione under cover of the clatter of serving spoons and requests for mashed potatoes.

Hermione shrugged. “There was a whole article about it in the Prophet two weeks ago, along with a lot of letters to the editor.”

Ginny leaned toward them and said, “It must sting — he had DADA for two years, after wanting it his whole career, and it’s been taken away again. We learned a lot in his classes and it was easier having the same teacher twice in a row.”

“The letter writers were all against letting a Death Eater, even a decorated former Death Eater, teach anything related to the Dark Arts,” Hermione said. She gave them a summary of the subsequent press, how the public had besieged the Board of Governors for Hogwarts with angry letters, how Dumbledore had tried to support Snape and allow him to select his own subject, how finally the headmaster had been overruled and he’d been forced yet again to locate a DADA instructor. But this time, the Ministries of several nations coordinated to identify a candidate. “From what I could tell,” she concluded, “Madame Maxime recommended him.”

“And Draco?” asked Ginny. “I thought mum said Mrs Malfoy had left the country. So why’s he back?”

“My gran said he’s trying to save the family reputation,” Neville interjected, reaching around Ron to grab a roll. “His dad got released from Azkaban, you know, and he’s claiming the Order held the family ransom.”

“Ransom?” Harry spluttered into his juice. “We protected them! If it hadn’t been for the Order — “

“But Harry,” Hermione said, “neither you nor Dumbledore will talk about what happened on the tower that night. Nor Snape,” she added, bobbing her brows toward the end of the High Table where the Potions master was sitting.

Harry shook his head. “It all happened so fast, I couldn’t swear to who did what to whom, and until my Bodybind spell got cancelled, I couldn’t do anything.”

“At least that explains why he’s back,” said Ginny.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes,” said Hermione, and huffed in response to the startled expressions of her friends. “Think about it. He actually defied Voldemort, and lived, and he’s in a House with more than a handful of sympathizers. I wonder if he’ll be able to sleep at all while he’s here.” Collectively they craned to look at the surly knot of older Slytherin students who were rumored to have ties to Voldemort.

“Now that you mention it, I bet Snape’s less than happy to have them in the school,” said Harry. “Remember Remus telling us about how he’d started testing every bit of food and drink and all his utensils with poison-detection charms?”

Hermione nodded. “I think he’s still doing that, from what I could tell when he sat down tonight.” She bit her lower lip. “That tells me he’s going to be even more unbearable this year.”

Ron groaned and dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. “I can’t imagine how much worse he
could be. Thanks a lot, Hermione, for convincing mum I needed to come back.”
Chapter Summary

Nothing ever goes right the first day of class.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange.

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

"Miss Granger, explain the process that permits us to use dragon bones successfully in this potion."

Snape loomed over her, arms crossed, his eyes expressionless.

First day back in class, and the first class after lunch was double Potions. The class was huge, doubled from the crop of newly risen Seventh Years to include those returning from war to obtain their NEWTs in response to the urgency for qualified wizards to fill the voids left by the war. In all courses, the requirements for admission to NEWT courses for war veterans had been reduced to a passing grade. This fact evidently added fuel to Snape’s frustration at being pressed back into his old role as Potions instructor. His mood worsened noticeably through the class and they were all making an effort to avoid further antagonizing him.

"In my own words, sir?" she asked, sitting as upright as possible without actually leaning away from him.

"As opposed to what I can read in the text, yes, Miss Granger. You did actually do the project I assigned as preparation to return for your NEWT, did you not?"

"I did, sir. I turned in my scroll recording my observations and conclusions when you requested our work at the beginning of class."

Snape's lip twisted. "Would you like your scroll back to read for reference?"

"No sir," she replied, forcing herself to calm down and continue facing him. "I completed the project, but I felt that there was a better way of demonstrating what you wished us to learn."

The class went quiet, then she heard a titter from Draco's table.

"Enlighten me." If possible, he loomed broader and taller than he had before.
"Sir, it came to me when I was cooking dinner. Bones contain collagen, which is a connective substance. As collagen is heated, it breaks down into gelatin and into smaller particles. The smaller particles lose a lot of their adhesive nature while they are hot. As the particles cool, they re-adhere to each other, which is why you stop heating and stirring gravy just before it's the consistency you want. So when we use dragon bones, we have to heat them to break down the collagen. I deduce that dragon collagen requires more heat than bovine collagen. The end result is the same, and we have to be able to judge when to remove the heat so when the potion cools it has the desired consistency." Hermione took a slow breath.

He tilted his head and looked at her. "And you felt making gravy demonstrated this principle better how?"

"Because it's more easily repeatable, in a shorter amount of time. I made a dozen gravies by altering the time, temperature, and preparation, and recorded my observations in the appendix of my scroll. I was able to validate my discoveries by sampling. I tried them, and my parents tried them too, and I charted our observations on graphs, also in the appendix."

His mouth twitched, but whether it was a smile or a sneer, she was not certain.

"Fascinating," he intoned. "But also accurate, thorough, and well defended both written and orally — I read your paper during the exercise. Ten points to Gryffindor. Miss Granger, since you have obviously learned the principle, you are excused from the following assignment. The rest of you, three feet describing in detail the process, without resorting to Muggle terminology or examples, due next Thursday."

Ginny ducked her head and winked at Hermione, mouthing, "Good job." Hermione raised her brows and started copying down the assignment.

"Miss Granger."

She stopped what she was doing and looked up at him again, his expression and mood unreadable.

"Sir?"

"What are you doing, Miss Granger?"

She looked at the assignment on the board, back to his face, down to her quill, back to the board, and returned her gaze to his face. She felt an uncontrollable, unreasonable swelling of silly joy bursting upwards, another fit of elation that had struck her randomly since she'd seen Voldemort finally disintegrate into powder. Her inward voice started chanting No, no, no, not now, not here, not Snape! but she felt her face lighting up into a broad insane grin.

"I have no idea, Professor."

Around her, quills stopped scratching on parchment. He didn't move or change his gaze. She couldn't seem to avert her eyes either, and for some reason, this made her smile more. Hermione felt a titter bubbling up too, and she pinched her leg hard.

"No idea?"

"I could...assemble ingredients for the First Years?"

His brows contracted and he said smoothly, "That sounds wise, Miss Granger."

She stuffed everything in her rucksack and scurried into the Potions closet, her face burning.
pushed the door closed, made her way to the back of the closet, and cast a silencing spell around her before collapsing in hopeless giggles.

When she finally got herself under control she started poking around looking for the phial. She located it, finally, at a top shelf, locked inside a glass fronted cabinet. It wouldn't budge. She growled to herself and started muttering incantations, but nothing worked.

"Right, I'm competing with Snape here," she told herself. "That's almost impossible. He's an excellent wizard, and I have no idea if he used dark magic to secure this. Why didn't I think of that? I really must have lost my mind after a whole two months with Muggles...."

Stymied, she went to the front of the closet and assembled the ingredients for the first years into individual baskets in a frenzy of motion. As she set the collections of bottles in order, she thought about the cabinet. She'd attacked it from the front and from the bottom and sides. What about the top? She thought the top was flush with the bottom of the shelf above it and that the cabinet was attached to the wall at the back. Was that true?

She hurried to the back, cast *Lumos* and looked around the back and bottom of the cabinet. She felt along the top, and realized there was enough space between the top of the cabinet and the bottom of the next shelf to....what? Wait, there were screws holding the cabinet together.

She cast a retracting spell and concentrated on the screws at the top of the cabinet. Slowly, the screws worked loose, one after the other. She lifted the top off, holding her breath. Nothing happened, and if he had some kind of silent alarm, then she was up the creek anyway.

She used the retracting spell to lift the phial out and rearranged some of the other bottles and jars to disguise what she had taken. She was closing the cabinet when she heard shuffling outside.

Hermione paused, straining her ears, then checked her watch. Holy Merlin -- her class was long over and the next class was filtering in. She cast a disillusionment spell on herself, tugged her stuff out of the way, and retreated into the gloom of the closet.

The door banged open and Snape entered, his silhouette crisp against the relatively bright light of the classroom. She cringed backward, thinking small and invisible. She saw him pause and peer into the darkness, then he levitated the baskets from the closet and closed the door behind him.

She parked her hip on a ladder. Blast. If she left now, she would interrupt his class. Would he demand to know why she had taken far longer than expected? She wasn't sure. She checked her watch again. This was the last class of the day and she was willing to wait and slip out once the other class left. Keeping a close ear out for any noises at the door, she settled into the back of the closet with her alchemy book to read in as dim a light she could stand.
Hermione peeked through the open gap of the closet door. Blast the dim light, she couldn’t tell if the room was empty. The last class had noisily vacated what felt like ages ago and her right leg was cramping. She’d heard no movement for several minutes. Not for the first time, she cursed herself silently that she hadn't worn the self-illuminated watch her parents had given her as an early 19th birthday present and she didn’t dare cast *Lumos* with the closet door gapped open. Everyone should be heading to their dorms. It should be safe to leave.

She’d set her hand on the door and prepared to push it open when the classroom door creaked. She held still. The door was shut and locked and quiet steps crossed before her to the front of the room. She had just a moment to catch a glimpse of the Potion master's beaky profile before he moved out of sight. Letting her breath out slowly, she strained to hear where he might have gone.

Damn. She couldn't possibly slip out if Snape was around, especially since he had locked them in. If he didn’t nab her the moment she stepped out of the closet, then he would certainly hear her as she made her escape. She squeezed the phial in her robe pocket, annoyed that she had thought stealing from Snape's private store would be a simple process just because she'd done it before. No potion-gone-awry this time for cover. He’d catch her, he’d make her empty her pockets, and that would be that.

She moved her head, trying to see where he was. Her heart lurched when he appeared, carrying a smallish black bag. He pushed the backs of two chairs against his desk, set the bag on one chair, and relocated his speaking lectern closer to his desk. He apparently inspected the arrangement, then slipped off his teaching robes and draped them carefully over the lectern. He unbuttoned first the right then the left sleeve of his coat, then opened the long row of buttons at the front of his coat. He shrugged the coat off and arranged it also over the lectern. Hermione realized her mouth was dangling slack and she wetted her lips nervously. What on earth was he up to?

Snape sat in the unoccupied chair and opened the bag. He removed several dark items and laid them
carefully on the chair before he turned and set the bag itself on his desk. He sat for a moment looking at the objects. Since they were on the far side of him, Hermione couldn’t see what they were. She heard him sigh slowly, then he removed his cravat and opened the front of his white shirt, exposing his bare chest, worked the sleeves open so the cloth fell away from his wrists, and sat still again. He pushed a hand slowly through his limp hair and leaned back in the chair, his legs relaxing and splaying outwards.

Hermione watched in amazement as he stroked his hand over his hair, down his neck, and lazily circled his nipples, then slid both hands down his thighs. She bit her lower lip, regretting more than ever volunteering to raid the ingredient store. Very possibly she had found the one thing worse than being caught by Snape -- catching Snape jerking off. She wanted desperately to not watch, but the bizarre scene kept her transfixed.

He unbuckled his belt with one hand and loosened his trousers. He slipped his right hand inside, pushing his hips to the edge of the chair seat so he could have easier access. He sighed deeply, then picked up one of the objects from the chair. She watched as he pulled a black glove onto his left hand, then continued stroking his chest and neck with the gloved hand as he lazily rubbed at his crotch. Snape let his head tilt backwards onto the chair's backrest, and he groaned softly, his eyes closed. Hermione could see his mouth moving slowly, but she heard no words.

He reached to the other chair again and picked up a... wand? A stick? She squinted, peering in the gloom, trying to make out what he had in his hand. Whatever it was, he raised it to his lips and grazed the tip across his face and down his body, inhaling in a slow hiss as he brought it parallel to his right leg, lifted his hand, and brought it down in a sharp thwack against his thigh.

It was a riding crop.

Hermione pressed her hand against her mouth and forced herself to breathe as silently as she could. Images of the pornography she had found in the Room of Requirement flooded her mind and she recalled one of the stories that seemed to have been heavily read and referenced, the worn pages dog-eared. There was a riding crop in the story, as well as a multi-bladed flog, and the main character was worked to distraction by a disdainful dominatrix -- Hermione had imagined a saner Bellatrix. Come to think, it made sense that Snape might prefer a submissive role, since all the Death Eaters obeyed their Dark Lord and Master.

Snape groaned again and rubbed his crotch with his right hand, the riding crop resting across his chest, as he stroked his cheeks and neck with his gloved left hand. His mouth was open, now relaxed and soft, now tensed and baring his teeth. She wondered how long he would continue to touch himself and if he would actually bring himself to climax.

She was certain she would betray herself if that happened. What was the standard punishment for watching a professor masturbate? She giggled inwardly, correcting herself. What was the punishment for watching Snape masturbate? Was it covered in the student handbook? Her face burned with a flash of heat. She was actually turned on. Not wildly, not as if Ron had been kissing her neck, but definitely turned on. She thought back to the pornography, about how reading it had made her breath quicken. At the time, she’d blamed it on the smut, which was of course supposed to be titillating, and the taboo of finding someone’s (Snape’s!) private stash, having a glimpse into someone’s (Snape’s!) mind. For a moment, she had an idea of why wizards practiced legilimency. Pants, why hadn’t she considered how erotic diving into someone’s mind might be? She inhaled a little sharper than expected with the sudden insight.

Snape snapped his head to the right, looking in her direction, and was still.

Hermione froze too, and for a long moment she felt they were staring into each other’s eyes.
Impossible, she realized, comforting herself as his gaze slowly moved away from the closet. He didn't know she was there.

But he knew something was amiss.

"Is someone there?" he asked softly.

A perverse plan popped into her head, scripted and organized as if she had been thinking about it for weeks. Steeling herself, she slammed the closet door open and, keeping her face immobile, stepped into the classroom.

They stared at each other, neither moving. His chest lifting from quick breaths that slowed and deepened. He must have been unnerved by her appearance, which meant she must be careful to not display any nervousness herself. She recommitted to her course of action.

"Why are you in my closet, Miss Granger?" Snape asked smoothly.

"Why are you playing with yourself in the Potions classroom, Professor?" she countered, keeping her voice low and controlled. His eyebrow lifted slightly.

"It's hardly your concern what I do in my own time, Miss Granger." He lowered his hands to the seat’s edges and prepared to push himself into a more upright position.

"Don't move, s-Severus," Hermione said taking a single step forward and kicking herself mentally for the stutter. He stopped though, watched her carefully. "I was enjoying the show," she added. *I'm confident, I'm sincere, I'm in charge.*

"Indeed."

"Yes. Continue."

He blinked slowly and a slow smirk twisted the corners of his mouth. She realized part of his appeal centered on how his lips moved and shaped around words, like he was eating them. "Just why should I continue, Miss Granger?"

"Because I said so," she started, watching his lips thin into a sneer. "Because I found your smut pile in the Room of Requirements," his face hardened, "and because I've read a particular story with a riding crop and a flog, both of which you seem to have here."

No response. His lips had straightened into a line she was well familiar with. They looked at each other, waiting. She kept her expression neutral and her breathing regular.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And what of this story, Miss Granger?"

Hermione lifted her hand and caught the loose glove as she called it silently to her. Not breaking eye contact, she slipped it on her right hand, realized it was way too large for her, and silently transformed it to fit her hand. She noticed his eyes widen slightly, and she focused on the glove on his left hand, calling it to her too. She'd done that a hundred times with Ron's quidditch gear, magically stripping him with the simple wandless spell, and it worked on Snape's glove as well, evoking a gasp from him when the glove ripped itself from his hand. She pulled it on, still warm from his body heat, and fitted it.

"Well done, Miss Granger. Ten poi--"

Hermione closed the space between them in a step before he could finish, grabbed a fistful of hair at
the back of his head, and loomed over him, recalling the way he swooped over his own students, intimidating them into silence. She scowled. He gazed up at her, his eyes wide and breath quick. "Quiet, Severus," she hissed, drawing out the sibilance. She slowly stroked the side of his face and pulled at his lower lip with her thumb. "Relax your mouth. I liked that better."

He relaxed his jaw. His tongue flicked out and wetted his lips as they parted. She felt his breath stir the loose hair around her face as she looked down at him. Warmth spread across her skin and a tingling grew between her legs. She'd never been so close to him, not by her own choice, and she felt his body heat and smelled his odor, masculine and exciting, with a vague woody scent that she had always associated with the Potions store room.

"What do you propose to do?" he whispered. She wondered if her proximity was affecting him as much as it seemed his was affecting her. He had not moved at all, not since she'd ordered him not to.

She reached down his arm, dragging her fingers over him, and closed her hand over his, with her forefinger and thumb wrapped around the handle of the crop. He didn't resist when she took the whip from his hand. He pulled in a deep breath with a light shudder, almost imperceptible, and closed his eyes.

She reviewed the story they were enacting, making sure she knew what came next. "You may call me Mistress, Severus." He regarded her from lowered lids, let his head turn towards her. "Do you require a safe word?"

Immediately she knew she'd made a mistake. The corner of his mouth twitched upwards, but Hermione thought quickly and brought the crop against his thighs as hard as she could. He sucked in air and shot a startled expression at her.

"Do you require a safe word?" she repeated quietly.

His mouth worked wordlessly for a moment. Truly shaken and struggling for balance. He closed his eyes and replied evenly, "Does Mistress wish me to have a safe word?"

She paused and considered. Was it possible that she would push him to his limits, considering she had never done this and he presumably had, probably many many times? Doubtful. But the prospect of pushing him to the point of breaking, of asking for release..... She felt her panties grow damp, thinking of him begging for her to....what? It didn't matter, she realized. She wanted Severus beneath her, begging. With a safe word, he might be willing to let her explore.

"'Thestral' is your safe word, Severus."

"Thestral," he echoed, his eyes still closed, and she noticed the pulse fluttering at his neck. She was seized by a desire to bite him there, and she did, gratified at his gasp. His skin was cool against the hotness of her mouth. She pulled back and regarded him again. She kissed him then, pressing her mouth on his, and felt him open to her, their tongues touching. She suspected he was restraining himself for her benefit, deliberately allowing her to be the aggressor for the moment, but she didn't care. Expected him to taste of sour milk or something rotten — instead, he tasted vaguely of almonds and honey, evidently something he’d eaten while she was hiding and that overlaid his own masculine oaky flavor. The unevenness of his teeth fascinated her; she stroked her tongue over them repeatedly, wanting to lock the memory in her mind — what? Why? She withdrew, dragging his lower lip between hers, and he moaned softly before opening his eyes a sliver to look at her.

"Give me the flog and position yourself," she said, straightening away from him. He held the handle to her but he didn't release it when she grasped it.
"Mistress," he whispered, his voice rising slightly in a query. She nodded, and he continued, "Has Mistress used a flog before? There's a certain skill to flogging...for the best results.... It's also possible for an unskilled flogger to hurt herself with strain."

She didn't release the flog handle while she considered. Just as with the safe word, he was pushing her to think. Perhaps his greater experience urged caution. "Would you prefer the crop, Severus?"

He nodded once. A glaze of sweat spread across his forehead. Perhaps he was apprehensive of her wielding the crop as well, especially since he had already felt her strike him with it.

"Say it, Severus."

Another slow, deep breath. "Please use the crop on me, Mistress." He tightly closed his eyes and a dark flush crept across his bare chest. He released the flog and she laid it on the desk at his head.

"Then position yourself, Severus. I'm losing patience and won't ask again." She felt the last words tumble out automatically, hearing the echo of Snape's voice in her head saying the exact same words during innumerable classes.

If the irony of having his own phrase thrown at him amused him, Snape didn't show it. He stood obediently, face expressionless, loosened his trousers so they slid past his hips, and removed his shirt. He laid the shirt on the desk and knelt on the chair. His boxers were distorted with his erection before he lowered his underwear to mid-thigh. He was pale everywhere with lines of scars crisscrossing his skin. His hair swung forward as he braced his forearms on the desk, hiding his face from her view, and his pants slid the rest of the way to his knees. The white bow of his back and his bare buttocks gleamed in the dim room. Vulnerable.

She studied him. When he had turned, she saw the red line where she had struck him across his thighs, had missed his genitals by only inches. For a moment, she regretted being in a position where she might add to the marks on him. Could just toss the whip and scarper. Then she recalled the role she had chosen to play, and she flexed the crop in her hands and lifted it. How had the witches in the stories done this?

Hermione brought the first strike across his buttocks, as hard as she could, the thin rod hissing through the air. He cried out hoarsely, then whimpered. Hermione leaned forward to look at the mark and saw that it was rising already, red and dark against his pallor. She blew softly at it — he gasped and shifted away. Instinctively she smacked his hip back into position and he grunted. She striped his backside and thighs with a dozen strokes, stopping when she felt an ache through her elbow and wrist. He sagged onto the desk, his breathing labored.

She moved to the desk and pushed the drape of hair off his face. He looked at her, his feverish expression betraying his excitement. She leaned in and kissed him again; his mouth was cooled dry from panting. He rose with her when she parted, sucking at her lips. Hermione caressed his torso and ranged downward, where she found his hand stroking his swollen cock.

"How long have you been pleasuring yourself, Severus?" she asked, reaching beneath to cup his soft balls.

He growled and leaned against her. She pushed him back and squeezed his scrotum slightly.

"Since about the sixth stroke, Mistress," he husked. His fisting tempo increased. How close he was!

"Did I give you permission to do that?"

He paused mid-stroke and met her eyes. "No, mistress," he said so softly she almost mistook his
words as a sigh.

“Put your hands out, palms up.”

A quizzical expression flickered across his face. This was not part of the script, but he did as told and held his hands out parallel to the desk. Before she could lose nerve, she cut the crop viciously across his palms. Snape cried out, caught the whip and held it, glaring at her.

"I have to teach tomorrow, silly girl," he hissed at her.

“Then you should learn to obey,” Hermione responded, darting her hand forward to seize his member. It twitched and she started stroking him, trying to mirror his own technique. He thrusted into her fist. He leaned against the desk with the butts of his palms, sparing the weal marks, and his breath grew raspy as he neared climax.

“Finish me,” he groaned, "please."

She dropped her hands from him. He humped the air in frustration. “Finish yourself,” she spat, remembering the dialog from the story. He glared at her again; wincing, he made himself come, thick spurts puddling on the desk.

She waited until he seemed to recover then handed him his shirt. “Clean up your mess, Severus,” she said. “Manually, no magic. Then get dressed.”

He sighed heavily and complied, pulling the semen-stained shirt on and doing up his trousers. He faced her and rose to his full height.

Whatever had happened, it was over. She shrank into smallness, peeled the gloves off, and offered them to him. He took them and dropped them back into the bag, then turned back to her, appraising her quietly.

"Professor — " she started.

"Oh, back to formalities?" he asked coolly. "I think we've moved past that, haven't we?"

She shrugged. "I can't call you Severus in public."

"No, I suppose not."

"Are...are you okay?"

He barked a laugh, and held out his hands. "Miss Granger, why this touch?"

"My dad used to tell me the nuns would ruler their students' hands in school."

He raised his brows in understanding. "Effective. As well as you striped me, I can deal with that pain, but this," he shook his hands, "This went too far."

"Then you should have used your safe word," she retorted.

He inclined his head toward her. "In future, I will not touch myself without mistress's permission. For now, I need assistance healing this."

"Of course," she said. Halfway to the first aid cabinet beside the store closet door she stopped and turned to him. "What do you mean, in future?"
"You have talent, Miss Granger. Or would you prefer not...?"

She studied the floor at her feet. "I don't know."

"This was a whim?"

"It was an opportunity."

He remained silent as she retrieved a jar from the cabinet and returned to daub a healing ointment across his palms. "Would you like me to put this on the others?" she asked, glancing toward his hips.

Snape pursed his lips. "That would defeat the point, wouldn't it? Besides, I can access those marks myself."

_In future. Talent. Three compliments in one day from Snape._ Her head spun. "It seems so one sided."

"Meaning?"

"It was all about your needs." She gestured towards the desk. "You got release, after all. I just got to, well, beat you."

"That's your inexperience showing," Snape replied, tipping his head back to look at her under lowered lids.

"I didn't want to appear foolish," Hermione snapped and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Are you a virgin?"

She jerked upright and glared at him. "That's none of your business. Look, I felt like you only obeyed me when I impressed you."

His lips compressed. "I admit that."

"And I scared you."

"Yes."

"With the flog...."

"Yes -- if your technique is bad, you can cause damage."

"To you, not to me, though," she argued.

"Does your arm hurt?" Snape asked, his head canting in query.

She flexed. "Yes, and my back and shoulder."

"The flog requires more finesse to control the tongues. Any idiot can hit a stationary target with a single, short stick."

"Oh." Hermione pivoted away from him, cheeks flaming. This hadn’t seemed so difficult in the stories she’d read, just a matter of flailing away at someone. Her embarrassment gave way to anger that yet again he’d pointed out a shortcoming, something else that she couldn’t do right, another area where his superiority was obvious --

"I could teach you," he offered mildly, breaking into her thoughts.
Startled by his tone as much as by his words. "I don't think I want to be the recipient."

Snape shook his head. “You misunderstand. I could teach you to...” His fingers lifted, gesturing towards the bag.

"Flog you? Safely?"

His eyes glistened in the dim light and he crossed his arms. "If you want."

She returned the medicine to the cabinet then returned to stand close to him. She craned her neck to look up at him, realizing how much taller he was than her and how imposing, even in his current state of dishevel. He stared placidly back. She felt vaguely taken advantage of, confused at her own excitement and at the thrill of his submission to her — the turmoil boiled. "Why teach me, Mister Snape? Given my inexperience and your obvious extensive experience, surely you have more qualified candidates."

He snorted. "Of course there are better candidates than a rough virgin, and virgin you are, compared to me. Use your brain, Miss Granger." He angrily pulled up his left sleeve, exposing the faded Dark Mark. “Given the times, where would I find someone who would overlook this, someone I could trust to not kill or mutilate me, even someone who would offer a current or former Death Eater a safe word, and mean it? Even if I sought out release in the Muggle world, my comings and goings would be noted and exploited. I have many enemies amongst the remaining Death Eaters."

He was trembling by the time he ended. He yanked the sleeve down, started automatically buttoning it, then crossed his arms again. "Might I point out you barged in on me?"

She clenched her fists. Control. Breathe. "I guess that makes me the best offer, other that just fantasizing and self-flagellation.” Hermione shrugged. "That even sounds pathetic."

Snape grew rigid and growled.

Hermione waved a hand at him and edged backward, "I didn't mean — “

"Of course you did," he shot back. His shoulders sagged as he added listlessly, “And you're right. Top marks, Miss Granger."

She reached out and squeezed his arm. He covered her hand with his, the palm hot against the back of her hand, the healing stripe afire.

They stood together for a few minutes before he stepped from her. He pulled his wand from his coat pocket, removed his shirt, and used a cleaning spell across both the shirt and the desk. Wordlessly, Hermione relocated the chairs and watched as he methodically replaced his clothing. He was moving more stiffly than usual, responding to the stripes she’d left on him. At last he stood still again, severe in the enclosing fabric. Hermione drew near and tentatively reached out to free his hair from the high collar. He let her do so, then captured her wrist against his chest, firmly trapping her. With his free hand, he reached to her robe pocket and pressed the phial against her hip.

"What did you steal, Miss Granger?"

Caught.

Immediately, she was a student again, transgressing against the unapproachable Potions master. She trembled and he smirked, turned her slightly so he could slip his hand in the pocket, removed the phial, and peered at the label. "This is from my personal store," he murmured, barely moving his mouth, squeezing her wrist harder. She forced herself to not wince, not respond, and met his seething
glare blankly. He stopped squeezing and loosened his grip without releasing her.

"Miss Granger, are you aware that men pay for services from dominatrices?"

She nodded. The magazines had been festooned with garish adverts with disdainful women and there’d been dozens of pages of classifieds in blobby, tiny print. Smudgy pages.

"Consider this payment." He pressed the phial into her hand against his chest. She closed her hand on the object as her stomach flipped. He reached for her other hand and pressed her palm against his crotch. He was still hard, hardening even as her hand remained there. Snape released her wrist, lifted her hair from her neck and lightly kissed her high on her neck. He moved his mouth to her ear and whispered, "Mistress mine." Immediately she felt a wash of heat and her knees weakened; he sniffed slightly as his penis twitched under her grasp. "Think on that," he added, and released her. "Now go, before I reconsider."

She staggered backward, the loss of contact stunning her as solidly as a punch, and pocketed the phial before she could drop it. She felt him watching her as she crabbed away, colliding with stools and tables until she gathered her senses and turned towards the door. As she neared it, the door boomed open and she fled.
3 Sept 98, Gryffindor Common Room

Chapter Summary

Good friends are better than tea.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested

She burst into the Gryffindor common room, and leaned against a wall, panting. The room was vacant except for Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Neville, and they gapingly stared at her.

Ginny was the first to collect herself. "Hermione, what happened? What took you so long?"

"S-Snape happened," Hermione stammered. "He caught me."

Ron rushed to her and wrapped his arms around her. "That damned bat."

"Did you get the phial?" Neville asked, receiving glares from both Ron and Ginny.

"I did, he didn't get it," she replied, and took it out of her pocket. Her hand shook so badly that Ron took the bottle from her and led her to the sofa. Harry summoned a cup of tea, which she gulped at, the tea sloshing with every breath.

"So what happened?" Ginny repeated, rubbing Hermione's back. Hermione set the cup and saucer on the coffee table with a clatter and rubbed her face with both hands.

She regretted the action immediately, as his scent lingered on her hands and sleeves, and her butterflies returned in force.

Ginny eeped and Ron grabbed her hand. Her robe sleeves had fallen back when she had covered her face, exposing her wrist with the blooming bruise of Snape's handprint. Each place his fingers had pressed stood clearly against her skin with the thumbprint an angry mottle just below the base of her thumb.

"I told you, he caught me," she stammered, staring at the marks.

"What else? Detention?" Harry asked.
She shook her head and rubbed her wrist, which was starting to ache. "N-no. He lectured me. And shook me."

"Maybe he was afraid of being reported," Neville offered. "I can't see McGonagall being very happy that Snape had physically harmed a student."

"Maybe," Harry agreed grudgingly. "It still sounds wrong."

"But at least you got the ingredient," Ron said. He handed the phial to Harry, who studied the label, then pushed his glasses out of the way to examine it closely.

"Hm, that's odd. Hermione, did you look at this label?"

"Don't tell me I got the wrong one!"

"No, that's not it. It's the right one. But, the label has a note on it. It looks like," he squinted at the marking, "'like 'paid: SS to HG'."

"R-really," Hermione asked, reaching for the bottle. Harry handed it to her, and she stared at it. The note had not been there before, not when she retrieved it from the store room. It was unmistakably in Snape's handwriting, in purple ink. Her hands started to shake again, and Ron took the bottle from her. "Ooh, that hateful, hateful man," she muttered, hugging herself as a flush of heat spread from her core and her cheeks burned.

"Ironic, isn't it," Neville said, "that he would have bought it from someone with your initials, Hermione. That must be what that means."

"Yeah," she replied and rubbed her palms on her upper arms. "His loss, then. It was from his personal store, did you know that? It wasn't just special Hogwarts stock."

Ginny giggled. "You stole from the bat himself? Wow. When he finds out, he'll be furious."

Hermione nodded, smiling and shivering. She couldn't stop shaking and it was starting to worry her.

"I hope he doesn't connect you to that," Ron said. "Remember how he was when he thought Harry was stealing from the school store to make polyjuice potion. He didn't have any proof of that."

"I know," Harry said. He still had a puzzled expression on his face. "It doesn't really add up though. He must have suspected something, he certainly left a mark on you. Snape does a lot of things, but I've never heard of him physically harming a student."

Hermione shook her head. "I know, me neither. Maybe the war with Voldemort last year rattled something loose." Inside, she felt a twist and the image of Snape's face swam before her, his mouth opened in a groan, his eyes closed. She swilled down the rest of her tea, pushing the thought from her mind, and smelled his woody fragrance from her hand as she drank. She carefully set the cup down.

"I need a shower," she said.

"Do you want me to find some healing ointment for your wrist?" Ginny asked. "I'm sure the stuff we use after quidditch would work. It works on bludger bruises, so it should work on that."

Hermione shook her head. "It's okay, really. But I'm not hungry. You go on to dinner without me."

The next morning, they crowded into the boys' dorm room when it was still dark and carefully made
the brew. Hermione's bruise had spread overnight, the mark full of angry reds, emerging blacks and purples, and some blooming yellows. Ron pointed out that the note's ink color almost exactly matched the purples in her bruise, causing her hands to tremble so badly Ginny took over.

"Maybe he did know," Neville said in a hushed voice.

"No, he would have done something else to me, I feel certain. At the least, he would have taken it from me." She hugged herself. "I don’t think I can bear to see him at breakfast and I left my school bag in the Potions store room!"

Ron rubbed her back and promised to bring toast and juice to her if she’d wait in the courtyard. They finished working and watch the completed potions swirling weirdly in the collection of small bottles. "The greasy git would sure be shocked if he realized we were voluntarily making potions outside of class, especially with stuff we've stolen right from under his huge nose."

Hermione gasped. “I forgot. We have Potions as last class today.”

They looked glumly at each other. Harry gingerly picked up the box with the bottles, set it into his trunk, and cast both locking and alarm spells on the trunk.

"I guess we'll find out if there are repercussions," Harry said as they trooped down the hallway to the portal.

They found Hermione’s school bag propped against the outside wall beside the portrait of the Fat Lady.
**4 Sept 98, Potions Classroom**

Chapter Summary

Transgressions require penance.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Hermione lagged behind when the Potions class assembled and hurried to her bench beside Ginny just as the last few students trickled in. They sat close to the front of the room, to the right. The lectern was against the wall and Hermione had a clear view of Snape's desk. Again she saw him sprawled against the desk; she shoved the image from her mind and concentrated on assembling her workstation.

Snape billowed in from the door, slammed it shut, and stalked up to the front of the room. He paused at the store closet to push the door firmly shut and glanced in Hermione's direction when he did. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to remain calm, but feeling a tremble start in her belly.

Snape stood at the front of the class, surveying them for a moment. The class sat quietly, waiting.

"I want to do something different today," he said, his voice sonorous and oddly light. Whimsical. Hermione felt a pricking at the back of her neck and her thundering pulse urged caution.

"You'll all need to roll up your sleeves. It's not dangerous, but it will be messy, and I'm sure none of you want to get your clothing sullied. You may remove your school robes if you desire."

The class collectively murmured. Most of them shook off their robes. Hermione sat still, staring at him as he watched them. Eventually he focused on her and stalked to her table.

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice soft. "Do you plan to join this exercise?"

"Yes, Professor," she replied. She tossed her hair off her shoulders. "I'm sure I can keep my sleeves clean."

"I see." He smirked at her. "Don't complain when you cannot."

She nodded dismissively and set her Potions notebook on the table. He walked behind her and
paused to examine Ginny's workspace. Hermione could feel his cloak brush against hers and his smell flooded her senses.

"Miss Weasley, I forbid you from assisting Miss Granger should her sleeves become soiled." Ginny stared up at him in surprise and glanced at her friend. Hermione glowered fixedly at the table then pushed off her stool, bumping against Snape's leg and back as she did so.

He gasped. He still hurt from their session. With a grunt of satisfaction, she pulled off her robe and rolled her sleeves up, carefully and deliberately. The exposed bruise bloomed stark against her wrist. She stared defiantly at him as she sat down and was startled when he licked his lips with the very tip of his tongue and swallowed.

Insight flashed and she straightened upright.

On the one hand, he was humiliating her by forcing her to display his handiwork. On the other hand, the mark was proof of a shared private experience. A secret claim each on the other.

Then it was over.

He barked orders and scrawled the needed ingredients on the board. She hurried with Ginny to collect what they needed and they worked together. It was indeed messy, and she was thankful that she had bared her forearms.

When Snape was at the back of the room, Ginny leaned close to her to chat under cover of working on the exercise.

"What's with him? This is one of the easiest assignments he's given us. Ever. And it's kind of fun."

"I don't know." She pressed her lips together.

"Do you think he's setting a trap?"

She paused in her measurement, stared at the green powder she was handling. "I hadn't thought about that."

"For you? Or us? Does he know?"

Hermione shrugged, trying to concentrate. She felt awkward, as though she couldn't control her movements. The box she was measuring from jumped in her hand and spilled twice the amount into her cauldron, turning the mixture a bruised puce. She cursed to herself, thinking quickly how to fix what should have been an easy assignment.

"So, Miss Granger," he said at her shoulder, looking down into the cauldron. "What seems to have happened here?"

She leaned over the table with her eyes fixed on the spoiled brew and refused to reward him with a look. "My hand shook, and I was just going to repair the damage."

"Really? Why would your hand shake, Miss Granger? Muscle fatigue, perhaps?"

She glared up at him. He was openly mocking her now, his lip curling into a sneer, and a swell of anger rose up in her belly.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I hope you can cover the cost of the extra supplies," he murmured, "that box you emptied I bought personally." Hermione felt Ginny twitch beside her, and
Snape's eyes flickered from her to the red head and back. His jaws clenched, and she shook her head almost imperceptibly, *no, I didn't tell anyone.*

He lifted his head, staring down at her from the corner of his eye, then waved his wand over the cauldron. Vanished. "Detention, Miss Granger. No points for today’s work."

Her jaw dropped. "Why did you do that Se-sir? I could have repaired it!" Pants, that was a close slip! She jerked back when he lunged forward to hiss at her, both hands planted on the table inches from hers.

"Because you need to learn restraint, Miss Granger. Because you need to learn to control your gestures, even if your body aches.” His breath washed over her and his hair swung forward to frame his face and focus attention on his down-turned mouth.

Flee. Every fiber of her recoiled. But when he said “aches” she remembered the aching between her legs she’d felt as she struggled for sleep and she forced herself to push toward him, if only by millimeters.

To her surprise, he withdrew the same fractional distance.

Then he tapped the cauldron, and she gawked as the potion returned, just as it had been before she tried to add the final ingredient.

Beside her, Ginny shuffled in her seat. What was this? Generosity? Kindness? Lunacy?

"Finish your assignment, Miss Granger. But I expect you in my office at seven tonight to serve your detention. And visit Madam Pomfrey about that wrist.”

He moved to another table. She flapped her hands to dispel the tension, then picked up the box of green powder and measured again. This time it worked well and she was rewarded with a beautiful silver bubble that rose with a tinkling sound and bounced erratically across the dungeon ceiling with those of her class mates. Everyone was giggling and magicking the bubbles around, joking with each other.

Hermione stole a glance at Snape. For a moment, she saw him relaxed and unguarded, smiling slightly up at the bubbles as well. Then he met her eyes and his face closed again. Her brows puckered in confusion. He rolled his eyes and began collecting supplies from the tables.

The class shuffled out, lingering to poke at the balls as long as possible. Hermione packed slowly, waiting for the room to clear.

Ginny edged beside her. "Hurry up.”

"Don't worry about me, go on."

Her friend frowned at her but picked her way across the room, glancing back occasionally. The door swung closed behind her, leaving Hermione the last student in the room.

"Miss Granger, why are you still here?" Snape asked as he walked beneath the bubbles and burst them with light flicks of his wand.

"Why am I serving detention?"

He stopped to look at her. "No honorific?"
"No, not now. Why?"

He waved his wand, making all the remaining bubbles vanish, then moved to her side. He leaned a hip against the table. "As I said, you need to learn restraint and control."

She slammed her book onto the table. "I did not drop the box deliberately, it jumped from my...." She trailed off, stared at him open-mouthed. "You did that."

"And if I did?" He rested his palms against the top of the table.

She punched him in his arm as hard as she could, then gasped and covered her mouth, stammering an apology.

He lifted his head slightly and regarded her beneath lowered lids. "As I was saying, restraint and control. And don't forget, Miss Granger, I am still your teacher and you are still a student."

She lifted her chin and returned his gaze evenly. He turned to face forward again. "Severus," she said softly. His cheeks flushed, but he didn’t look at her.

"My friends...they saw the note you left on the phial. And they know you caught me -- they saw the bruise, well, everyone has now. And I think they suspect -- "

"That I know you stole from me?" he finished for her.

"Yes. I mean to say, they didn't know it was payment. That's still between us."

Snape glared at her. "No, Hermione, stole. What you took, Hermione, was my privacy, something you shouldn’t have tampered with." He lingered over her name as he repeated it, and his voice trailed to an end.

"I hear an 'and' hanging," she said.

He flashed a smirk. "Yes, an 'and' indeed." He turned from the table and slid his right hand the short distance across the table to rest barely against hers. "You're a smart witch, Hermione. You’re interested. I’m experienced."

Her pulse pounded as she broke into a cold sweat and she churned his words over. On the face of it, he was entreating sexual favors. She’d interrupted him, been where she shouldn’t have been. She had only to tell Dumbledore or McGonagall that Snape had propositioned her. But that wouldn’t be right. He could point out that she’d stolen from him — which would cause problems for the DA’s plans. Hermione had spent the last night mulling over her body’s responses to what she’d read, what they’d done, finding herself wet and frustrated. On the face of it, he was stating the simple truth that she was evading: they both wanted the same thing.

Hermione moved her hand to cover his and felt his fingers tremble.

"It will take time for you to learn what I need you to know." He wiggled his fingers to mesh them with hers. "More than that, I want to be sure you understand what I'm asking of you."

She waited, not trusting herself to speak, her heart skipping beats as her mouth dried.

Snape looked fully at her, his face less than a foot from hers. "Please,” he breathed and pursed his lips, moistening them. “Come tonight in clothing you can move in.”

Hermione nodded, finding her voice. "Where should I meet you?"
"My office. Seven," he said and pulled his hand from hers. "Now, go. Go to the hospital wing and get that bruise seen to."

"Did you have your own bruises looked at?"

"Impertinent," Snape snapped, frowning at her, then lowered his eyes and continued more gently, "as little as Madam Pomfrey would be surprised to see those marks on me, no, I did not, and will not. I bought them and I will keep them."

"Then neither will I."

He eyed her again and inclined his torso towards her. For a moment, she thought he might touch her again, but he turned on his heel and vanished into the class workroom.

---

"Hermione! Over here!" Ron shouted at her when she walked into the entrance hall from the stairwell to the dungeon. He and Harry waved at her and she joined them. "What happened in Potions today? What's with him?"

"I have no idea," she said. "That box just moved on its own."

"Did he really give you your potion back?" Harry asked, his eyes wide. "I couldn't believe that when Ginny said so."

"I was surprised too," she agreed. "But yes, he did."

Ron hooked his arm about her waist, snuggling her against him. "Do you still have detention?"

She nodded. "I tried to get out of it, but he wouldn't budge."

"Bloody git. Still, at least the class was fun for a change. 'Bout time, after six years of class and a whole year working together, Snape would finally lighten up."

The three went into the great hall and settled at a table. Plates of food appeared on the table, and pitchers of pumpkin juice and water. They each poured a beverage and watched Ron tuck into his food.

"Hermione," Harry said, "I'm still confused by Snape's behavior."

She shrugged, broke a biscuit and buttered it. "I can't begin to explain. Who can get inside his head?"

"Well true," Ron muttered around a mouth of chicken. "Anyway, when do we use the potions? Has Seamus said anything to anyone?"
4 Sept 98, Potions Master's Office

Chapter Summary

What’s a good girl to do in detention besides daydream?

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Hermione tossed her book bag over her shoulder and quietly left the Gryffindor common room. She'd left her friends in the great hall, finishing dessert. She had watched Snape at the teachers' table, eating and talking quietly to Professors Flitwick and Vector. For all the years she had seen him, she'd never thought much beyond him than that he was impenetrable, forbidding. She left table before he did, knowing that she had less than an hour to change, collect her things, and make her way down to his office in the dungeon.

The dungeon was dim and quiet, with most of the students still enjoying themselves at dinner. She had seldom had detention with Snape and, until now, had tried to avoid seeking him out outside of class. Eventually she found his office and stood outside, wondering if he was within or not. She extended her hand to knock, but the door swung quietly open before she could.

"Come in."

She entered cautiously. His office was dimly lit, the walls covered in shelves of bottles and books. Snape was sitting behind his desk, marking scrolls, his hair obscuring his face. Hermione wondered idly how many vats of red ink he went through in the course of the year. She stood just inside the door and waited.

"Sit, silly girl," he said irritably, not pausing or glancing up. She noticed then a stuffed, threadbare armchair just in front of his desk and she sat. The door swung shut with a quiet click and she heard the lock snick closed.

"Sit, silly girl," he said irritably, not pausing or glancing up. She noticed then a stuffed, threadbare armchair just in front of his desk and she sat. The door swung shut with a quiet click and she heard the lock snick closed.

"Sit, silly girl," he said irritably, not pausing or glancing up. She noticed then a stuffed, threadbare armchair just in front of his desk and she sat. The door swung shut with a quiet click and she heard the lock snick closed.

She watched him work, his spiky script darting across the scroll, a seemingly endless thread of red. It reminded her of the essays she'd written for him, how crushed she had been her first few years to get back a marked-up scroll that seemed to sneer with commentary on her stupidity. She eventually learned his approach was generic and consistent. Even the Slytherins got bleeding scrolls returned to them.
She was still wool-gathering when a mantle clock above her marked the hour, its chime reminding her of a clock her grandfather had and of Christmas morning as a child, racing into the family room for presents as soon as the clock struck seven. After a moment, she realized he had stopped working and was sitting watching her, his own face unreadable, waiting for her attention.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"I, oh, the clock sounds like one my grandparents had, and I loved to hear it on holidays."

"Interesting."

"What, sir?"

"I'm trying to recall the last student who sat in my office awaiting detention who was oblivious enough to smile inanely."

"Why the bubble potion, Professor?"

A pained expression darted across his face. He stood up and pressed a shelf out of the way, disclosing a dark hallway. "Come."

He silently cast *Lumos* and led her into the dark as the shelf closed behind them. At the other end, another door opened into a larger room filled with filtered light. The furnishings were what she had become to think of as standard Hogwarts antiques, a desk, a table with two chairs, more shelves of books, a battered sofa with a cluster of pillows and a throw, and a few mismatched armchairs. In the clear space at the center of the room stood a bolster-like object that looked like a tan-colored punching bag mounted at an angle.

There was a door directly opposite and two to her left, all closed. The door they’d entered through was covered with a full length mirror. The light in the room came from several tall, narrow windows to her right, and she realized the light was filtered through water.

"Are we below the lake surface, Professor?" she asked, taking a couple steps toward the windows. He caught her arm, stopping her, and released his light grasp immediately.

"Yes, but I must ask you, while we are here, don't call me professor. Or sir."

She fought the urge to ask, and returned a stoic gaze, waiting.

"Just Snape. Or Severus." His nostrils flared. She inclined her head indicating understanding. "Did you dress comfortably?"

She put her bag and her school robe on the desk, to one side of the black bag he’d had in the potion’s classroom, revealing the teal velour jogging set she’d worn.

“Definitely Muggle clothing, but suited to our needs.”

“Glad you approve.”

“Indeed. Now, the crop has never been my preferred implement, so — ”

"Then why — "

"I was acting out the scene. I didn't expect to have company." He lifted a flogger from the black bag on the desk, shook the tails loose. "I'd prefer to start you with this. The braided cat, which I had that day, is also unacceptable as a beginner whip."
Leather strips of maroon and warm beige wrapped the handle in a herringbone pattern. Its tails were foot long, half inch wide strips of brown suede. On impulse she sniffed it as she combed her fingers through the blades and a thrill zinged from between her legs to her spine. The faint scent of tanned hide underlay the spice and herbal smells she now associated with Severus.

"You like leather."

She hummed at his observation as she continued to stroke the tails. "Suppose."

The soft hiss of his slow inhale sharpened her awareness. He's irritated, but why? She sneaked a glance at him under her brows. Predictably, he'd folded his arms and his lips and brows had drawn into parallel lines across his face.

"Miss Granger --"

"Hermione --"

"Hermione, I've already appeared naked before you, physically and emotionally. It's not unreasonable to expect some disclosure from you regarding your needs."

Her needs. She pinched a spongy strip between her fingers. Admitting the fragrance and feel of leather did something to her, to him of all people, when she didn't even understand it herself.... She'd never thought about enjoying the sensations as being a need. "Y-yes," she stammered. "I guess I like it."

"Any sense more than another? One earlier than another?"

"Odor, then touch, I guess. It's hard, because I imagine the smell when I see it. I like to touch it, too."

His sole made a sound in the carpet as he shifted his weight. "It may surprise you, but my goal isn't to embarrass you."

Her head popped up and she met him face on. His brows were drawn and lifted, as though she were a troublesome potion requiring analysis.

"You've just begun exploring your own sensuality. I don't expect you to have much self-awareness. I do ask that you make some conscious effort to improve your understanding of yourself. I'm encouraged that you know your mind fills in for sensory gaps."

"You're not angry?" she blurted.

His head retracted. "What makes you think that?"

Any number of responses filled her head but she chose the one that betrayed how attuned she'd become to his moods. "Your breathing changed."

The lines across his forehead lightened and she had the impression of amusement. "I'm puzzled, not angry. You're acting in ways I consider out of character. The Hermione Granger I've suffered for seven years wouldn't have gone along with obviously fake detention without a barrage of questions. I'm a spy. My survival depends on others' predictability."

"In other words, explain myself?" she asked. "I was curious."

"About what?"
"What would happen, why I felt the way I did. Why I was turned on."

"Tea?"

He took another slow breath then gestured to the tiny dinette table. The utensils and china he set out matched those in the Gryffindor common room. Hogwarts standard institutional. Perhaps the metal trim on his showed a bit more wear. He produced a tin of unremarkable assorted biscuits from somewhere as the water boiled. She took one reflexively and nibbled at it when she realized it was the same generic Tesco brand her parents preferred. He offered milk, sugar cubes, and fruit-flavored hard candies. Plopped a single lemon drop into his own cup and stirred with the more tarnished of the two spoons. It could have been tea with anyone, anywhere, but it was Snape in his private rooms with an awkward topic looming.

"How many of my periodicals did you read?"

She shrugged. "A couple. I lost track of time."

"When?"

"The afternoon of the Welcome Feast. We arrived early."

He set the spoon in his saucer silently. "Had you ever read such before?"

"In a library. *Exit to Eden*, I think it was called. A couple years ago on summer hols. It was a novel, no pictures."

Did his eyes flash?

"What did you think of it?"

"I wasn't sure." She giggled, concentrated on stirring her tea. "I didn't check it out. Mum would have had kittens."

"No opinion at all."

She pressed her knees together and concentrated on the swirling specks at the bottom of her cup. "I found the concept of a private island dedicated to sexual pleasure hard to believe."

"But not what they did in The Club?"

He had read it. She wasn't sure she could meet his gaze. Was it more unnerving that they had similar interests or that they were discussing it at school over tea? Slytherin S&M book club. Maybe it was a Death Eater thing -- her mind transported her back into Malfoy’s dungeon and she suppressed a shudder, but her spoon chattered as she placed it in her saucer. "I suppose if you're held captive -- "

"The submissives were there voluntarily. Free will. Because they desired it." He snorted. "Did you think I didn't consent to your use of me? That you'd overpowered me?"

"Of course not. You could have picked me up and tossed me out."

"Yet I didn't. And you're here freely. Can leave freely if you wish. We are here because we want to be here." He selected and munched a digestive. "I offered to teach you. You've evidently accepted that offer, or are at least intrigued. I can explain what I will get from providing this service to you. I'd like to understand what you hope to gain."
Explain herself. Could explain everything except this. She opened and shut her mouth several times, ended by staring at the tea pot.

"Let me rephrase." He crossed his ankles and leaned back. The chair creaked. "I've hired professional dominatrices in the past. While they obtain non-monetary benefits, it is for them primarily a commercial activity. I won't offer you money. You need no assistance with grades, if that weren't repulsive to both of us. I'd provide a reference for you post-schooling if asked regardless, but few non-Slytherins ever approach me for that. Emotionally I'll be of little use to you. What possessions I have are largely books but they are not on the table. I can't see you wanting any of my personal effects other than incidental restricted substances. That leaves me, my knowledge, and my abilities. What can I, Severus Snape, offer you, Hermione Granger?"

He rested his hands on one another on his lap and waited.

"I don't know why I find it exciting," she said slowly, kept her eyes on his fingers.

"Why does anyone like a particular food? I can't help you with why's. I can help you explore your sensuality without hurting yourself or your partners."

Hermione forced herself to look at him directly. His expression was neutral, probably a controlled mask, and she was reasonably certain her nerves were all over her face. "How's and what's, then. How to use a whip, how to control it, what turns me on or off."

He hummed, sipped his tea. "It's not all pain. It can be service as well, any activity that requires subsuming your will to another for their arousal or pleasure."

"You make it sound like it's the same as running an errand for someone."

"It can be," he said, leaning toward her. "Most of sex happens between the ears anyway. Or, perhaps you need to accept that you require the presence of leather to get wet."

"But I don't. I mean — no, I don't." He didn't just say that, did he?

"But it might help." He smirked. "You spent several minutes petting and smelling my flogger, indulging your senses. There's nothing wrong with doing so, but if it engages you, shouldn't you know that it has some effect on you?"

"Do you like leather?" Take that for prying, Snape.

He laughed. "I like how that flogger feels when it's used on me in certain ways. It's a means to an end. Leather of itself doesn't interest me. Does learning to flog interest you?"

"It does."

"Did you enjoy dominating me?"

Her stomach flipped and she stuttered vaguely.

"It's fine if you did. Preferable, to my mind. We've agreed we both consented."

"But enjoying having power over someone, it's bad."

"Bad?" One brow arched. "Is this Muggle morality? Did you feel deliciously naughty, Hermione? Do you now?"

Slimy git! Her skin burned. "That's not, not, that's not the point, Professor — “
He raised his hand in warning.

“Snape, then. That’s not the point!”

“What is the point?”

She just stared at him.
4 Sept 98, Potions Master's Chambers

Chapter Summary

First lessons are bittersweet.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

“What is the point?”

She just stared at him.

Snape pushed the tea service into the center of the table and rose. “Come.” He moved to the punching bag thing and laid his hand on it. “This is a practice dummy. The surface responds very similarly to skin, so you have accurate feedback.”

Hermione set her palm on it. Smooth, like leather, and vaguely warm.

He handed her the crop. “For illustrative purposes only. The crop can be a subtle tool, but it’s not typically used on or by beginners. For best effect it’s worked up to, although it can be handled crudely with acceptable results.”

"Like I did." She looked at it now in the better light, the thin burgundy cordovan leather braiding, the handle made of cork, the pommel with a gold metal finial.

Snape took a step back, making room. "Remember how you beat me, Hermione, and strike the dummy."

Hermione glanced at him, positioned herself, and brought the crop down across the dummy, feeling foolish and awkward. A red line striped across, reminding her exactly of the stripes she had made on him, and she turned her head towards him and waited for a response.

"Good." He stood behind her, covered her hand on the crop with his, and guided her through the movement as he described it. "Move from your hip, through your torso, to your arm. The tool is an extension of the gesture. Understand?” His scent surrounded her and the warmth of his body against her started a prickling of her skin. He repeated the motion and she let him maneuver her though the throw, his hands firm on her.
"I think so." He stepped clear again, and she swung, feeling the movement flow from her core. The resulting stripe was wider and darker. She paused, and struck again, with the same result.

He took the crop and moved before her and she fell back. He’d shed his coat and was just in his white shirt. "Observe."

She watched, his strikes were smooth and practiced, demonstrating economy of movement. Graceful. For a moment, she felt ridiculous, knowing that her movement was clumsy and uneven in comparison. He looked back at her. "What did you observe?"

"No extraneous movement. Complete focus. Effortless." *Everything I’m not*, she added to herself, biting her lip in irritation.

He shook the hair from his face. "Compare the marks."

His stripes were significantly darker and deeper than any of hers. The welts were actually weeping. She ran her fingers over the moist lines and jerked her hand back.

"You want to be beaten like that?" she asked, looking up at him.

He scoffed, set the crop on the desk, and picked up the whip. "I have in the past. I don't expect you to deliver a blow close to that. Consider it a word in a new vocabulary."

"Experience?" She took the flogger from him as he offered it, feeling numb.

"Some, but also height, weight, sex. What does that mean for you, Hermione?"

She regarded him cautiously. "That I should worry if you come at me with a crop?"

Snape flashed a half-smile. "Perhaps, but mainly that it's highly unlikely that you could seriously harm me."

"Meaning that a safe word really isn't necessary with me."

"We both know that." She expected a sneer to accompany his statement, but none did. "I would very much appreciate being permitted a safe word when we play, if only because we have just started together. One last point about the crop, which you seem to know instinctively. Only strike on fleshy parts. The rule of thumb with the crop is the buttocks, the back and front of the thighs."

"And the palms," she added with a smirk.

"That is your addition, and your message was made clear. The crop can be used to direct attention, to caress, to indicate position, with the underscore of threat. Psychological elements, maybe a bit advanced. For now, I'll keep it out of my implement bag."

She gestured at the dummy with the whip. "Same motion?"

"No. I'll teach you two basic throws that will force you to concentrate on the tips." He caught up the braided cat from the bag and gestured for her to make room.

"Why on the tips?"

"Because if you strike the target with the middle of the blades the ends will accelerate and wrap around. Unless you intend for that to happen, which takes practice to control, and I honestly don’t enjoy the sensation." He began an easy left and right swiping motion across the target and spoke as he worked. "You want to control both forehand and backhand throws, make them as even as
possible. Experiment with distance, from more contact to fanning the target. Do the same with the vertical throw." The target blushed a warm pink. He altered to an up-down brush, then retreated.

She digested this information, swung the flogger to get the feel of it, then tried a sideways strike. The blades made a dull series of thuds and the blades swished off the dummy. His tails had kept neatly together, but hers splayed out across the surface.

"That's fine, you can alter the strike by altering speed or adjusting your distance," he said. "For now, focus on making the tails obey you. Try both, one may feel more natural."

Hermione kept swinging until she found a combination that allowed her consistent motions both ways. Her arm and shoulder burned, her calves ached. She stretched her arm across her body and felt Severus take the whip from her hand.

"It's past nine and that's enough for now. Accuracy will come with time. I can give you an analgesic potion for the soreness, if you like."

"I'll need a target and a flogger to practice."

"Neither of which are issued as part of a standard Hogwarts’ student kit," he said. "Easily remedied. I'll teach you the spell to transfigure the surface of an object to show your blows. Perhaps you can find something appropriate in your dorm or in the Room of Requirement, or the Room itself may deliver. I'd suggest using one of your little friends, but that would be a whole different fantasy." She gave him a stony look. "That was intended as a joke, Hermione. The flogger," he silently duplicated the item and handed her the duplicate. "Disguise it before you leave. You'll note that the duplicate is not an exact copy."

On the duplicate, the deep red leather had been changed to a light grey, the tan to a musty green, and the blades were charcoal. House colors. How fitting. He taught her the spell to transform surfaces and watched as she transfigured the flogger into a hardbound copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and pushed it deep into her bag.

"I suppose I should go." Over, the evening was over, and her lungs seemed to have stopped working. The whole time she’d practiced she’d felt the heat of his grasp like a thermal shadow. His body had curled over and around hers and she’d never so much as held his hand.

"I'll walk you through my office." He tidied up the room -- transformed the target back into an oversized green pouf, placed the whips into the bag, and sent the biscuit tin back where it came from -- all with minimal effort, wand gestures tight and clean. He didn't move unless he had to, for example, when he opted to manually push her chair under the table but levitated his into place, because his coat was draped across the back of the chair she’d used.

Just as Severus lifted his jacket, Hermione said, "May I…?"

He stalled with his arm extended. "May you what?"

She licked her lips. "Touch you? Before you dress."

He straightened and turned his head toward her. "Why?"

"Curious."

“That response will save you a few times, Hermione,” he said, tipping his head so he looked down his nose at her. “But I’ll agree, on some conditions. No contact below the waist, no loosening or removing of garments. On either of us.”
"That's fine." She pressed her open palms against her thighs, trying to covertly dry them, while her mind set up a chant of Think think think think.

"Shall I just stand here?"

Hermione pulled her wand from her robe. Almost without active thought, she made his chair scoot beside him and transform into a tall stool like those in the Potions classroom. He perched lopsidedly on it, one heel resting on a crossbar, and watched her approach. He kept facing forward as she circled to his back and tucked her wand into her sleeve. When she rested her hand on his right shoulder blade, he pivoted his head to look at her from the corner of his eye.

"Are you touching me because I am me or because I am a convenient body?"

As she worked through the logic of his question she felt the heat from her hand warm his skin. Her heart pounded and her voice fled. "You," she managed to whisper.

"Continue."

She glided her fingers across his shirt with just the barest pressure, brought her face close to his spine and inhaled. When she rested a hand on each side of his waist he twitched -- ticklish! -- she slipped her arms around him and pressed her chest to his back. He'd tensed as she'd embraced him but relaxed once she stopped moving. No way to know what he was thinking, but she was filled with lightness at being permitted to hold without being held. After a minute or so, she rubbed his chest and he tightened against the caress. Keeping her left arm curved around him, she retracted her right and stroked her fingers over his hair. It was limp with oil, no argument, had been greasy the day before as well, but the smell of Hogwarts-issue shampoo was unmistakable. Whatever he did or failed to do, it just didn't work for him. Alert for tangles, she pushed her hand under the fall of it to expose the pale skin of his neck. He'd closed his eyes, from what she could see of his profile. She nuzzled behind his ear, taking in the scent of him, his clothes, vague tang of sweat and earwax -- not unwashed odors but evidence of a long work day. Hermione tilted her head and brushed her lips against the fine hairs of his hairline just back of his ear.

His chest jumped as if he'd been kicked. She expected him to leap up, lock his punishing grip on her hand, at least bark at her. Instead, he simply held himself stiffly erect so she was uncertain if she should release him. A thought occurred to her.

"May I kiss -- I didn't ask -- "

"Please." He turned his head to meet hers, his eyelids nearly closed. Was it a request for a kiss, consent to be kissed -- she guessed and put her mouth to his. He didn't return any pressure. When she opened her mouth, he did the same. When she lapped his inner lips, he widened his jaws, granting her more access. Their tongues didn't meet until she sought for his, even then he seemed intent on only echoing her movements. His docility unnerved her. Did this upset him?

She withdrew, confused at his response and her own surging lust, his heartbeats racing under her fingertips light on his chest. Their foreheads rested against each other. He wetted his lips by sucking them into his mouth and she realized he was watching her. From this proximity, meeting his gaze was exactly like staring into an abyss.

"If you're sated," he said softly.

"I'll go," she replied and made to pull decisively from him. He read her gesture and clasped her hand to his chest with the flat of his palm.
"I don't mean to chase you away."

"I do have homework, and it's Friday night."

"It's unlike me to be lenient for students' convenience," he replied and his eyes narrowed. A joke, must be. She giggled uncertainly, got the reward of a half-smile before he kissed the backs of her fingers and released her. "I have duties of my own to prepare for."

Hermione busied herself with her robe and bag, checking and rechecking closures. She heard the soft whisper as the stool became a chair and was pushed under the table, the sounds of him dressing. He'd discarded his robe near hers and she made way for him to pull it from the table and put it on. He met her eyes in the mirror's reflection as he adjusted hair, collar, cravat, jacket, robe, finished by finger-combing his hair into place. Then the door swung inward and he sent a ball of light into the passage before he gestured for her to go first. She had the distinct impression of leaving an altered reality once the shelved door closed them into his office. He seemed to loom over her and the sternness returned to his face.

"Hurry back to your tower, Miss Granger, so you're not out after curfew."
**Scenes from the Dungeon**

Chapter Summary

Twistier than a nest of mating garter snakes.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Note to readers: Expect at least one update a week through November while NaNoWriMo is underway. Thanks for reading!

---

**2 Sept 98, Dungeon**

Start of school year. Per usual, essential tasks and unnecessary dramas piled high as a Fifth Year’s dessert plate. First task: get the students' schedules distributed. Auxiliary first task: last minute prep for classes. Second task: orient the new First Years on Slytherin House history. Auxiliary second task: curtail any zealot lunacy. Third and fourth tasks: establish and maintain absolute order in the House. Somewhere in the second digits of his list he'd added "sleep, eat, read."

He stole a few minutes peace in his office between appointments to swill down tannicky tea, noted the next attendant to his advisory sessions for NEWT and OWL candidates, and muffled a growl. Draco Malfoy.

The whole little nest of sympathizers should have skipped their final year. But the boy’d returned, clearly just as deluded as his parents. Likely the few others who came back suffered the same loose grasp on reality. Deluded -- not only about the outcome of the war but about their positions in the House.

Handling that muddle -- simple. He enjoyed disillusioning idiots and it gave him an excuse to prowl. No, that wasn't what frustrated him.

If Malfoy'd succeeded in the Dark Lord's task, one vital thing beyond the obvious would have been different. Shame of incomplete schooling would have been eclipsed by the glory of the Dark Lord's thoroughly Slytherin gratitude. But he'd failed, and twice failed meant more than dishonor squared. There'd never been a Hogwarts dropout in either the Black or Malfoy families. Draco Malfoy carried the full weight of restoring family honor tarnished by terrorists, torturers, and traitors. Hence his
slinking return.

And here he was, Severus Snape, still alive despite supposedly making an Unbreakable Vow with the boy's mother. That whispered footnote had coupled with his outliving the Dark Lord and spawned strange results. Distrust he expected, but he couldn’t have predicted how his non-bigoted snakes mooned after him as though he'd invented a Midas Glove. Pity he'd earned neither sentiment.

Why must he suffer such drama his last year in the wretched school?

He Vanished the dregs from his cup and called Malfoy into his office.

3 Sept 98, Potions Classroom

He exhausted his prodigious vocabulary of obscenities in the two minutes after she dashed from the classroom. Smashed and repaired the work tables three times in the ten minutes that followed. Crumpled to the floor and almost longed to be summoned to the Dark Lord's side, even to be tossed to Bella for entertainment. Then he pulled himself together and went to dinner. His finest honed skill: to force himself to do things he loathed without betraying himself. To maintain a seamless facade over savage turmoil.

Muggles called it impression management.

He called it Slytherin ideals raised exponentially.

That evening, after he'd settled his asps (tryouts for team sports planned, Firstie questions answered, two girls who'd crossed into puberty sent to Pomfrey, Malfoy's infant coup squelched), he slumped in the leather chair in the classroom's workroom to review the next day's lesson plans. And stared at the last class of the day, the Seventh Years.

He'd planned to review the remedial exercise on temperature control he'd herded them through at the end of class Thursday.

Granger.

Snape rubbed his face and fisted both hands in his hair. If he hadn't been feeling himself up, he could turn her in for enticing him. He'd considered telling Dumbledore anyway, admitting the whole bathetic mess of his life, which would be misinterpreted and lead to enforced social outings, a few scattered blind dates with whatever witch was daft or desperate enough, cow-eyed tsking from his female peers -- no, he'd been down that path.

Most distressingly, he'd enjoyed it. Not the cudgeling so much -- she hadn't a damn clue what she was doing and he'd feared for his genitals -- but everything else. His slip of nearly giving her points had been from shocked admiration. Her assumption of power, his almost too eager submission, her direct handling of his body. Her stripping the gloves from him stunned him -- his fantasies often included magical disrobement, but what wizard's didn't? And when she'd turned his own words against him to mop up his spunk....

He shifted in the chair. The stripes stung.

He should tell Dumbledore they were doing something dicey in the castle. Made a note to search Myrtle's bathroom. But if he mentioned what she'd stolen, he'd have to admit why he'd let her take it. Explain how he'd kept it hidden in plain sight, largely secure and overlooked because of its uncommon uses and casual storage. Only a dozen potions called for it, in particular a notoriously undetectable abortifacient. He smirked. He'd brewed it himself since his sixth year once he realized
how much Squibs and unscrupulous rivals would pay for the fiddly concoction. No Hogwarts student should need it for that use, especially since contraceptive spells were routinely taught in Third Year sex ed. The draw had to be one of its marginally better known applications as a superb explosives amplifier. They probably believed they could defeat the remaining Death Eaters themselves.

Best no one knew he had that particular substance on campus. Least of all the old man.

Trapped.

Tomorrow she'd be there, first row, end table. No doubt had already told the whole tower what she'd caught him doing. What she'd done. Crowed about it, even. "Had him begging for release, but he got what was coming."

He sighed and flipped through the lesson plan again. He'd managed to keep his interests secret from the Dark Lord, Bella, Wormtail -- even Lucius and Cissy remained unaware -- and somehow a irritating school girl had laid him bare. Figuratively, since he'd stripped himself. The paper crunched as his fingers knotted, recalling bone on bone.

Could have snapped her wrist, but he held back. Even though she might strut, he'd marked her and she'd remember he had teeth. Would she heal the bruise and hold her tongue or bandy it about, garner sympathy, advertise his cruelty?

What if she’d kept it and hidden it? He sucked through pursed lips and rubbed his thumb over his palm. What if her interest were sincere, if she wore it as a badge, the same way he regarded his weals? She'd be silent then too, enjoying her secret.

Had to know if she'd hid it or healed it. How? He drummed on the desk as he reviewed potions, discarded them steadily until he hit on one so flippant the class would be distracted while he interrogated her.

He stumbled over a dark lump in the classroom store closet as he confirmed supplies for the changed plans. Granger’s bag. Stifled the urge to incinerate it. Whatever her failings, she remained legitimately the best student in the castle. Snape finished his preparations and headed out for midnight patrol with the bag tucked under his robes.

4 Sept 98, Potions Master’s Chambers

It was nearly ten when he closed the door behind her and retreated back into his private rooms, spewing wards as he went. He'd forgotten how enticing he found watching someone wield a whip, if only on a target.

The body-hugging Muggle garments hadn’t hurt. Snape sprawled across the sofa and wedged pillows under his head. He’d suspected since he was a student that half the reason for the Hogwarts’ uniform was to render female forms shapeless. He replayed the scene, lingering over the movements of her hips, how she had irritably bound up her hair, her scowl when he’d taken the flog from her. Just as driven outside the classroom as in.

He chuckled, Summoned a box of chocolate truffles from the cupboard, and let one dissolve in his mouth. The little know-it-all couldn’t help herself. Wouldn’t be one bit surprised if she hurt herself trying to perfect her technique. With luck, one of her quidditch-obsessed friends would set her straight.
He’d been relieved when she tired. Her expression, her intensity, the flogging — he’d not been entirely honest with her about the leather. His whips excited him. Throwing his bullhide braided cat with an audience, seeing his red deer flogger handled — she’d been so focused practicing he’d been able to adjust himself without notice.

And just as he managed to calm himself, she’d stirred him to aching again. Hardening now, just relishing the memory of her tentative exploration of him. She’d been more confident the first time, drunk on adrenaline, surely. The quiver in her voice when she’d asked had echoed the throbbing in his groin. He casually stroked himself and recalled other times he’d been fondled during scenes. The last time he’d paid for a visit, the domme had —

The door alarm sounded and he rolled to his feet with a groan. Without fail, the first few weeks of school promised interrupted nights until the students learned who their new family was and who could be trusted and to not bother him without real cause.
8 Sept 98, Potions Classroom

Chapter Summary

Nothing new in Potions class, but Hermione spent time in the library over the weekend.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom.

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Note to readers: Expect at least one update a week through November while NaNoWriMo is underway. Thanks for reading!

Stroke of brilliance, delaying the Friday’s class topic to Tuesday.

Granger seemed to have decided to sit on her hands. She didn’t even come to the aid of Longbottom when he questioned the boy. Midway through the class, after he’d turned them loose on their brewing, he finally had the chance to observe her. Was she chastened? Distraught? Distrait?

He read nothing. Interesting.

She laid out her ingredients in order of use. She prepped each exactly as described in the book — no, she’d learned a new way of collecting bark off the slippery elm. After a moment’s reflection, he realized she was scraping the specimen exactly as one would scrape a vanilla bean. Clever. Rather than waste time stirring, she set a charm to keep the cauldron’s contents moving as she crushed the daphne berries and added the yellow juice at exactly the right time, before the harvested fluid could set up. She doused the flame and leaned over, watching for the change in hue and the acid bite, sample beaker in one hand and pipette in the other. He approached her table first, noted she never raised her head although her eyes flicked in his direction. Beside her, the Weasley girl lagged a step or two. Behind them, Potter and Weasley struggled to add ingredients within time limits, as they’d once again failed to prep ahead of time. Most of the class fell within reasonable extremes of Granger and Potter — but in the center row, both Longbottom’s and Finnegan’s flames burned dangerous blue.

Snape killed the heat beneath both overheated cauldrons and vanished the contents from the other side of the room. “You two, zeros for the day and three feet on the effects of temperature inconsistencies, due next class.” Neither boy responded and Granger remained bent over her work.
But Malfoy sniggered from the far corner.

Parkinson had become Malfoy’s shadow overnight, predictably perhaps. Malfoy Manor had been badly damaged in the final battle and the Parkinsons had taken the disgraced family in. The pair occupied the table closest to his desk, with the other Slytherin Seventh Years at the three closest tables. Then the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, intermingled, and furthest from his desk and the door, all eleven of the Gryffindors. Far too big a class for such advanced studies, and the extra hour he’d managed to wrangle out of an already stretched schedule seemed to barely improve matters.

By the time he’d completed his circuit, most of the class had deposited their samples on his desk. As the students sorted and cleaned equipment, he reviewed the beakers, ticking off each name with either a passing or failing score, Vanishing the sample itself, and marking the score on the empty beaker’s label. Given the enforced lowered standards he’d had to accept, he’d decided to adopt Slughorn’s lazy grading for the Seventh Years, just to simplify matters. It meant any potion close enough to be recognizable survived.

This strategy cut deepest when he got to the first samples turned in, each from a student he’d openly admit was a competent potioneer. Most of his House, of course, and the Ravenclaws, the Hufflepuffs who’d opted to attend, and a handful of Gryffindors who really tried. Like Granger. He held her beaker to the light. Not a speck of dross. It wasn’t just that her brewing was exemplary; her collection methods impressed him as well. He hunched over his grade book and made notes.

The bell rang, instigating a riot of shuffling and scraping until the room was quiet. He sighed, enjoying the sound of his quill in the silence, and reached blindly toward his drawer for the Cox apple and slab of sharp cheddar he’d tucked away.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Professor?”

His head snapped up. Granger stood at the far edge of his desk, hugging her satchel to her with both arms. Second time in a week he’d been taken unawares by the girl.

“Why are you still here, Miss Granger?”

He could almost see her mind working as she came up with a response.

“What’s being an apprentice like?”

“To a Potions master?” He struggled to keep the surprise out of his voice. “It’s work, Miss Granger. Exacting. Are you considering Potions as a career?”

“No.” She rested her bulging bag on his desk. “I did some research on the bubble potion and saw that a Sylvanus Ciren was known for requiring it from his candidates. I’d never considered — “

“That I’d done any additional training beyond Hogwarts?” he interrupted. His stomach twisted away any appetite he’d had. She took far too many liberties.

“Yes. Rather, no — I assumed you had. But the career counseling we did in Fifth Year didn’t address apprenticeship.” Her eyes shone and her fingers tightened on the fabric of her satchel’s strap. “All they covered were careers. Not specialized training.”

Snape leaned against the back of his chair. “If you seek career advice, make an appointment with me during my office hours.”

“Where would we meet?”
“In my office.” Was the girl dense?

“Sunday?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to spend the day in Hogsmeade?” The first Hogsmeade weekend usually enticed every eligible student and sucked all their distracting babble out of the castle.

She looked down at her bag, her lips compressed. “I planned to spend Sunday in the library. It’s nice and quiet when everyone’s in the village.” Even in the reduced light near his desk he could see her eyes moving under the lids. He wasn’t prepared when her lashes fluttered as she raised her gaze to his. “Your office then, at two?”

“Two. Don’t be late.” He sat up sharply, intending the gesture to be dismissive, but she remained. “Something else, Miss Granger?”

“Was Ciren your…” She hesitated and lowered her eyes again. “You apprenticed to him?”

“Yes, he was my — “ He felt the word lodge in his throat while an awkward heat sparked in his groin. It hadn’t been that kind of relationship at all, completely professional, but he’d served both sexes and with both yearning and possibility so close — push that away. “I studied under him.” He winced inwardly. Even that phrase had a salacious tone.

“Oh.” She made an odd little motion with her head, a swiveled nod. “I’ll be on time, sir.”

Granger hefted her armload, exited the door, and let it fall shut behind her.

He stared after her. All his years teaching maybe thirty students had ever asked him about his post-Hogwarts training. Most had been Slytherins and he treated their interest as simple fawning. His snakes had to learn somewhere, after all. Perhaps Granger was flattering him as well.

Her reluctance to call Ciren by his rightful title unnerved him nearly as much as his own unease, but he drove it from his mind and yanked open the drawer containing his lunch. Midday mealtimes offered one of the few periods of uninterrupted solitude for Heads of House. He refused to waste the time puzzling over inscrutables.
9 Sept 98, Great Hall

Chapter Summary

The gang enjoys breakfast chatter in the Great Hall.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. **AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom**

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Note to readers: Expect at least one update a week through November while NaNoWriMo is underway. Thanks for reading!

“Coming down to watch the tryouts tonight?”

Hermione lowered her newspaper and squinted at Ron. “Can you swallow and say that again?”

Ron washed down his kippers with a gulp of pumpkin juice and repeated himself while he skewered toast on his fork. “Wednesday, Hermione. The big day. Hoping Ginny lets Harry have Seeker again.” He nudged Ginny in the ribs while he reached for the jam jar. “You’re good, Gin, but Harry, you know. He’s Harry.”

Ginny snorted. “Yeah, and you just better be able to keep up. Freddy really got better last year. He only missed one quaffle the whole year.”

“Well, there weren’t many seasoned players, were there?” Ron retorted through a mouthful of jam and toast. All off fighting the war, not fooling around in school. He studied the top of Hermione’s head, buried as she was in her *Prophet* while she sipped coffee. Wouldn’t have made it without her, either, and when they finally realized how right they were together — oh, it was sweet when it finally happened. A little rocky here and there, but that was girls, wasn’t it? And Hermione — well, they were bound to have disagreements. She never really understood quidditch. And she felt they needed to come back for the last year, convinced Mum and Dad, and here he was. The twins hadn’t finished, and they’d done fine. At least Fred had had two years of fun and more Galleons than he could hold before he’d died.

He stabbed down at the remaining kipper on his plate. Missed Fred. George missed Fred, missed having another Weasley helping out at the shop. He’d give Hogwarts a go, for Hermione’s sake and to keep Mum from carping at him, and if he got Keeper again, there’d be a reason to stay. Another
reason. He poked his foot around until his toe connected with Hermione’s shoe and tapped at her.

She lowered the paper and glared at him. “What, Ron? I’ll come watch, I said so.”

“Oh.” He grinned at her, nudged her foot again. “I don’t guess it’ll take too long. Want to go down to the boat house after?”

She patted her stuffed rucksack. “Eleven subjects, Ron, and homework in most of them. Tonight’s Astronomy at 10. And I committed to mentoring the Thursday night study hall as well.”

“Friday, then?” he asked. “You were upset over Snape’s detention the whole weekend, we haven’t had a proper date since — hey, this week’s Hogsmeade weekend. We can go to the Three Broomsticks.” Merlin’s pants, whatever the bat had made her do, she hadn’t settled down until Sunday morning. Ever since she’d been drawing up revision tables. Or reading.

Hermione nodded. “Sounds good.” She tossed the newspaper down on the table and swung the rucksack over her shoulder. “Catch you in Defense,” she said and headed away.

“There she is,” Ginny said quietly, gesturing with her chin. “Slytherin’s new Seeker.”

“Her?” Ron craned to look at the thin girl with dark brown hair bound in tight braids as she wove around students in the aisle between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables. “What happened to Malfoy?”

“Dunno. Alice from Ravenclaw told me yesterday. The Slytherin tryouts were Monday evening.”

“What’s her name?”

“Vivi. Fourth Year. Alice said she’d overheard Candace, the Slytherin captain, saying if Harry was back and got Seeker, Slytherin needed a secret weapon.”

“Her,” Ron replied. He snorted. “No way.”

Ginny shrugged. “It makes as much sense as anything else. Look, Ron, you weren’t here last year. The Slytherin team had to rebuild from scratch. Every player went off to the war —”

“All on You Know Who’s side, I bet —”

“Probably. Slytherin’s strategy always has been overpower and overrun —”

“And cheat —”

“That too. Not last year, though. Candace got captain, and Slytherin’s not had a girl player in twenty years, let alone a girl captain. Their style changed too. More like Ravenclaw, but almost everyone on the team is built small.”

“Even the Beaters?”

“As Beaters go, yeah. There’s their regular Beaters now, see?”

A pair of lanky boys with green and grey scarves swaggered past, one with a giggling Hufflepuff girl on his arm. They were built like twins, both tall and lean, pallid and spotty, and differed only in hair color and style. The one with the girl had brown hair in a plait to his mid-back. The other had dark blond hair clipped short.

“D’ya think Slytherins are pasty by nature?”
Ginny giggled. “That Vivi’s not. Did you get a good look at her? Course, could be because she’s just
back from summer hols.”

“Didn’t pay attention,” Ron muttered, reaching past his sister for another sausage. “Gin, did
Hermione tell you anything about her detention?”

“Not a thing. In fact, she’s changed the subject every time it’s come up. Bit of a record, isn’t it,
getting detention the second day of class?”

“There was that time we flew the car into the Whomping Willow and got detention during the
Welcome Feast.”

“Well, record for Hermione, then.” Ginny grabbed her bag. “She made me a revision table and I’m
supposed to be studying in the library. Aren’t you, too?”

“Yeah, but I’m meeting Harry to practice some quidditch runs.”

“Don’t waste time,” she said and glowered at him before leaving. Man, she was looking more and
more like mum every day.

He turned around and scanned for the Slytherin team. They were just down a bit from where he sat,
at their table of course. The dark-haired Beater had the girl on his lap now, one arm round her back,
the other hand on her hip. Candace rapped the other Beater on the head with a roll of parchment and
he guffawed loudly in response. A scrawny ginger boy leaned over and tugged at Vivi’s plait; she
slapped back at him and hexed his tie backwards.

He’d never seen Slytherins look like so much fun. This bunch horsed around. Or could — they all
sat up proper and orderly as Snape passed them on his way from the staff table. As soon as he was
out the door, the roughhousing resumed, although most of them bundled up books and parchments at
the same time.

Harry caught his eye at the door with their brooms over his shoulder and Ron snatched up his bag.

“Both Hermione and Gin gave me what for,” he said as they made their way through the crowded
hall. “Revision tables, this early in the term?”

“Hermione does that every year, and every year we ignore her,” Harry replied. “I have to tell you,
Ron, I’m tempted to try it this year, just to say I did. Once.”

“She’d never let you live that down, you realize.”

“Yeah, but I’m not the one who’s dating her.” Harry jostled into him and he bumped back. “How’s
that going, anyway?”

“School’s got her on edge.”

“Me too, with what I have curing in my trunk. Come on, we only have an hour if we want to get
washed up before Dark Arts class.”
Ron broke into a jog as he landed and trotted across to where the rest of the candidates waited. No reason why he should join the string of wannabes — he’d blocked every quaffle thrown at him, even when they’d doubled up on him. But Ginny had made it clear, if anyone blew her off, she’d cut them from the team, no matter how good the player or how she knew them. So he took a place in line.

Hermione waved down at him from the stands. He waved back. It looked like she had a book open on her lap. Of course. But she was packing up now and making her way down the bleachers to the stairs that lead to the field.

“Listen up,” Ginny shouted. She held a large clipboard and a red-feathered quill and waited until everyone was quiet. “No surprises here. Freddy, you did really well, but you missed two. I want you as reserve. Ron, congratulations on making Keeper. Wanda, you’re in the empty Beater position. Harry, you outflew everyone again. Rich and Sally, I want you as reserve Beater and Seeker, respectively. The rest of the team stays the same as last year.”

Ron thumped his sister and Harry on the back, trotted toward Hermione, and flung his arms around her. Her sack of books whacked into his ribs.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, Ron." She dropped the bag on the ground and hugged him back. “Class doesn’t start for another couple hours.”

He chuckled into her ear. “Boathouse?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not really enough time. Maybe walk around the stands?”
“Help me take off the gear?” If he could get her pulling off his stuff, maybe she’d get into the mood. He gave her his most enticing smile.

She slung her bag over her shoulder. “Go on. I’ll wait here.”

Harry offered to haul Ron’s equipment up to the dorm, so Ron emerged from the changing room empty-handed. Hermione had settled down on the players’ bench and was flipping through a text book and scowling. She grinned at him when he approached and he took her bag from her.

“You carry too much,” he said as the strap bit into his flesh.

“Only what I need.”

They linked elbows and turned right to walk round the pitch.

“Good job on making Keeper.”

“And you didn’t even have to Confundus Freddy.”

“How’d you know about that?” Her brows bunched as she looked up at him.

“Harry told me. Told me he didn’t give me any Liquid Luck, too. Remember how steamed you got, thinking he had?”

She didn’t respond but stared down at the flattened grass of the path.

“Anyway, I miss McLaggen. Right git, but a good sort.”

“Can we not talk about him any more, please?” Hermione said as she pulled her arm from his.

They continued in tense silence and approached the sharp curve of the end of the pitch before she spoke again.

“Hard to believe this is our last year.”

“Hard to believe I came back.”

She scoffed. “Ron, you never know if you might want to do more than work in your brother’s shop. What if you decided to work in the Ministry?”

“What, with dad and Percy?” He shook his head. “No, I’d like to do something fun. Exciting. Like the joke shop.”

Hermione rubbed his arm with the back of her hand. “How’s George doing, anyway?”

“Fine.” He winced at his tone. “I mean, as well as can be expected.” He jerked his head towards the underside of the bleachers ahead of them, already in deep shadow. “Want to sit there for a bit?”

She chuckled. “By ‘sit’ you mean ‘snog,’ don’t you? Sure, as long as we don’t get caught. I’ll set an alarm.”

Ron groaned. “Just once I wish you’d stop timing us.”

“You know how we are,” she replied, already fiddling with her watch. “We get involved — “

“But you enjoy it, don’t you?”
“Of course. But I have class tonight.”

He moved amongst the pilings of the bleachers to an open area, sent a Sweeping charm to brush away any litter, and Transformed his robe into a blanket for them. She followed after a moment of her own charm-casting and settled beside him.

“Privacy spells? What are you worried about?”

“Teachers, students. Mrs. Norris. Habit.” She leaned against him. “I’m glad we’re together.”

He hummed into her hair, put his arms round her, and kissed her neck. “Hogsmeade this weekend.”

“I know.” She combed her fingers into his hair, clamped her hand on his head, and pushed her mouth on his. He kissed her back, held her tightly against him, and fell backward, pulling her down with him. They lay close together, panting and kissing, and she struggled up to straddle him.

“Nice.” He chuckled and cupped his hands over her boobs.

She sat back and batted his hands away. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.” She smiled and leaned over him, her hands planted on either side of his head. “Maybe I just want to do this.” And she ground her pelvis against his.

Ron moaned and closed his eyes. She’d done this from time to time and he’d learned to deal. He tilted his hips upward so she rubbed on his stiffy. She lifted from him.

“No, just let me.”

He stared at her in the near darkness. “What’s the fun for me then?”

“Letting me enjoy myself should be enough fun. Just lie still.”

He huffed, put his hands on her waist, and pushed her back down. “You’re a tease, Hermione.”

She squirmed, then stopped again. “Why do you kiss me back when I kiss you?”

“What kind of question is that? Because you taste good. I don’t know. I’m supposed to.”

“Would you not? Just once? Let me kiss you — “

“Without me kissing back?” He studied her. She was serious.

“Well, I mean don’t do anything until I do it first.”

“I’ll try, but it makes no sense.”

She leaned forward and put her lips on his. She opened her mouth and licked his lips. He parted his teeth, felt her tongue slip against his. Ridiculous, not kissing her back. He shoved a hand into her hair and held her as he stroked her tongue with his.

She struggled away. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because it’s stupid, Hermione.”

He guessed she was looking down at him in the gloom. “Okay. What did it feel like before you
responded?"

"Weird. Why don’t you try it yourself?"

"Okay.” She bent over him again and touched her mouth to his. He cradled her head in his hands and kissed her, felt her lips yield to his probing, her tongue move around his. He withdrew.

"See, it’s not much fun, is it?"

"No, I suppose not.” She sounded distracted. She rolled off him and lay beside him on the blanket.

"Something wrong?"

"No.” She cast a ball of blue flames and set it on the ground at their heads. “I didn’t realize how quickly it would get dark.” After a minute she turned sideways, draped a leg over his, and propped herself on her elbow. "Do you like when I touch you?” She swirled her fingers over his chest and he wriggled.

"Hey, that tickles!” Ron rolled toward her and grabbed at her wrists to make her stop. They tussled back and forth and ended with him leaning on her while they gasped for breath. He nuzzled her neck until she kissed him again and clung to him. He shifted, wedged one knee between her thighs, and humped against her thigh. "So good."

But when he plucked at her jeans zip, she pressed his hand from her. "Not here."

He grimaced. "You can’t leave me in pain. Then second best, yeah?"

"Fine. You undo it, and I'm killing the light." Blackness swallowed them when she cancelled her flames and she groped over him, locating his exposed twig by touch. He lost himself in her hot mouth, rested his hand on her head as she bobbed up and down, and gripped her shoulder when he shot his load. She snuggled into his armpit. "Like that?"

"You know I do,” he said and kissed her. She tasted of his cum and he kissed a line down her cheek to her neck. Her hands roamed over him, slipped under his clothes, and gripped his butt cheek, fingertips clawing into his skin. He caught her hand. "Let up. Hurts."

Hermione giggled and released him, just as her watch started vibrating. He dropped to his back with a growl.

"Walk me up to class? Do you need light to dress?"

"No, but we will to get out of here.” He heaved his hips skyward, tucked his bits away, pulled his clothes together, and gave her the all clear. She lit her wand, waited for him to disenchant and pull on his robe and grab her bag, then led the way out from the pilings.

"Ron, when we make out, do you think of either of us as being in charge?"

He squinted at her. "Never thought of it. I mean, I wouldn't if you weren't interested. Like tonight, I didn't push it."

She pointed her wand down to light the path. "No, I guess."

Distracted again. Girls. Hard to figure. "Do you? Think one of us is in charge?"

"Guess not.” She kept her head bowed as though she were watching her feet. She didn't say much the rest of the way, not even when he kissed her good bye on the Astronomy tower.
Other than asking him about his apprenticeship, Hermione managed to avoid speaking much to Snape the whole week. In class, she stared fixedly at the knot of his cravat and answered as concisely as possible only the questions he directed at her. He seemed just as focussed on minimizing contact with her, even to limiting the amount of time he loomed over her and her cauldron.

She slipped off to the Room of Requirement early that Saturday morning to locate the stack of magazines, just as she'd done the previous Sunday. She found them again, still in the cluttered bookshelf near the shattered lion statue, and noticed they had been rearranged. The issue with the vignette that she had helped recreate was missing (it had been on the top of the stack), and she decided the Potions master was suggesting something. Or not, since it was hard to tell how many people might actually visit the Room.

Probably very few of those hunted out reading material.

She picked up the new top issue and perched on a table nearby. Snape had thumbed the pages into rounded corners. Hermione examined both the spine and the edges looking for a suggestion of what might be the favorite selection. Wait. There was actually a worn scrap of parchment with a smudge of red ink on it marking a page towards the back. She flipped to the marker and read the scenes. The situation was different, not the idle capture and ravishment of a wizard in an office. In this one, the wizard was ambushed in a deserted alley by a menacing witch, ordered to strip, and flogged before being made to pleasure his attacker. "I see a theme here, Severus," she muttered to herself. She read the flogging section several times. Detailed description of the marks left by the flog and the witch’s skill wielding it, the sensation of the tails draping over his skin, the subsequent caressing of the marks.
Hermione skimmed through the rest of the issue until she found a story that made her rock her hips so the seam of her jeans pressed against her crotch. Written from the point of view of the witch rather than that of the wizard, it had the wizard nearly stalking the witch before throwing himself at her and begging to be used. She moved the parchment scrap to this location and set it back on the stack, but upside down, thinking that might indicate she had come and gone. Or not. Surely Snape had better things to do than skulk around trying to determine her interests in pornography.

First goal completed, she extracted the disguised flogger from her satchel, uncharmed and examined it. Smelled delicious and the hides felt wonderful as she combed her fingers through them. He was right. This was more than a passing thing for leather. She went back to the the old, velvet-covered chair she’d transformed the week before. The velvet reinforced the charm he'd taught her and showed clearly where each of the tails hit. She worked both directions until she managed to make reasonably matching dents with both fore- and backhand strokes. The gestures reminded her of something she couldn’t quite identify and she started playing, altering her approach and attack until a cramp in her left arch made her stop.

Hermione kicked off her trainer, plopped on the floor, and massaged her foot and calf. It wasn't really physically demanding and the flogger wasn't heavy. The challenge was in keeping the throws consistent and aiming with the ends. The longer she practiced, the looser she felt, and the more regularly she striped the target.

Until she imagined a pale back in place of the dummy. Then her arm stiffened and the tails splayed awkwardly and wrapped.

He didn't like the tails to wrap. She'd mulled his comment the whole week and couldn't come up with a better way to understand. Take a breath. Another. She hefted the whip, then whacked her bare left forearm with it.

Not what she'd expected. If anything, it was like having a leather coat thrown at her. She tried a few more times before deliberately moving the whip closer so the tails snapped around her wrist. She rubbed at the sting and the pinkish blotches. Made sense why he disliked it -- jarringly sharp in contrast to the controlled thud. An image popped into her head from a movie she’d watched with her parents....

She flipped the blades over her shoulder onto her back. Thuddy. Try as she might, she couldn't increase the intensity and stripping off her shirt was out of the question. Comforting, really, that it wasn't as painful as it appeared, because those weeping marks he'd made with the crop unnerved her.

Hermione arranged the flogger across her lap to examine it again. House colors, so the original was likely also House colors. Her House. The crop too, Gryffindor colors. The idea had made her vaguely uneasy since she'd made the connection the week before. Questions battled for attention as she petted the tails, but the only person who could answer them was the last person she'd ask.

Well, maybe not. She could ask Remus. Maybe he remembered something. Harry had led most of the discussions about his parents with Sirius and Remus over the years, largely amounting to stories of pranks the boys had pulled with a few notes about how sweet and caring his mother had been. In some respects, the few glimpses of Lily painted her as a one-sided angel, barely even an individual. In contrast, James had certainly been a real human with foibles and nobilities. Irritating, but then, they were all boys. Probably natural they'd only pay attention to their direct rivals.

But their recollections of other boys left gaps. Peter Pettigrew's image had suffered under his subsequent betrayal. If Severus deserved a mention, it was only because he had been the target or a miserable observer of some jape. Sirius and James had been the stars, Remus and Peter took some
supporting roles, Lily became either a mildly scolding conscience or a glittering ornament, and the rest of the school faded away.

Hermione rolled to her back on the floor and stretched lengthwise. That was a problem with being Muggle-born. The only magical people she really knew were somehow connected to the school. Students, teachers, family of students, shop keepers. The war had introduced her to people from the Order and the Ministry and, well, Death Eaters. Very few "normal" people. Like Bellatrix.

Where'd that thought come from? Bellatrix was the polar opposite of normal. Crazed, power-mad, fanatical, sadistic,... She thought about the welt Severus had made on the dummy. He'd wanted to be hurt like that before. Would he want that from her? Could she do something like that to anyone, wallop them so hard the skin broke? The thought made her ill. How many of his scars were from his dominatrices? Had he been with Bellatrix, let her torture him?

She shuddered. It would explain why the witch had jeered at him during their final confrontation, if he'd jilted her, but so would the fact that he'd betrayed them. No, Hermione couldn't strike him like that, make him feel pain that severe. Even if he begged. Especially if he begged, she amended herself. If he wanted pain, if he was a masochist like that, then the proper response as a sadist was to deny what he wanted. Maybe.

Madness. The more she tried to analyze why this interested her or tried to pin down what she felt, the more confused she became. She'd spent several free periods in the library and scoured the shelf on sexuality, but found little beyond a few mentions of The English Disease and the Marquis de Sade. Come to think of it, there wasn't a lot about homosexuality either, as though the whole wizarding world avoided non-reproductive sex. Her search for information on Horcruxes had been more fruitful. Maybe it was reasonable, though, because it was a school library for teaching children.

She was willing to bet that Muggle school libraries didn't devote whole sections on how to best brew poisons or fine tune methods to kill and maim.

She jumped when her watch alarm vibrated. Time to get downstairs to meet Ron and her friends for breakfast and head off to Hogsmeade. She tapped the watch's crystal to kill the alarm, set everything back, secreted the flogger-turned-book in her bag, and made her way out of the Room.

Her friends clustered at the middle of the Gryffindor table. Hermione joined them, took the juice Ginny handed her and smeared currant jam over a slice of toast. The Hall was abuzz — perhaps it always was the first Hogsmeade weekend, but it seemed especially electric today. She glanced around. Every House table had clumps of chattering, animated students, and only the youngest wore their black school robes. The rest were all in bright fall colors or school colors.

A mass of black caught her eye as McGonagall and Snape swept into the Hall, with Sprout bustling on their heels. They huddled just inside the door. Hermione craned her neck — yes, Flitwick was there as well, all three of the other Heads were looking down at him. Then they separated, each to their own House table, but alternating where they stood, so that Sprout and Snape both went to the ends closest to the High Table.

“Your attention, please,” McGonagall called. “Third Year and above Gryffindors, come to this end.” Across the Hall, the other teachers made similar requests. McGonagall went through her usual pre-Hogsmeade talk about their behavior reflecting on the school and the trips being privileges that could be revoked. She concluded with a reminder that since the Seventh Year was bigger than usual, they should make an extra effort to courtesy and decorum.

“Third Years, I need your permission slips. The rest of you are free to go.”
By agreement, Hermione and her friends waited until the stampede cleared. Not surprisingly, most of the returning veterans at each table remained seated, finishing breakfast.

“Hogshead?” asked Ron. “Firewhisky, now that we’re old enough?”

Dean and Seamus laughed in agreement.

“Where are you headed?” Ginny asked Hermione.

“I need quills and ink, if you can believe it.”

“Already? Term just started.”

Hermione chuckled. “In all the excitement, I never checked the state of my supplies. Half my nibs are bent and my ink is so desiccated my rehydrating spells aren’t working.”

“Then where?”

“Window shopping?” She shrugged. “You?”

“Harry wants a new broom maintenance kit. Then I’m leaving the boys to their drinking, or whatever. Even quill shopping.”

“Then I’ll follow you, and we can hang out after.”
Chapter Summary

Hermione’s shopping trip results in some surprises.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

This work has not been beta-read. Contact me if interested.

Note to readers: I’ve decided a weekly update routine works pretty well. Expect this schedule to continue for the foreseeable future. Thanks for reading!

Selecting broom supplies took longer than she’d imagined. When Hermione had bought Harry his first kit, she’d gone on the advice of the salesclerk. A newbie error, it seemed. Apparently the quidditch mags bursted with conflicting reviews of kits and unguents — she listened in amusement as they argued about the ideal diameters for brush bristles before Ginny jerked her head towards the door.

“They’ll be at that all day,” the red head complained once the door shut behind them. “It’s not as if we have top of the line equipment to begin with. Harry almost does, but not the rest of us.”

They made their way to the stationery shop, winding around knots of kids and adults. From the outside, the shop seemed deserted.

“Doesn’t seem popular,” Hermione said.

“ Noticed?” Ginny chuckled. “Come on then.”

A bell tinkled as they entered. In contrast to the bright fall day, the store’s gentle lighting seemed completely inadequate. They explored the displays near the window until their eyes adjusted. Several small tables filled the center of the shop, each cluttered with a variety of quills and inks and papers to try. Before they moved inward, a voice rose over the muted sounds of the crowds outside.

“No, I’m not mistaken, I ordered that ink two weeks ago and it never arrived. Here’s the date on the slip, you’d see it if you’d just raise the bloody lights.”

Snape loomed over the elderly witch, a strip of parchment in his extended hand. His black robes and hair had blended into the gloom at the back of the room.
The witch said something in a quavering voice and shuffled behind a curtain. Snape straightened, turned and picked up a fluffy white quill on a table near him, and noticed them as he spun the feather between his fingers.

“Wore down your quills already, Miss Granger?”

“No sir, didn’t prepare well for this term.” She took a few steps toward the table he’d taken the quill from, felt Ginny tug on her sleeve in protest. “Not quite your type, is it, sir?”

His mouth twitched and he dropped the plume back in its holder. “No, indeed.”

“Here it is, professor,” the clerk said as she elbowed through the curtain. She cradled a box with several tall bottles in it. “My grandson was playing in the back over summer, I think he mislaid them.”

He exhaled heavily, leaned over to sign the receipt of goods, and took the box from her. “Who is your grandson, madam?”

She hesitated before replying. “Patrick Flanders. He’s a forgetful boy at times.”

“So I’ve observed.” He left the shop without another word.

After the door shut behind him, the clerk clucked her tongue and simpered apologetically at them. “How can I help you, dears?”

Hermione collected a selection of fine-nibbed quills and several bottles of ink. She set them carefully on the counter and the clerk boxed them up. While that happened, Hermione eyed the ridiculously fluffy quill Snape had toyed with. In addition to being beyond frou-frou with its billow of curly plumes, it had the broadest nib she’d ever seen and gold chasing on the shaft.

“Like that, dear?” the clerk asked. “A professor some six years back ordered that and never came for it. Nice fellow, pretty smile. I’d be happy to take half price for it.”

Hermione considered for a moment, then added it to the pile.

“You bought Lockhart’s quill?” Harry said in shock when they met him at the Three Broomsticks. “Why?”

“Whim.” She handed him the plume in its gilded white box. They took turns giggling over it as they waited for sandwiches and butterbeers. “It might make a nice Christmas present.”

“For whom?” asked Ginny. She tickled Harry’s ear with the long, floating ends of the feathers and gasped. “You ought to give it to Snape as a going-away present at the Leaving Feast. He’d toast it on sight.”

“He looked like he wanted to incinerate it in the shop,” Hermione said as she put it away. “Where’d Ron go?”

“Off with Dean and Seamus. I think they were serious about firewhisky.” Harry sipped his freshly delivered beverage. “I can’t wait for quidditch to get underway.”

Hermione snorted. “I thought you came back for school, same as me.”

“I did. But the other guys — they’re restless. They need something to focus on.” He lifted his gaze to the door. “There’s Ron now.”
Ron wove his way through the crowds and scooched into the booth beside Hermione. He threw his arm round her shoulders and squeezed her roughly. “Can’t keep up with Seamus. He’s a bloomin’ sponge.”

She shook him off, irritated by the whiff of whisky and smoke from his breath and clothes. “Did you just leave him there?”

“Dean’s with him. And a bunch of ‘Claws. Some ‘Puffs, too. Seen Neville?” He peered around, narrowed his eyes. “Malfoy.”

Draco and Pansy scooted into the same side of a small booth on the opposite end of the room.

“They’re not bothering us,” Ginny said. “Have some of my roast beef, Ron.”

“Saw Snape, too,” Ron said suddenly. “Stormed into the ‘Head, went upstairs, and left.”

“We saw him too,” Ginny said and recounted their experience at the shop. “I suppose everyone has to shop sometime.”

“Poor fucker,” Ron said. “The shopkeeper’s grandson. Bet Snape will do something nasty to him.”

“I was thinking about that,” Ginny said. “The only Flanders I know of is a Second Year Hufflepuff.”

Yeah, he’ll be in detention by the end of his first Potions class,” Harry said and shortled. They ate lunch and chatted. Once they’d polished off their food, Ginny and Harry left to wander about the village.

Ron rubbed Hermione’s thigh. “Guess it’s just us.”

“Guess so.”

“Get all your homework done last night?”

“Most. Have a Theory of Magic essay to finish.” She turned to look at him. “I didn’t realize how busy I’d be this last year, between the study hall and everything.”

“Eleven subjects.” He swilled the dregs of his butterbeer. “You’re always busy, Hermione.”

“When does practice start?”

“This afternoon, actually.” He put his hand over hers, leaned towards her. “I really like you, Hermione.”

“I know.” She edged further into the corner of the booth where they sat. “I like you too, Ron.”

“Once we get out of school, what are you going to do?”

“Work, I guess.” She fiddled with the fork on the table before her. “St. Mungo’s, maybe. Or apprentice with someone. Specialized training.”

He made a face. “I’m done with school. Will be, anyway.” He tucked his chin and looked up at her. “I mean, us. What do you think? Should we, dunno, get hitched?”

She laughed nervously. “I hadn’t thought. That’s a ways off still, Ron.”

Ron shoved his arm behind her back and pulled her against him. “I have. We belong together,
Hermione.” He kissed the corner of her mouth. “I don’t want an answer now, but I’m serious. One, two years out, I’d like to have you be my Mrs.”

Hermione squinted at him. “How much did you drink, Ron?”

“I’m not pissed!” He loosened his hold on her, pulled a letter out of his jacket pocket. “Got this owl when I was at the ‘Head. From George. He’s asked Angelina to marry him and she accepted.”

“That’s great!” She leaned over to read the nearly illegible writing. “Next spring?”

“Yeah. May.” He squirreled the letter away. “George hasn’t told mum and dad yet. Or anyone else. Thinks they’ll tell him he’s too young. So don’t tell Ginny or Harry or anyone, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“Yeah.” He took the last swallow of his drink. “So, I don’t want to be the last to settle down, you know?”

“What difference does that make?”

“Just don’t. Always got the hand-me-downs, last of everything.”

“I doubt Ginny and Harry will marry any time soon.”

“They might. See how they moon over each other? But she’s the only girl — it’ll be special for her anyway.”

“Percy’s not married, nor Charlie.”

“Yet. Percy’s seeing someone, though, and Charlie never talks about what he’s doing. He might have tied the knot already and just didn’t tell anyone.”

Hermione gave him a sideways look. “I don’t think anyone in your family would be that secretive, Ron.”

“You don’t know Charlie.” He tugged her against him again, pressed his palm against her belly. “He’s a real lady’s man, from what Bill says, loads of witches after him in Romania.”

She wriggled a little to shake him off her. “Really, Ron, this isn’t a competition, who pairs up soonest.”

His hand snaked up and stroked the outside of her breast and she jerked away.

“What the hell, Ron? We’re in public!”

“No one’s looking. Don’t make a scene and no one will notice.”

She stared at him. “No, Ron. I’m not doing that here, now.”

“Well, when? We’ve hardly had a proper date in weeks, not since we got back to school — “

“Because I’m busy!”

The diners near them turned to gawk.

“I’m busy,” she repeated in a hiss. “And if the best you can come up with is to push me into a corner
and feel me up, then you have a lot to learn.”

He made space between them, glanced around him. “Okay, I got it. Maybe I did have too much to drink. I’ll try to be slower next time.”

“You do that. Now, let me out. I want to take this stuff back to the dorm and I need to finish that essay.”

Ron stood up and moved away from the end of the bench. “You have tomorrow, Hermione.”

“I have an appointment tomorrow.” She hung her bags on her shoulders. “I’ll see you later, Ron.”
Hermione stalked from the Three Broomsticks and Ron just stood staring at the door after it shut. That hadn’t ended the way he’d planned.

He’d expected that she’d accept the cuddle, move in a bit, cuddle back.

When a server came to bus his table, he grabbed his bag of broom supplies and went outside. The village was still mobbed with students and he couldn’t see a place where he could sit and clear his head.

The ‘Head? Firewhisky? His feet carried him toward the dive before he made himself stop. That'd contributed to this mess, it wouldn't get him out of it.

Oh, but Seamus and Dean and the boys — they'd have ideas. Like more to drink.

Inspiration struck him as a Ravenclaw walked by with a package wrapped in lemon yellow with a black and red polka dot ribbon. Hermione's birthday was coming up and he'd yet to get her a present.

Ron wandered down the streets looking in shop windows. She'd been quill shopping already. She played no sports. He'd no idea what kinds of books she might want. The bookseller advertised gift cards, but that seemed too close to admitting failure. Besides, he was limited to cash on hand, and that wasn't much, especially after he'd been to the quidditch shop. Robes? No. He apparently peered in the pink and black decorated windows of the witch's wear store eyeing the frillies a bit too long, judging by the stern stares of the matron within. In an attempt to justify his ogling, he slipped into the next door he came to and nearly sprang back out.
Who would recreate the Potions workroom in the village and why?

Jars of multicolored liquids glowed in indirect lighting. All sounds were muffled, as if the few shoppers feared raising their voices over the light tinkle of glass as they lifted stoppers from bottles. He waded into lush carpet, reluctantly drawn forward by a smell...then he realized where he was.

Ophelia's Scent Shop.

He'd heard his older brothers sing praises of this place, always accompanied with nervous giggles. They could never explain, something about he had to go there himself but make sure he'd scrubbed his hands first. Even that made sense, because he found himself feeling for hangnails and chewed ends. Malfoy probably felt right at home here, now that Ron's eyes had adjusted and what had appeared at first to be stone counters were revealed as being upholstered in grey satin and crushed velvet.

"You seem lost."

Blimey. The clerk had sidled up to him from somewhere. He was slender with a thin face, large dark eyes, groomed stubble, and reddish hair pulled back in a bunch. He steepled his hands at his chest.

Ron stammered out that he wanted something for his girlfriend's birthday. The clerk guided him into the shop to a waist-high table where a bare handful of tester crocks stood.

"Our most popular line with Hogwarts students," he said in a purr.

"How do I pick…?" Ron asked as he leaned toward the crocks.

"Ideally, you pick a scent that complements the young lady’s natural fragrance." The clerk dipped a slip of paper into one of the crocks and waved it in Ron's face. "This has lovely undertones with some aromatic notes."

"Do you have anything that smells like old books or libraries?" Ron asked nervously.

The clerk pursed his lips and he clearly assessed Ron's status of poor student with vertical flick of his eyes. "We can certainly oblige with a bespoke order. But perhaps this one might interest you?"

When the clerk left to ring up another customer, Ron noticed the little cards under each crock. Descriptions and, more importantly, prices. Merlin's Y-fronts, this was expensive. He made his way around the table until he found the cheapest three. He picked the least flowery of these, although they all smelled like desserts, wrote the smallest amount down on an order card, and started toward the register.

A secluded display caught his attention. It had its own lighting, captive blue flames just like the ones Hermione made, but in cut glass vases that refracted the light. Elegant script wrote and rewrote itself on the back of the display box. "Self-Illuminating Ink — See your thoughts, no matter what."

Brilliant. Perfect. He was tempted to ditch the perfume order, when something his dad had done years back popped into his head.

They'd had a fight, mum and dad, probably over some Muggle artifact or other, and dad had been consigned to the sofa for several nights. He'd arrived home from work for dinner, haggard and desperate to sleep in his bed, with a present, a tiny bottle of cologne, and mum had forgiven him.

Worth a try with Hermione.
So he bought both. The ink even came in its own little posh pouch.

"Professor Snape still over Slytherin?" the clerk asked while Ron counted out Sickles. Ron hummed affirmatively and the clerk continued in a mild tone, "I brewed that range."

Ron paused, focused on his coins. Several details connected.

"Ophelia hired me based on the professor's recommendation. She does most of the complicated fragrances, but I'm catching up. And that ink — that's her invention, based on my idea."

Ron pushed the little pile of coins over the counter. "That's nice," he said and met the clerk's eyes. Yeah, the man had been three or four years ahead of him. Ron faintly recalled the boy receiving his award for Highest Potions NEWT at the Farewell Feast. What he remembered clearly was the snarky chatter about how only Slytherins ever won that award, that it should be renamed the Junior Death Eater Poison Prize.

"It is. Professor Snape wanted me where the sympathizers wouldn't try to court me. Who'd think a talented Potions apprentice would be content working in a perfumery?" He made change, wrapped the scent with a flick of his wand, and put both items in a rustling grey fabric bag.

Ron shrugged, tucked the bag in with the rest of his purchases, muttered thanks, and only then noticed the silver framed photos on the back wall. Snape and Dumbledore on either side of the clerk, who held a shiny metal disk on his open palm and a scroll in his other hand. A Gobstones team of pigtailed girls clustered around a middle-aged Slughorn. A very young Slughorn with a witch on his knee, both of them cradling small cauldrons that seemed to be inscribed. Another customer put her orders on the counter and Ron escaped into the non-Slytherin air outside.

Not quite. Everywhere he looked, green and silver scarves. Snakes. He plowed through the crowds toward the castle, listing off the places where he might be likely to find Hermione, what he might say to her, how to apologize and sound sincere — and slammed into a hurtling black-robed figure who tumbled to the ground.

"Hey!" Dark brown eyes glared into his from knee height. "Watch it!"

He extended a hand automatically before his brain caught up and identified her as the new Slytherin Seeker. Too late to retract — she grabbed his wrist and leveraged his recoil to leap up.

She was really light under that robe. Petite. Half a head smaller than Ginny. Numbers calculated — she might be able to beat Harry with speed and agility. She leaned toward him and cooed as she squeezed his bicep.

"Strong. You should be a Beater."

Then she rushed past him toward a giggling mass of green and silver stripes.

He collected himself, checked for broken bottles, and resumed his march to Hogwarts.

Ron tracked her down in the library, back in a nook by a window. She had her usual pile of books and scrolls and peered over them at him.

"Can I talk to you?"

She sighed heavily and he shuffled his foot. "I'm at a stopping point." She set aside what she'd been working on, emerged from the alcove, and sat beside him on the work table between the shelves.
"I was a git."

"True."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't do it again, Ron." Her gaze hadn't softened. "I mean, that's a private thing."

"Yeah." He shifted his weight from hip to hip. "I got you something."

She huffed and dropped her head backwards. Not a good sign.

"Not to buy you off, Hermione, because I thought you'd like it."

"Really?" She was looking at him now, that was encouraging, but he'd seen similar skeptical expressions on both mum and McGonagall. Not comforting.

He set the perfume on the table between them. They both stared at it until she reached out and picked it up.

"Should I open it now?"

He hummed and shrugged, not wanting to push her but eager to know if she liked it. She fiddled at the edges of the paper and unpeeled the wrapper.

"Oh, it's scent." She rocked the bottle to read the metallic writing. "From Ophelia's?"

"Yeah. I met the bloke who made it."

She looked sharply at him. "Really? You met the potioneer?"

He nodded encouragingly. Had no idea that she'd be so interested about that aspect, so he babbled on. "He studied here, at Hogwarts. Got highest Potions NEWTs for his year a few years back. Think he said he was an apprentice."

"Apprentice," she echoed softly. Hermione turned her attention back to the bottle and took a sniff, then dabbed the stopper on her wrists. She sniffed her skin and held her arm to him to sample it. On her, it smelled like sponge cake and baby powder. Tasty and huggable, like she were fresh from a bath.

"Do you like it?"

"I do, actually," she said, as if she were surprised. "It has a nice color and viscosity."

"You sound like Slughorn."

"It's an art potion, Ron, it's supposed to be pleasing to all the senses." She snorted, focused on the bottle. "Did he say who he was apprenticed to?"

"No. Just that Snape put him there."

Her lips drew back in a pained grin. "Professor Snape put him there? What does that mean?"

"To keep him away from the Death Eaters, I guess. Didn't make much sense to me either."

"Ron..." Hermione sighed. "Recall what Harry said Slughorn told the headmaster, that they kept
trying to recruit him?"

"Because of the Horcruxes."

"Sure, but obviously he knew more than he let on. Don't you think skill in potions would be inherently useful?"

"He had Snape." He nodded toward the clutter of books and paper. "Are you done?"

She twisted her mouth. "Maybe. I still have some to write, but I got distracted."

"By what?"

She picked up one of the books and flipped the pages. "I'm finding that the Fifth Year career counseling left a lot out. I'm Muggle-born, I really don't have a good idea what I can do."

Back to that. "Talk to my dad."

"I'm not sure I want to work in the Ministry. I'd always assumed I'd go into health services. Healing."

"Madam Pomfrey, then."

"Most of those roles require an apprenticeship. And none of these — " she gestured at the books piled in her alcove, "none talk about how to make the initial connections. It's all who you know. I don't know anyone."

"You know lots of people, Hermione. All the people in the Order — "

"Who mostly work in the Ministry or Hogwarts, if they work. Mundungus, for instance."

She had a point.

"Dad keeps saying to pick something I enjoy. I like studying best, I think. I'd teach, but I'm too young."

"Hermione, it's still September. You have a whole year and we just finished saving the world."

She drummed her fingers on the book's cover. "You realize I'm turning nineteen in a week."

"Yeah, so?" Ron grinned. "Want to plan a little private party?"

Her eyes flashed and her mouth compressed. "I'm serious, Ron. This world we saved — all the people who kept it running are still in place. It's still the same world, we just don't have Voldemort to worry about, and no one cares what Harry thinks any more."

"So?"

"So, I want make a difference, Ron, I don't want any of it to happen again, and the best way to do that is to change it from inside, but inside is least likely to change." She shook another book at him. "I found this last weekend. It's nothing but phony science on how magical genetics are transmitted. It's bad research — even for when it was written — and supports the belief that Muggle-borns' magic is substandard."

"Then you do want to be in the Ministry — "

"No, I think I want to bring more modern scientific practices and discoveries into the magical world."
But I can't tell where would be the best place to start." She paced as she spoke, going in circles on her basic idea that to do one thing required her to do something completely different, the duplicity bothered her, it'd be best if she could partner with someone who was already respected, and all of it involved needing to know more. Reminded him of when she'd gone on the spew kick because she just didn't understand how things worked with magical folk.

She stopped right in front of him and poked him in the chest. "Are you listening?"

He hummed and nodded.

Hermione crossed her arms and eyed him doubtfully. "I'm going to stay here for a while and ask if Madam Pince will remove this rubbish from circulation. I'll see you at dinner."
Snape heard a rap just when his clock ticked to two and waved the door open. Granger stood framed in the arch, hand raised to knock again and eyes wide.

“Startled me, sir.”

“Come. Sit.”

She closed the door gently behind her and sat on the edge of the armchair with her ever-present satchel on her lap. After a moment rustling in the depths of the bag, she extracted a notebook and a Muggle biro pen and looked expectantly at him.

He stifled an urge to laugh at her earnestness. “What would you like to know?”

After a glance at her paper — Merlin, she had notes! — she said, "Sir, why did you go into Potions?"

Easy. "I excelled at it."
"Why did you choose Ciren?"

He couldn't voice the primary answer, that Ciren sympathized with the Dark Lord and recognized his own declining vision as a death knell. Teaching Snape was a way to prolong Ciren's own usefulness before the Dark Lord cast him aside. So he gave her the other two reasons, both mostly true. "He was the best Potions master at the time and invited me to apply." Slughorn had been thrilled to write a recommendation, but his Death Eater colleagues' support trumped all.

She frowned down at her notebook. "What if you're not invited?"

"Research who may have openings and if they're working in an area that interests you. When you find a match, you submit a CV, references, and make plain your intentions."

Her scowl deepened.

"Is something unclear?"

"I'm interested in too many things. I do well in most, or I'd just pick what I'm best at. I hardly know anyone, outside of a few people in the Ministry." She tilted her head. "How would I get someone to approach me, maybe because they felt we could work to a common goal?"

Tempted to dart upstairs to see if it were raining frogs. "That's a curiously Slytherin question from a Gryffindor."

"Then you're the right person to ask, sir." The corners of her lips curved upward. Not a hint of toady, just genuine amusement at the situation. "It's a way of narrowing my options."

"Indeed." He leaned forward, wished there were some reliable way to ken what logic she used. "Have you considered that whoever might rise to such bait might be an inappropriate choice? You might just be a means to another's ends."

Her full body twitch made her pen skitter erratically across the page. "I've thought about that a lot recently."

He wanted to ask why she'd brought it up. Maybe not from his House, but she clearly conducted her discussion on two levels. So he waited. She clicked the biro several times before continuing, her head still bowed.

"Could I ask you about consent?"

"You may, but not here. Over tea?"

She rose in agreement and followed him down the hallway to his quarters. Perhaps this had been her plan after all? She took the same seat she'd occupied before, kept a close eye on him as he laid out things.

"Raspberry?" she asked, pointing at a dark red candy. At his nod, she spooned it out and lowered it into her cup. Stirred slowly, consuming time. "I've never known anyone to use hard candies to flavor their tea."

"Surely you didn't lure me into meeting with you to discuss my culinary habits."

"No. I — "

"Consent."
She set her spoon down and met his gaze. "Did I anger you the other day, when I kissed you? Does everything have to be agreed to ahead of time?"

"You surprised me. What makes you think I was angry?"

"Because..." She licked her bottom lip. "Because you jumped, then you didn't respond."

"Didn't kiss you as you expected, you mean."

Cheeks tinted. "No. It — I wasn't sure how to read that."

Snape glanced down at his cup as he lifted it. "I responded to you from a submissive role."

"So, if I'd been more aggressive, you would have been also?"

"Perhaps." He sipped his tea. Was she considering a repeat? An experiment? The soles of his feet tingled. "To answer your question, some prefer that all elements be discussed before hand. Some prefer a static script. There are benefits, and I've done those things, but I'm comfortable with some vagueness."

Her brows knitted. "If you consent once, then is that forever? I mean, say you agreed that I could touch you last week and we're in a similar situation now, would it still be in effect?"

He narrowed his eyes. Something lurked. "Not unless we were in a special relationship that had matured to a certain point." He set his cup onto the table. "Why do you ask?"

Her head quivered in a rapid negative. "I just — "

"Hermione, has someone coerced you to do something?"

The sound of her name popped her eyes wide. "No. I mean, it was okay, just it was awkward."

Small hairs between his shoulder blades stood on end. Years of counseling students who'd been cajoled into questionable acts by more seductive Slytherin upper classmates had developed his ability to spot trouble. Whatever had brought her here, she was still a student. If she'd been defiled, Minerva needed to know. "I don't believe you. Who was it and what happened?"

"It wasn't anything. Really."

He let his face harden to frighten her into talking. She squirmed in her seat.

"I shouldn't have brought it up!" She bounced to her feet, he lunged forth and grabbed her hand in his, forced himself to gentle his grip. She tugged at him then plopped back onto her chair. "It's fine, I just did something that I didn't want to do a little less than what I really didn't want to do. You know? Haven't you chosen the lesser of two, just to keep peace?"

"You weren't violated?" he asked somberly. He knew, had faced the same choice.

Granger shook her head. "Of course not. I felt used. I made myself do it. I used myself. I felt cheap for it and I hate that." He released her and she knotted her fingers together. "And it made me think about what we'd talked about, consent, and I realized it was more complex than I'd thought."

Gryffindors — always oversimplifying life. As he sat back into his chair the fabric of her trouser leg reflected the light oddly. He tipped his head. Speaking of complex...same stretchy Muggle fabric as last week. "What were your intentions for coming here?"
"To talk. I don't understand how my mind's working and I think you do."

He snorted. "I normally don't expect honesty from students, but you're a special case. Again. Why?"

"Fine. I practiced and I wanted to show you." She lifted her chin as she flushed slightly. Excited, self-satisfied, nervous — despite his misgivings, he warmed to her and waved toward the center of the room.

"I'll indulge you." He Transfigured the footstool again, cleared space, and propped himself on the desk.

She shrugged off her robe, revealing another of the clinging garments, this time in black. His gaze stumbled over incongruent faint ridges over her bum and across her back which he realized marked the edges of her underclothes. Whatever the fabric was, it had a nap and his fingers itched to pet it. She turned to him, the duplicated flogger in her hands, brows lifted in question.

Didn't trust his voice. Nodded, folded his arms, watched the fibers glisten as she moved.

Then made himself focus on what she was doing.

She had improved. When had she practiced? Both horizontal fore- and back-hand strokes fell evenly, although the vertical backhand needed work and she lost rhythm from time to time.

"Then I tried this," she said, altering to a figure-eight pattern, then stopped to turn toward him. "It’s not so difficult once you get the feel of it."

“No, it’s not. Wait here.” He crossed the room into his his bedroom, shut the door securely behind him, and delved deep into his closet where he’d tucked his implement bag behind his dress robes. Really all he needed was the red deer flogger, but he stroked the braided cat wistfully before he charmed the closet door closed and paused to look at his reflection in the mirror. He was indeed flushed, as he’d suspected. He felt fevered. Wouldn’t do. He sought for some composure. Just minutes before he’d worried she’d been pawed over by one of her peers, now he considered ways to put himself in the same position. Maybe his years around the Dark Lord’s minions had sullied him more than he imagined. The thought chilled him. No, she’d come to him, she’d orchestrated a way to make them be alone together in his rooms. She came dressed in Muggle exercise clothing, for fuck's sake. What he wanted was just sensation and a few thrills. What she wanted was to learn to dominate and to wield the whips for her own pleasure. His thinking was just muddled by the lack of crisp monetary exchange.

He strode back into the living quarters. She’d sat back at the dinette and was drinking from her cup, but rose and joined him beside the dummy.

“Wrist twirl,” he said and demonstrated. “Very regular, both ways.” He made way for her to try. Directed her where to move. “See the blush on the surface? You build that so you can increase the sensation.”

“How?” She stepped clear.

“Like this.” He moved in an arc around the target, twirling the blades over the surface, thwack, thwack, thwack, then flicked the whip in a hard figure-eight that sounded sharply loud. He returned to the even twirl before stroking the tails in light, long caresses over the dummy.

“It’s not all pain.”

He let his arm fall to his side. “No, I told you that. Rhythm more so, perhaps. Sensation, not just
pain.”

“I mean, you just brushed the whip lightly.” Hermione petted the flogger she held. “When I hit you with the crop — that hurt. This doesn’t, not really.”

Her words intrigued him. “How do you mean, this doesn’t hurt?”

Granger simpered, looked to one side. Embarrassment, he realized, maybe shyness as well. “Well, because I hit myself with it, to see what it felt like. It’s not bad, not like what I think the crop would feel like.”

“Did you like it?”

She met his gaze, glanced away. “Don’t know.”

Snape remembered his favorite domme comparing notes with a fellow while her subs knelt in a line. “I always test new implements on myself first.”

“It’s a good habit, to do that,” he said. He felt suddenly awkward, knowing what he wanted to ask. Like the first time he asked a girl to sit with him at a quidditch match, the same icy rush from being shoved into the Black Lake. “Would you like to try on me?”
“Would you like to try on me?”

Her eyes swiveled up to meet his. “Sure?”

“If you want to.” He considered where to have her strike him, what would be easiest for her, how to keep it non-sexual. “I’ll kneel, you can flog my upper back. Don’t move, I’ll show you.” He stepped behind her, deftly outlined an area on her back, shoulder to shoulder to the flat of her scapulas and back. “Avoid the spine,” he added, drawing two fingers down the middle of her back. The fur of the fabric was springier than expected and caught on his nails. “Don’t strike below the ribs, the kidneys, pelvis.” He put the backs of his fingers against her sacrum, lifted his hand as though she were molten.

She might have been. He could smell her heat.

Granger pivoted her head to look at him over her shoulder, the lines of her neck echoing the curve of her nose. “Won’t you have to undress? Some?”

“I will.”

Her lashes lowered. What was she looking at? “May I touch you? Severus?”

The root of his cock sent a warning to his belly. “Are you comfortable striking my shoulders?”

“Think so.”
"I'll strip to my waist and you may touch whatever is bare as you wish."

"If I hurt you?"

"You striped me with a crop, Hermione. This is a far gentler implement." He held out his flogger. "Use this one, not the duplicate."

Her fingers wrapped round the handle, just touching his.

"One more thing. The safe-word. I was taught to use red for stop and green for continue. Yellow if something needs to change. Let's use that system instead." Muggle traffic signals, should be crystal clear to her.

She smirked, then frowned. "Thesral was the first — "

"Word that came to mind. I'm likely to fall back into what I'm familiar with, we'll use that. Red, yellow, green."

He turned from her, drew his wand from his sleeve, and altered the footstool into a low padded riser with a padded upright, a modified version of a kneeling bench he’d used. She’d set her flogger on the desk and sat beside it, her chin tucked, following his movements.

"I suppose you like watching me disrobe?" She blushed, said nothing. Wasn’t used to her being so quiet.

"Did you watch me strip from the closet?"

"Yes," she said. Her gaze seemed glued to his hands as he worked the buttons of his coat and sleeves, untied his cravat and pulled it loose, placed each garment on the desk chair. Couldn’t remember the last time he’d had an audience when he’d undressed, certainly not one so attentive. "Am I embarrassing you?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Your…." She chuckled. "Your cheeks are red."

"It’s been a while."

"I thought you hired, had…."

"Dommes, yes, but I readied myself before they entered the room." He had to loosen his belt and trousers to pull his shirttails loose and turned his back to do so, secured himself before pivoting to drape his shirt over the back of the chair. Not surprising that he was blushing given the frozen sear of uncovering under her gaze.

He could imagine what she thought as he stood half-naked before her in the green-tinted afternoon light. Blood sports had been a hobby in the Slytherin boys’ dorms, a practice he’d forbidden and punished once he took control. Slughorn never noticed what his students got up to — or cared, really, unless they were his favorites. He’d added to his collection during his time as a Death Eater. Could name who gave him most of them, too.

He was no prize, that’s for sure, between all that and his parents’ good looks.

But she approached anyway, extended her left hand, stroked a line from Adam’s apple to navel. She leaned close, her breath ticklish, and…smelled him? “Can you, er…."
He went to the block, knelt, and rested his hands on the cross of the upright. It broadened his back but was low enough to let him guard his face. She drew the same lines he’d drawn on her, indicating she understood. Then didn’t move.

“How do I start?”

He smiled at his chest. “Lightly, until my skin reddens, then vary blows.”

“How long?”

“Until we’re done.”

If the flippant vagueness of his answer bothered her, she made no sign. Instead, she draped the tails over him, stroking his back, arms, shoulders. When he lifted his head up, she drew the tails over his face, neck, and chest, seeming to instinctively understand — no, she’d read what he’d left for her. Good girl. He noted the release of a knot in his gut only by its absence.

Then she brushed his hair forward off his neck and began beating him and he focused on what she gave him. Just as the sensation started to fade, as his tolerance plateaued, he asked her to step closer, directed her around to spread the blows. When the intensity of her strokes varied unexpectedly, he muffled his startled gasps into the padding. She wrapped the ends and interrupted the rhythm, but the soft hide tempered the faults of her inexperience. His flesh hummed. He was on the edge of making her stop for her own good when she discarded the leather and fell upon him.

Hermione bit him on his neck, his arms, his armpits. Her hands blurred over his burning skin. He whimpered when she circled his nipples, whined when she pinched the nubs, and surrendered to her when she plundered his mouth. Would have lost himself in utter gratitude for the shadow reminder of favorite scenes, except her palms circled ever downward on his belly and he cupped his hands over hers.

“Not there.”

“But you’re hard, Severus, I can see that.”

“No.”

“But you’ll hurt.”

He huffed and opened his eyes to look in hers. “Girls still fall for that?”

She glowered and he wondered what he’d said, then she kissed him again, watery sweet like pear nectar, and he forgot anything else. Somehow he found himself supine on the rug with her leaning on his chest while he toyed with the pelt of the peculiar stretchy velvet spanning her back. She kissed him, sucked his lips, bit his neck — his mind had uncurled and he didn’t care what she did. If his high collar didn’t cover a blemish, any one of several potions or charms would sort it.

He wasn’t certain when she switched from mouthing him to watching him.

"Having fun?” she asked and rocked her torso under his hands to emphasize what she was asking about.

Severus plucked at the garment. "What is this fabric?"

"Stretch velour. I think it's synthetic." She giggled as he skimmed his hands over her arms and shoulders. "I assume you approve?"
“Beguiling,” he murmured, repeating the caress as his balls tightened. Warm, soft, pliant, a perfect metaphor for —

"Shall I remove it?"

"No." He stared at her and dropped his hands to the floor. "Release me."

Granger looked at him oddly for a moment, then intoned, "You're released," as though canceling a spell. Maybe she was. The charged connection broke and they were two individuals recovering from a shared labor. She rolled to her feet and pulled on her robe. Snape sat up, found only familiar aches in his joints, stood slowly. His knees seemed weak. It'd been too long since he'd tasted his flogger and the congestion in his groin distracted him. Not to mention the warm void where his alertness usually sat. He reached for his shirt and she pivoted, her face a mixed expression of confusion, concern, hurt.

"That's it?"

He grimaced as he settled his shirt on his shoulders. "Largely. For now. You expected more?"

"Maybe? I don't know."

Leaving the sleeves and shirt undone, he sat in the desk chair and looked up at her. "You'll have to talk to me, Hermione, I can't read minds."

"I feel something's missing." She twisted buttons of her robe between her fingers, her eyes lowered. "In the stories, they — "

"Those are fantasies. Fiction."

"I understand that," she said with pique. "What about when you hired — "

"Don't compare yourself to them. You haven't the skill yet."

"But I want — " She cut herself off. "More."

He knew what she wanted. Could smell her frustration. His body responded to the traces of pheromones, her proximity, everything. "Greedy."

Her eyes blazed. "Is that it?"

"It is." He started buttoning his sleeves, kept his voice non-committal. "It takes time to learn this — "

She straddled his legs and fisteld the fronts of his shirt. "Tell me."

His hands planted her on his lap before he'd had time to consider what he was doing and pushed her crotch against his. "You want servicing, Hermione. Your clit wants tonguing, your cunt wants filling. You need to climax, little Gryffindor, and I can't help you."

"What did they do?"

The musk of her humid sex dizzied him. "They satisfied themselves outside of session, either by themselves or with their partners, I suppose. Dommes are not whores, Hermione, nor are they lovers."

Her fingers loosened. "This is all?" Plaintive. He recalled the first time he'd submitted, how he'd left the woman's office feeling as just as conflicted as Granger seemed to be.
"No. There can be more." He paused. "As a reward, one of my dommes would order me to service her. It was earned, Hermione." And she even let him taste her on occasion, but he kept those memories locked away. "It was earned and negotiated, consented to."

"I could order —"

"That would be nonconsensual, Granger. Rape."

Her eyes glazed and she blinked rapidly. "I didn't mean without, not without — " She struggled and he wrapped both arms around her, shushed her, and she calmed.

"I wouldn't submit, Hermione. It wouldn't happen." He stroked her hair, reminded himself she was young, a student, should have pitched her out — had he been any different the first time he'd asked a tart to let him spank her, exultant over making fantasy real, terrified of his own lust, the marks he'd left? "Are you drawn to this?"

She nodded into his neck. "I don't know why."

"Did you enjoy what we did together?" Whipping him, touching him, making him squirm and cry out?

"Did. But I feel like a hole's in me." She craned her head to look at him, cheeks streaked. "And you didn't get to come."

"Is this about you or me? Because I don't need you — or anyone, for that matter — to satisfy myself. Men spend most their lives befuddled by their genitals — it's not terminal."

"That leaves me, then." Her mouth turned down and she averted her gaze. "I'm making a fool of myself."

"I told you the first time we talked. You're just starting to explore yourself." He cupped his fingers under her chin and lifted it so she had to face him. "I offered to teach you to use these implements. That's all I offered."

"I marked you." She traced a few raw spots on his collar bone and neck.

He shrugged. "Temporary. And under clothing. Maybe not that one," he admitted as she touched a place close to the hinge of his jaw. "No matter. You enjoyed it?"

"Yes, but —"

"No 'but.' Yes. As did I."

She brightened. "Did you? Will you...." She glanced over her shoulder toward the bedroom door.

"Cheeky. I'm not discussing that with you." He pinched behind her knee and she yipped. "As it is, the first month of term leaves me very little time." He rolled his eyes. "Students — every year, you'd think none of them ever spent a night away from home. Even those who return."

"Never thought about it like that."

"Not surprised." He sighed. "Now get off me so I can dress." He put his clothes on with an audience, tempted to hum a stripper song as he did. He reflected. Twice now she'd grown restive around the topic of consent. He left his cravat off and pointed to the chair at the dinette. "Sit."

He sat opposite her again, pushed the tea things to the center of the table. "You're not in my House,
but I don't think you'd appreciate me telling Minerva about what we discussed earlier. For the time being pretend that's a green badge on your robes."

She stiffened. "There's no need — "

"Quiet. Males are as capable of surviving sexual frustration as females are."

"It wasn't like that."

"It was a female?"

Her jaw dropped. "No. I told you, it's fine."

He tapped the table hard with his index finger. "You say that, but you were just crying on me when I pointed out what non-consent means. Why would you respond like that if this weren't upsetting you?"

Her lips compressed and she glowered sullenly back at him. It occurred to him that, before this year, she would never have responded to him like that. Probably wouldn't outside of the current private space. He never tolerated sulkiness from non-Slytherins. His willingness to extend his acceptance to her gnawed at him and he frowned.

In an instant her expression adjusted to neutrality.

"I just hadn't thought about the implications of it, consent, I mean."

"The next time you're in a similar position — "

"I won't back down."

He could almost hear her asking if he was done, could she go, so he leaned forward again. "If you come to me again like that, I will take you to Minerva."

"Understood." So she said. Her brows gathered again and she asked, "One of the stories mentioned soft limits. What are those?"

Snape sighed and settled back. "Quickly. During scene negotiations, hard limits are things you won't do at all, and soft limits are things you might do. Breaking a hard limit might mean all action must stop or even that partners can't play together again."

"And they don't change?"

"They can." He rearranged the spoons on the saucers. "Up until this year, I had a hard limit about being even partially undressed before a student. Obviously, that's become a soft limit between us."

Granger became very still. "What I did to you, it really was non-consensual."

"We discussed that, no need to worry now," he said firmly.

"It's just one-sided? Just the submissive?"

"No. You as dominant or top can also have limits. Perhaps you're turned off by the sight of blood. You could set a limit of not using any implements that might break the skin." He could think of several better examples, but she was new to this. No need to terrify her.

"Top?"
"Yes, I think that's a better term for your role. You're not quite a dominant."

"What's the difference?"

He tapped her on the sternum. "It's here. You have moments, but for now, just topping, doling out the sensation. And I'm bottoming, accepting the sensation."

Her eyes moved as she studied him. "This is complicated. I never thought of it as giving you something."

"You are. Do." He stood up. "I need to return to my work."

She checked her watch, rose in a hurry. "It's half past three!" She scurried to the desk, disguised the green flogger and buried it in her bag, and fidgeted with her hair. His turn to watch, and he relished it as he did up his tie. She reached for the door, but it remained closed.

"Aren't we going?"

"We are, but we need to do one thing that must always happen any time my implements are used." He retrieved his flogger from the floor where it had been abandoned and handed it to her. "Hold the handle to me."

She gave him a quizzical look, grasped it round the neck and beginning of the tresses, and offered it to him about neck level. He bent at the waist and, keeping his eyes on hers, pressed his lips to the handle, close enough to her that his cheek brushed her knuckle. As soon as she understood what he meant to do, her eyes lit. When he kissed the whip, her face glowed, then her eyes widened.

As he straightened, before she could spoil it, Snape raised a finger to his lips. "You know, I know you know. Keep it here." He set his fingertips on her sternum again. The door opened behind her. "Now we leave."
Chapter Summary

Hermione, like Archimedes, retreats to the bath for cogitation.

Chapter Notes

Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belong to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom

MANY THANKS: Thanks, Melusin, for offering to beta read and Brit pick. No easy task--I'm high maintenance at times and bull-headed always!

Hermione slowly climbed the stairs from the dungeon and absently dodged Slytherin students heading the other way. The skin on her chest still burned with the remembered touch of his fingertips after he’d kissed the flogger handle.

Her response to seeing the bloom on his skin, her hunger when she’d heard him whimper…. Forget who Severus was, her own reactions confused her. She had never considered herself a violent person. All those times she’d expressed herself physically—punching Draco, walloping the boys with whatever was handy….

Not only that, but her experiences with Viktor lit something in her that she seldom got with Ron. She’d thought it was just novelty as Viktor’d been her first. She wasn’t sure now, especially after Severus had jammed her onto his lap.

She stopped just inside the Entrance Hall. She’d become too quickly accustomed to thinking of the Potions master by his first name. Had it just been a couple of weeks ago he’d been simply a bitter mystery and now…what? Not Snape, that’s certain. Patient. Sensual. Accessible, if approached right. She shifted the book bag on her shoulder and continued to the Gryffindor dorms.

Back in her room, she settled at the tiny desk beside her bed to practice Arithmancy calculations. She scribbled testily at a maths error. The scrape of the nib recalled his quill moving across parchment in a pool of light—she leapt up and paced the room, her right shoulder and arm stiff.

Hermione growled and glared out the window at the sunny, clear day. Her classmates were probably scattered throughout the castle and village snogging in abandon. She was alone, achy and restless. Ron…. She pressed her forehead to the glass and could just make out the flash of a red uniform in the air near the pitch. No, even if he were available, that was wrong to shag him while her mind was on someone else. Wasn’t it?
That twinge of guilt hadn’t stopped her before—if anything, it had become a spice of its own. There’d been times when she’d closed her eyes with Ron in her and imagined her fingers were digging into Viktor’s well-muscled back. At first, she’d done it just as comparison, which seemed a reasonable exercise. Then she’d found it took her mind off minor irritants, like a cramp in her hip or a wadded sock under her back.

Sometimes it got her into trouble.

Viktor had growled in pleasure when she chewed on him and had bitten back. From the sly looks his wing mates gave her, he must have shown off his marks. But Ron complained and hissed at her to take it easy. If she thought too much of Viktor, she did what came natural, and biting and sucking felt natural to her.

Severus…well, he didn’t seem to react either way. She snorted. Predictable.

The stiffness crept into her neck, and she massaged the muscles. Analgesic? Maybe, but the bathrooms were probably vacated.… Smirking, she poked through Ginny’s toiletries for the Quidditch player’s muscle soaking salts, collected fresh clothes, and slipped down the corridor to the bathrooms. She added silencing spells to the bathing alcove she claimed, filled the tub with steaming water, added in the salts, and sank in.

As she floated in the warmth, she let her mind drift over the day’s events and merge reality with fantasy. His teeth—they’d frightened her for years, reminding her of the horrifying images in her parents’ trade dental journals. On some level, his dentition wasn’t that much worse than many in England, but the uneven jags of his lower teeth recalled piranha and other biting fish. She imagined his mouth on her, tongue lapping softly at her—perversely, she imagined him gnawing at her and contrasted that alarming thought with the memory of his insistent kissing as they’d lain on the floor—and her hands drifted downward over her body until she rubbed herself slowly, fingers slipping into her folds. Aside from her wrist, when he’d been angry and probably frightened, he’d not harmed her. When he’d shown her how to throw the flogger, his firm grasp had been gentle. She pushed two fingers into herself and sighed, recalling how concerned he’d been, how hard his cock had been against her—her eyes flipped open and she froze.

Your cunt, he’d said. Your clit.

Said it, probably smelled her—Hermione slipped further into the water so it covered her chin. She’d soaked the gusset of her knickers and the crotch of her track suit. She’d probably even left a damp spot on his trousers. How would she meet his eyes in class, knowing what they’d talked about? Done together? Oh, it was so much worse than the first day of class, his knowing she was aroused and calling it out.

Was he even now doing what she was doing, thinking about her, her soaking cunt—the phrase popped into her head, she imagined him saying it, saw his lips forming the words—was he stroking himself as he soaked in a soothing bath? She couldn’t get the obscene words out of her head now and said them aloud, heard her voice bounce off the ceramic of the tub.

Holy Merlin. She’d asked him if he’d masturbate. Of course he’d shut her down. One thing to do it, to watch him do it, but she had no right to casually discuss it. She covered her eyes with her free hand, examined what else she’d said to him. Sucked love bites all over him. Pointed out he was hard. Offered to take off her shirt, which was when he’d stopped it all.

Ron wouldn’t have stopped. Viktor might have. Severus did, even though he was aroused and knew she was and she’d offered and he could have taken her, but he didn’t. I can’t help you.
He’d kissed the whip—she felt the rush boil up again—and that coupled irresistibly with his restraint. Stripped for her. Knelt for her. Her mind broke loose, churning up images, his body offered to her to touch, explore, taste, tease. His hard limit had become soft for her. Limits change. Another thrill shot through her. Right now he refused her, maybe later he would let her demand more. And when that time came, what would she say?

What would she ask for? She’d have to be as direct as he was, or he’d stare her down. Could see his stern face now, challenging her. *What do you want me to do, Granger? Mistress?*

She spread her fingers over her vulva, pubic hairs snagging on her wet skin. What did she call this part of her anatomy? Formal terms really, official names, never slang. Vag, maybe. Outside of the doctor’s surgery, sex ed, and her mother explaining her periods and how sex worked, she really never referred to her…parts. None of her boyfriends had either.

Both Ron and Viktor had licked her there. She didn’t ask—they didn’t ask—it just happened. Well, maybe not *just*—both boys knew, from lads’ mags or somewhere, that it was a turn on, a way to get her ready so they could shag, a preliminary step towards the main event. Maybe even a distasteful first step. Anyway, not an earned reward, not something to be worked for.

She couldn’t order Ron to perform cunnilingus. Pants, it sounded so clinical. Not like what he’d said at all….

*You want servicing, your clit wants tonguing, your cunt wants filling.* The phrases echoed deliciously in her head in his smooth purr with his lips shaping around his crenelated teeth. He’d press against her, mouth hot. His face would be slick with her fluids, because she’d ordered him there.

Hermione worked at her clitoris frantically then, the fingers of her other hand diving into herself. If he said cunt, so easily, so naturally—he was cruel, crude, direct, after all he was *Snape*—what other words did he use? Her mind became a thesaurus of slang, words she’d heard boys whisper amongst themselves, that she’d seen on bathroom walls and in dictionaries, every one burning through her head in his baritone.

*You need to climax, little Gryffindor.*

Oh yes, she absolutely did, and knowing he knew what she needed sent her over the edge. The water sloshed over her pebbled nipples as she came in panted whimpers, eyes screwed tightly shut, imagining him naked at her feet, skin marked with the stripes and bites she’d given him as he surrendered as well.

She lay pondering in the tub ’til the water had turned tepid and she heard movement outside her alcove, then climbed out and dried herself as the bath drained.
Ron had already set up his workstation when Hermione hustled in, hurriedly unpacked her things, and laid out her tools in record time. Ginny edged out of the way of flying elbows and glanced back at her brother and Harry in concerned amusement.

A moment later, Snape slammed the door behind himself and strode to the front of the room.

“You’ll not need equipment yet.”

Hermione’s head snapped towards Snape, and she huffed loudly in exasperation. His black eyes narrowed, and he glared at her coldly before shuffling the papers on his desk.

Then he got on with it. He lectured and wrote notes on the board, drew a large diagram that showed the principle he was droning on about. He finally stopped and told them to start brewing.

Ron concentrated on his work. This particular assignment wasn’t so bad. Less about careful preparation or timing and more about adjusting portions of the brewing process to vary the outcome. He’d got nearly to the midpoint when the Potions master brushed behind him and circled round the girls’ table without slowing.

“Sir? Professor Snape?” Hermione called. “May I have a moment?”

Snape half-turned towards her, a few feet from the table. “You have a question, Miss Granger?”

She gestured down at her work. “About my technique.”
Snape craned his neck to look into the cauldron without going any closer. “What, exactly?”

“These damascena seed pods—I want to keep them intact while extracting their essence. Is my stroke timing acceptable?”

“Show me.” He wrapped his robes closer around himself as she stirred. “Tolerable,” he said frostily and started to step away.

She jerked her head from her cauldron. “Is there something I should change? Is this the best way to bruise without breaking…?”

Snape’s lips thinned. “Your rhythm is deplorable.”

Her stirring rod clacked erratically against the inside of her cauldron. She returned her attention to her task while Snape remained and watched her with a hard expression.

How she could carry on and ignore the git, Ron had no idea. When Snape’s gaze scanned across the middle of the room, Ron hastily focused on his work.

“Professor, is it only the rhythm?” Hermione asked as he started his prowl again. “Or do I need to alter how vigorously I stir?”

They’d just covered that in the lecture. Even Ron could remember back twenty minutes. Snape clearly looked as though she’d asked about the most idiotic question he’d ever heard, and Ron braced himself for a blistering retort.

But instead, he snugged his robes closer and leaned towards her slightly. “Passable.”

Hermione exhaled hard.

“For a Seventh Year,” he added coolly as he moved away.

She stared after him, her mouth slightly open. He glided to the third table over and gave her a smug sidelong glance before he bent over another cauldron.

Hermione’s hair fell forward as she tended to her brewing.

Snape called time and collected the stoppered samples with a flick of his wand. Ron immediately set to cleaning up. Lunch was next, and the sooner the better. He’d just finished Scourgifying his cauldron and utensils when the clean phial landed lightly beside his hand. Snape did that rarely, sending the empty sample containers back as he circled the room with a basket of them. As he passed near the girls’ table, Hermione staggered when she swung her laden satchel over her shoulder and lurched backward into the teacher’s path.

They both grunted when they collided. The phials he’d sent to her table shattered when they dropped, and his empty basket got knocked from his hand.

Hermione poured out apologies as Snape glowered at her. She whipped out her wand at the same time he did. Their simultaneous Reparo spells fused the broken bottles into a lump of glass, and she squeaked when she saw what had happened.

“Granger—class is over. Get out.” He bent to retrieve the basket and nearly bumped into a Ravenclaw, who blundered clear and trod on Pansy’s foot.

By the time Ron and Harry pulled themselves together from sniggering, both girls had gone.
“Did you see this?” Seamus asked as he shook a copy of the Prophet in Harry’s face. “Can you believe it?”

“If you’d just hold it still!” Harry replied and grabbed the folded newspaper. He scanned the article. “They’re reimbursing Malfoy for damages to the Manor?”

They’d convened in the boys’ dorm after dinner to dig through what Remus had collected for them about the remaining rogues. Ron had dumped the package of clippings and notes that had arrived with the lunch post on the floor. He, Hermione, and Dean sat in the middle of it and read through each item while Seamus and Harry glowered over the newspaper.

“He’d given it up to You-Know-Who as his headquarters,” Seamus continued.

“He argued that since he was incarcerated and his heirs were in hiding, he couldn’t be held liable,” Hermione said without looking up. “Legally, he had a strong case.”

“I suppose you agree with the verdict,” Seamus retorted.

She looked up then. “I didn’t say that. But he can’t really be held responsible for what happened when he was absent.” She exchanged a glance with Dean. “It happens in the Muggle world, you know. With squatters.”

“He should have tried to evict them, then,” Dean said. “My uncle had to do that.”

“But he couldn’t because he was in Azkaban, and the Ministry doesn’t allow prisoners to start legal actions not related to their own incarceration,” she said. “It’s a clever argument—“

Seamus interrupted her with a growl and plopped onto his bed. “It gives them a base to work from, and I’m sure they’ll repair everything. Then all they need is a rally point, one more powerful wizard —”

“Don’t be so sure,” Hermione said slowly. She’d unfolded a square of parchment. “This is from Tonks. No—Remus copied it from Tonks’ office. Apparently the Aurors have insisted on incorporating Dark Arts preventative wards into the rebuilding project and will inspect regularly.”

Ron and Seamus shared a glare of disbelief.

“Hermione, you don’t really think Malfoy will agree to that?” Ron asked as he leaned over to look at the document she held. “I mean—Bloody Hell, they made him take an Unbreakable Vow with Shacklebolt.” His eyes went wide. “They have him, then.”

“Think so?” asked Seamus. “You don’t spend enough time in the Dungeon bogs, Ron.”

They all turned to look at Seamus.

He laughed nervously. “I don’t mean like that. I mean I overheard some of the snakes talking one day about how Snape supposedly figured out how to break the Unbreakable Vow.”

“That’s impossible,” Hermione replied. “According to Rukin’s Theory—“

“Don’t start with theory,” Seamus said sharply. “Remember he was high up with You-Know-Who. It’s hard to say what he learned.”

Hermione flicked her brows and laid the paper aside. She’d set her mouth, a sure sign she disagreed but wasn’t going to talk anymore. After a moment, she piled the scraps around her together and gave
Ron a little smile.

“I’m not having any luck, and I have three essays to write before next week. If either of you talk to Remus,” her eyes darted to Harry’s, “ask him to please be careful stealing stuff from the Ministry.”

With that, she left.

Seamus hunkered down in her place and flipped through the bits. “There’s really not much to go on.”

“Anything from Wood?” Dean asked.

Harry shook his head. “I’ve asked. He’s trying, but his training schedule keeps getting in the way.” He kept studying Seamus’ head for a bit longer than necessary. “She’s good at this kind of thing, Hermione.”

Seamus met his gaze. “Theory, Harry. She’s good at theory. She has no place in the field.”

“You’re wrong,” Ron said.

“You’re saying that because she’s your girlfriend. You didn’t—“ He made a face. “Just trust me, mate. She has no business messing with this.” Seamus bobbed his head towards Dean. “Dean and me and Wood, we’re the ones who went off with those Aurors for that extra training—“

“And Cormac—“ Ron added.

“Yeah, but Cormac’s not with us.” A bit of red glowed in Seamus’ cheeks. “As soon as she’s done with the potions part, I want her out of harm’s way.”
Ginny lit the candles on the cake and led the whole Common Room into the birthday song as Hermione sat in the middle, laughing and beaming and holding Ron’s hand.

For the first time in forever, Hermione didn’t nag about how the house-elves had had to work overtime to get the cake made. As far as Ron could tell, she’d come to terms with the fact elves did what they did, and delivering birthday pastries for students was just one of their duties.

She certainly wasn’t above eating a slice or trying to smear icing on his nose.

All in all, it became one of the least antagonistic Granger parties he could remember.

Once everyone had been treated, most of the room emptied out ’til just the remnant of the DA remained. Students from other Houses had come, too—a reunion of veterans to some extent, which was fine, until Luna said something about missing Billy Chambers, who’d died during one of the Death Eater skirmishes against the Ministry.

Trust Luna to ruin the mood.

“Did you see all these presents, Hermione?” Ron said quickly as the room fell quiet. He pushed the pile of brightly wrapped objects across the table.

She stared down at them for a moment, mind clearly elsewhere, before she picked one up mechanically and read the tag aloud. Something flat—probably a book—from Luna. She ripped open the paper to reveal, as expected, a book.
“How did you know, Luna? *1998 Guide to Magical Universities.* I wish I’d had this last week. The library’s most recent edition is from 1990.”

“Daddy suggested it,” Luna replied.

Hermione rubbed the cover where a bunch of graduates flung their hats into the air repeatedly. “That will be helpful. Let’s see—this one’s from Harry.”

She worked her way through the pile until she came to Ron’s gift, a palm-sized box in a blue velvet pouch with a golden ribbon. “What can this be? More perfume?”

“Open it.” He tried not to squirm on the couch beside her. The ink wasn’t on the list of standard choices of presents for witches, and he’d been increasingly uncomfortable the more he thought about the former Potions student at the shop.

“Ink,” Hermione said and studied the bottle. “Oh, it’s Self-Illuminating Ink.”

“For seeing notes in the dark, I think. And for writing in the dark. Seemed like it might be handy.”

She hummed, produced a quill from somewhere, and dipped the nib into the bottle. She scribbled loops on the back of some of the wrapping paper with the dark grey ink. "Does it need light to charge?"

"I don't think so."

"I don't think it's for writing in the dark," Luna said. "Let me try." She read aloud as she wrote on a scrap, "I have to decide what to do with my life."

The letters reformed into: "Follow your bliss."

"See, self-illuminating."

Ron grunted. "I don’t get it."

"That's interesting." Hermione said as she loaded the quill again and pondered a piece of paper. "It's for enlightenment, not for light."

Ginny frowned. "That's awful like taking directions from a book."

Hermione wrote a line down, and the letters flipped around to read: "Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames." She sat suddenly upright.

"What did you write?" asked Ginny.

"The same thing Luna did." Hermione held the quill out to Ron. "You try it."

He read aloud what he got back. "'Active evil is better than passive good.' Ridiculous." He balled the scrap up and tossed it on the table.

"No, it's brilliant. Don't you see what it's saying?"

"Yeah. That we shouldn't have killed You-Know-Who."

"No." She smoothed out the paper. "It means it's better to be actively doing something rather than just drifting along. And Luna got that she should do whatever she really loves doing."
"And you?" prompted Ginny.

Hermione lowered her eyes. "It's close to what Luna got."

"It mentioned finding someone," Ron said.

"Maybe like finding someone to apprentice to," she said. "Someone who can teach me what I want to learn."

"Maybe that's why Daddy thought you needed that book," said Luna. "To find who fans your flames."

"That sounds like something from the agony column of *Witch Weekly*," Seamus said. The boys chortled, most of the girls glowered, and Hermione pursed her lips.

Ron gave Seamus a disapproving frown and touched the back of Hermione’s hand. “If that’s the best they can offer, let’s go for a walk.”

He waited by the portal for her, and together they headed down the long way to the boathouse. As soon as they got outside in the sun of the courtyard, she linked her hand into his elbow.

“Sure you like the ink?”

“I’ve never heard of anything quite like it.”

“That was from Ophelia’s, too.”

She bobbed her head. “It’s fancy work.”

They paused for a moment to watch a Gobstones game in progress and scurried on when one of the stones careened in their direction.

“What was your appointment last Sunday?”

Hermione tilted her head thoughtfully. “I talked to a professor about apprenticeships.”

“And?”

“It’s like I told you, I need to make contacts.” She stopped and peered over the stone parapet to the ground below. "About last weekend…"

Here it comes. “I told you, I’m sorry I—“

"No, I think I should apologize." She knocked a stray feather over the edge, watched it spiral out of sight. "I made you come back. You didn't want to."

"You're right, though. I might want to do something else. Improve my odds."

She studied him. "You’re sure?"

“Absolutely. Gonna see this through." He propped his elbows on the parapet and looked across the lake. "Top of my form in Quidditch, doing decent in all my classes—really, I am,” he added hastily when she started to open her mouth. “I just wish….”

"What?”
He patted his fingertips on the rough stone, felt the grains poke into his skin. "I wish we could stop fighting, Hermione. Go back to how it was."

"We've always fought, you know," she said quietly.

"Bantered."

"Same thing."

She was focused on the grain of the granite, her face expressionless.

"Do you want to break it off?"

Her shoulders jerked. "No, I just need time, I think..." She sighed. "Ron, things happened during the war, when I was out..."

"Like what?"

"Cormac. I was there, I saw him...I saw him die, Ron." She pursed her lips. "I wasn't very nice to him when we were in school."

"I think he got over that."

"No, not just..." She looked up at him. "It's more than just... I'm not ready to talk about it yet. It's confusing."

He put his arm around her waist. She held herself from him, then relaxed a little.

"Can't you tell me anything?"

Hermione rested her head against his shoulder. "If I can't even tell myself, Ron, how am I supposed to tell you? Every now and then things happen that remind me...." She trailed off. "I need time to sort it out."

Ron considered. "Is that why you're so jumpy?"

She stiffened. "I...I don't know what you mean."

"Ever since term started, it seems like you've been on edge. It can't be just school work."

After a moment, Hermione pulled away and leaned against the parapet. "I hadn't realized. Maybe."

She rubbed her palms on her thighs. "I'd like a walk, Ron, but I don't really want to do more than that right now. I hope you understand."

So much for that. "Okay. But when you're ready—"

"Yes, I'll tell you when I can. Just not yet, not until I can work this out in my head."

Chapter End Notes

**Attribs:**
Follow your bliss. Joseph Campbell

Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames. Rumi

Active evil is better than passive good. William Blake
“Professor Snape, I’d appreciate your support.”

The girl stood beside the work room’s table, her hands clasped at her waist, weight evenly balanced. Poised. Collected. She’d presented her case while he made the anti-cramping potion for the hospital stores, and she never once raised her voice or revealed impatience. Never actually asked for help, either. No real Slytherin would, after all. He smiled inwardly, careful to maintain a neutral outward expression. When he’d become Head of Slytherin, he’d had no idea that the task of training his snakes to hone their persuasive skills would bring him so much pleasure. Not that he’d betray himself.

“When does Madam Hooch expect you, Candace?”

“In twenty minutes, sir. In her office.”

Snape stoppered the last bottle, added it to his carry basket, and turned his attention fully on the Slytherin Quidditch captain. He noted with a wave of warmth that she didn’t react to his increased scrutiny. Not like Gryffindors, who inevitably grew emotional. Ravenclaws had the sense to respond intellect to intellect. Hufflepuffs wielded patience and cheerfulness like a hemp string saw and succeeded through sheer tediousness. Never mind. Good snake.

“I’ll support you, Candace, but I expect you to make the argument.”

She nodded. Only a trained eye would have noticed her quick swallow. “May I carry that for you, sir?” she asked, gesturing at the laden basket.
Excellent. Service offered as payment for future service.

“Certainly. We’ll deliver it after the meeting.”

Rolanda Hooch waved them into her office, all brisk and bustle. “Miss Marsland, I understand there’s been some kerfuffle with the team.”

“Yes, Professor, Draco Malfoy’s threatening to confiscate the brooms his father gave the team unless I name him as Seeker.”

“He didn’t perform as well as Vivi at the tryouts.” Hooch folded her arms. “You mean to say that he’s threatening blackmail unless you cave.”

“That’s right. The rest of the team agrees that he’s an inappropriate match for our strategy.”

“Typically, the Head of House steps in to adjudicate these issues,” the Quidditch coach said, raising a brow.

“I’ll thank you to not tell me how to run my House,” he replied coldly, and Hooch’s posture became stiffly erect. “Miss Marsland is well aware I don’t involve myself with the students’ internecine squabbles. You were given great responsibility when granted the captaincy of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Miss Marsland. Are you admitting, now, you cannot manage the team?”

“Not at all, sir.” The girl didn’t glower, didn’t sulk, didn’t react at all to his barrage.

Rolanda’s gaze darted from Candace to Snape and back. “Do you intend to expand on the strategy you used last year?”

“We do. Speed and agility. Draco lacks the agility, and he’s too heavy on his broom for what we need.”

Sluggish and clumsy. Sainted Salazar! Lucius would rain hell fire down on the girl if he heard that, let alone what Draco might do. She was right, of course. He’d watched the tryouts himself and had been surprised that Draco bothered to mount his broom.

“If I were in your shoes, I’d just tell him no. You’re captain.”

“Professor, I’m concerned if I do that outright, he’ll hamstring the team by taking the brooms. They’re older models, but they’re consistent.”

Good. Keeping the equipment for the benefit of the team as a whole—that will whet Rolanda’s appetite for fair play.

“What do you propose?” Hooch asked.

“Does the school recognize the Mann-Knoll ruling on reserve players?”

Hooch’s yellow eyes bulged. She clearly knew the obscure ruling that Candace had had to explain to him. It allowed captains to swap regular players for reserves with none of the usual requirements for incapacity, although it did require that the regular player perform for ninety seconds before being replaced. From a Quidditch perspective, invoking the rule was almost cheating since matches were expected to begin and end with the same players, unless something dire happened. That she knew the rule showed Candace had done her homework, and her enthusiasm would impress the Quidditch-obsessed coach.
Most importantly, it got the team in the air with the Nimbus brooms for the first match. If Vivi performed well, not a single student in the House would support Malfoy in resuming the Seeker position. Snape sensed other political advantages to the bait and switch as well; he’d have to confirm the girl's awareness of the additional confusion her plan could sow.

“Well, we’ve never used it, but it is in the International Quidditch rulebook,” Rolanda responded slowly. “We’ve always recognized the rulebook as the authority for disputes.”

Candace smiled and lowered her chin. “I just wanted to know if it would be recognized, if I chose to invoke it. Thank you for meeting with me, Madam Hooch.”

Rolanda’s lip twitched. He’d be mistaken if she didn’t detect the plans for check-mate being prepared and wasn’t impressed. The woman’s eyes crinkled. Oh, she saw it, and she liked it.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Candace?”

The girl shook her head, thanked both teachers for their time and support—good, not help: help implied vulnerability—and she followed Snape out the door.

“You did quite well, Candace,” Snape said softly as they made their way down the stairs towards the main halls.

She responded with a contained smile. “I’ll ensure all the reserve players get equal practice time and the team drills on our new strategies. As you say, we should leverage our House’s strengths of cunning and resourcefulness.”

He relaxed enough to chuckle quietly, and she joined in. Cunning and resourcefulness indeed. Loyalty too, and Malfoy’s hubris had led him to challenge a leader the other students respected. Draco wouldn’t have a clue what she had planned; she’d see to that. “Let me take that basket. There’s no need for you to go this far out of your way.”

Snape left the girl near the main hall and continued towards the hospital wing, his gait automatically changing to silence his footsteps. He’d practiced stealth and secrecy so long that blundering along felt like sacrilege. Besides, this way was easier to detect when others were around or approaching. Knowing he was in silent cruising, he wasn’t terribly surprised when the heated voices in the corridor ahead of him didn’t dampen at his approach.

“So I touch you too much? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, Ron, I’m just tired of being pawed at every time I’m within arms reach.”

Granger and Weasley. He hesitated. On the one hand, listening would change nothing, as there was nothing between them to change, and it had often proven useful to know which pairs were strained. On the other hand, this was Granger, a fellow Order member. And Weasley, of course.

“But we’re dating, Hermione. We’re supposed to hold hands and snog!”

“But not every breathing moment, Ron! I’m not Lavender, if you haven’t noticed. I don’t enjoy having my mouth clamped on yours all the time.” Weasley made some undertone response, and Granger scoffed. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’re ignoring the revision tables I made for you.”

“The first term’s just started, Hermione. It’s still September, if you haven’t noticed—“

“And if you don’t keep up, you’ll fall behind.”
“You say that every year, yet somehow I make it through.”

“Barely. Don’t expect my help this year. I’m officially mentoring now. What kind of message would I be sending if I rewrote your essays?”

Hah. Proof that she did their work. He tucked that insight away. Their voices strengthened as they neared the corner some ten feet from where Snape stood. He considered Disillusioning himself and decided he’d rather make a little noise to announce himself before he continued past them with his potions delivery. Just as he was about to force a cough, he heard a slap and froze.

“What’d you do that for?”

“I told you! Don’t grab me like that!”

“I just put my hand on your elbow! I didn’t grab.”

“You startled me. Take my hand instead.”

Before he had a chance to do anything, they rounded the turn and halted. Weasley’s mouth hung open, his left cheek reddened slightly where she must have hit him, whereas Granger’s lips remained pressed into a line. Snape indulged himself in a smirk of superiority and acknowledged them by name as he sauntered towards them. At the sound of his voice, Granger blinked hard and jerked her head upward, meeting his eyes and very obviously abandoning some inward thought.

Then her lips parted and she blushed.

A lesser man would have stumbled. Snape burned the image into his thoughts, shoved it down into the lower recesses of his memories, and brushed past them without breaking stride. Two corner turns later, he stopped and leaned against the inner wall.

He’d passed close enough to her that he’d caught the jarringly sweet vanilla notes of her perfume. He’d never smelled it in class—or out. Perhaps it was a fragrance Weasley had given her. He sniffed his sleeve, clearing his olfactory with his own cologne, and pulled up the image. Brown eyes focused and framed by sweeping brown lashes, peach-colored lips separated, and that fetching bloom on fair skin.

Vanilla was criminally wrong. No. Deep florals, ambers, musks. The scent of her arousal rose into his mind, his potioneer instincts selecting complementary odors before he reined it all in.

This little exercise was just for some fun while he killed time until the end of the school year. She’d invited whatever hurt she got out of it, and she’d had ample opportunity to retaliate by turning him in. If her Gryffindor chivalry led her to “sadder but wiser,” all the better.

Resolve buttressed, he stepped from the wall, but didn’t move on. She confused him. She hadn’t reported him. She’d read the stories he’d marked for her and used what she’d learned. She’d discovered a way to interact with him in class without betraying any extracurricular activities. She'd sought him out with a plausible story and enticed him, both intellectually and physically. Everything suggested she had planned each step, the way he would have.

Yet they’d met moments ago, and she blushed.

Must be reading too much into it. Likely she realized he must have overheard their row and was embarrassed. The eagerness with which he had reached for a connection with her angered him.

Weakness.
Was he so starved for female attention that he was creating interest out of the self-consciousness of some arrogant witchling? So hungry to submit, he'd lost his prudence? He'd skirted that edge when she’d been in his rooms last, if he hadn’t blundered right over it.

He half-turned to obey the urge to retrace his steps and demand an explanation for her blush. Should have taken points for their arguing causing a disturbance in the corridor when he had the chance. Should have chased her out of his classroom the moment she’d emerged from the storeroom.

The bottles in his basket chinkled, and he realized his hand was trembling.

*Severus Snape, you’d be wise to end this now,* he told himself firmly as he forced the tremors to stop. Easy enough, just don’t speak to her about anything except school. He had enough fresh memories to entertain himself privately. Besides, whatever could she possibly see in him? It had to be a game to her, as much as it was for him. A convenient whim. A dalliance spiced by the forbidden, maybe by the distasteful as well. Maybe her own perversion was for unattractive older men.

Treat it like that, then. If she made another unambiguous overture, then he would respond in kind. She’d taken the initiative, after all. And if she never took a step towards him again, then he would consider the thing ended.

He squared his shoulders and carried on toward the hospital wing.
Ron bit his lip in concentration and tried again to slice the leathery shell in half. He'd ruined two pickled tortoise shells already and was down to his last one. Just why the bloody things had to be so exactly cut made no sense to him. The blade seemed to dent the shell's surface, then it compressed unevenly, making the knife slip sideways and carve through at an angle.

He stepped away from the table and stared down at the ruined thing in disgust. Beside him, Harry was struggling nearly as much, but had a little more luck—his last shell practically split apart on its own. To his left, both Neville and Seamus had moved onto the actual brewing. He peered around to see if anyone had a spare shell.

Hermione had two. She'd actually managed to cut open the first three without problems. He couldn't believe it. And Snape was nowhere to be seen. Amazing luck.

"Psst, Hermione." It took him a couple of tries to get her attention, and she glowered at him. Still pissed off after Tuesday night.

"What?" she mouthed at him. He held up the ruined shells, put on his most pitiful face. She glanced down at the two grey shells on her workbench.

Turning in the extra shells meant a bonus from Snape, who didn't give bonuses. Asking for extras meant the loss of ten points from the grade. He raised one finger. Just one, that's all he wanted. She sighed and reached out to set one on his table.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked from the workroom door. "Miss Granger?"

Ron straightened. "No, no problem." Hermione froze in place, her fingers still squeezing the shell.
The Potions master made his way across the room, checking cauldrons and tables as he came. "I thought I'd made it clear this was a graded test, not an exercise." He stopped at the end of Ron's table. Hermione had stood up as well and hung her head. Snape pointed at the shell near her. "Is that yours, Miss Granger?"

She nodded and kept her head down.

"Mr. Weasley compelled you to give it up, and you did, knowing it would cost you points?"

Her head lifted, and she stared at him, her face paling. Ginny moved a little around the table to tend to her cauldron and frowned at Ron.

"You realize this is an individual activity, not a team sport, Mr. Weasley?"

"I didn't—"

"Quiet." Snape unfolded his arms from his chest and Vanished the ingredients from Ron's workspace. "Obviously your family's experience with scarcity hasn't impressed on you a respect for limited resources. A zero for the test, Mr. Weasley, ten points for disrupting the class, and meet with Mr. Filch tonight at seven for detention." He turned toward Hermione with his hand extended. "I'll take your spares now, Miss Granger, since you have so little value for them or for the extra points. I'll expect you at my office tonight for detention. Seven."

"With respect, Professor Snape, I can't tonight." She gave him the shells and folded her hands together. "I tutor in the Thursday night study hall."

"I'm sure your charges will grieve if you're absent. Tomorrow night, then. Same time." He turned back to Ron. "Since you have nothing to gain from remaining in my classroom, Mr. Weasley, gather your things and leave."

Ron's neck burned, and he stared at Snape's back as he moved away. What the hell? Snape had never dismissed a student from the classroom. Harry gave him a sympathetic grimace. Ginny glared at him, but Hermione had already turned back to her brewing. Ron collected his things and left the classroom.

He climbed the long staircase to the main hall and sat heavily on one of the stone benches lining the wall. Six years of dreaming up ways of avoiding Potions class and he gets thrown out. And detention. And points taken. Greasy git.

A folded paper fluttered out of his bag as he pawed through it for his DADA homework. He bent to retrieve it and noticed bands of color. Hermione’s revision tables. He unfolded it and studied it skeptically. She’d worked in Quidditch practice and the matches, given him time for Hogsmeade trips, sorted out exactly how much time he needed for reviewing and homework for each subject, and even added evenings off for “R&H” time. Dates. He felt a little ill and tucked the paper into the back of his Potions textbook and decided to try to figure out why the damned shell wouldn’t cut.

He stayed put when the bell rang and waited for his friends, who gathered near him to commiserate.

“Where’s Hermione?” Ron asked.

Ginny sat beside him. “Snape kept her, instructions for detention, I think.”

“Bastard.”

“Ronald,” she said sharply. “It was a test, after all. You should have just asked for another shell
instead of making Hermione lose points.”

“Oi, you’re supposed to take my side!”

“Maybe, maybe not.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Anyway, it wasn’t that hard to cut those things.”

“Right. It looked like you didn’t have any left over.”

“I had one left over, for your information, because I folded the first one wrong.”

“Folded?” He goggled at her. “What do you mean?”

“Professor Snape showed us at the beginning of class, and it was in the homework from Tuesday night,” Neville said. “You’re supposed to fold them first, then cut on the crease.”

“We had practice Tuesday night,” Ron said. “And I had to go to see Pomfrey after Freddy smacked that Quaffle right at my head—“ and Hermione and I argued again, he wanted to add.

“You’re supposed to catch those,” Ginny said, “not let them knock you off your broom.” Her gaze darted past Neville’s elbow. “Hermione, what happened?”

Neville moved sideways to let Hermione into their circle. She had a serious expression on her face and clasped her bag to her chest.

“Nothing, just I’m to bring my dragon hide gloves to detention.” Her eyes flickered towards Ron and back to Ginny. “Last time he had me do lines.”

“If he’s letting you wear gloves, it’ll be awful,” said Harry. He jerked his head toward the Great Hall. “Why don’t we go on in and get a place? Between all the essays and reading I have due by Monday, I’m not certain I’ll have time to practice this weekend.”
Chapter Summary

Hermione is yet again in the hot seat with Professor Snape.

Chapter Notes

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant USAian!

MANY THANKS: Thanks, Melusin, for offering to beta read and Brit pick. No easy task--I'm high maintenance at times and bull-headed always.

The door opened on her third knock, and she entered without being called. As usual, he sat at his desk marking essays with the brightest light in the office pooled on his task. Hermione knew she was a few minutes early, and she sat in the old armchair as quietly as possible.

He had asked her to bring the heavy protective gloves. He'd also asked that she bring a couple of other garments, very specific items. She'd worn none of it, but it was all pushed into her bag. Not a bit of it made sense to her.

The clock struck seven. He set his quill into its stand and regarded her. After a moment, he flicked his wand, and she felt the quick movement of a Transfiguration charm at her left chest. She glanced down. The scarlet and gold Gryffindor badge she'd worn for six years had become green and silver.

"You listen to me," he said, and she lifted her head to meet his intense stare. "You came to me in knots over the concept of consent. How can you fail to see this is related?"

"Ron's my friend—"

"Is he? What kind of friend are you to rescue him from his shortcomings?"

"I—"

"Tell me, what have all your years of academic glory taught you?"

Her breath caught, and her nails dug into her palms. "What do you mean?"

"Try it another way. How many times have you failed, not just a few points off a test, not an
Exceeds when you wanted an Outstanding, but failed so abysmally you wanted to crawl into the earth?"

A memory rushed to mind: the piano recital when she was eight. Her mother had hounded her to practice, but she hadn’t. Her teacher had sent them all to the loo before the show, but she hadn’t wanted to struggle with her tights. When she got on stage, she forgot where middle C was, forgot the entire middle section of her piece, and her bladder let fly just as she retreated to the wings.

She practiced every day after that, made herself go before every potentially stressful situation, and retained a healthy distrust of tights.

“Learned something that changed your life, didn't you?”

Hermione nodded. Sniffled. Oh Merlin, not tears again, not in front of Snape. He offered her his handkerchief, and she took it.

“But Ron’s always struggled,” she said. “He’s the youngest boy. They've all done everything—there's not a single thing he can do to distinguish himself.”

“So resting on the coat-tails of others is an acceptable way for him to live?”

“That's not what I meant.”

“And writing his essays for him helps him how?”

Her stomach flipped. “You heard that?”

“I didn't need the confirmation. You’ve a far better grasp of grammar and richer vocabulary than he can even aspire to. It was obvious what sections you'd done for him, and I routinely ignored them.”

“I helped him with a lot of essays—“

“How other teachers mark is not my concern.”

“And I helped him cheat during a test.”

“No, you were in the act of. You didn't actually, and that's why I didn't take points.”

Her jaw dropped. “But, that's just a technicality.”

“No, that's following the rule.”

“Professor McGonagall—“

“Minerva can discipline her classes as she wishes. My class, my House, my understanding of the rule.”

Her head swam with recollections of Slytherins breaking rules. Given this new, razor-fine interpretation, she wondered how many of the apparent infractions she’d observed over the years fell just short of being real violations.

“What made you decide to give up your bonus points?”

“I, well, he…."

Snape leaned back in his chair, out of the bright circle of the lamp. His eyes were nothing more than
shadows with glinting points in the ghostly pale of his face. “Go on.”

“He looked so pathetic.”

“Did you review his homework from Tuesday?”

“No. He had practice that evening, and he had to go to the hospital wing. I don't oversee all his schoolwork, if that's what you're implying.”

He unwound a bundle of scrolls, extracted one, and shoved it at her across the table. “Have a look.”

“It's not my place—“

“Read it.” Each word weighted.

She smoothed the curling edges back. It was clearly Ron's work, and far from his best. Not even average. If he'd had her read it, she would have made him redo it. Or something, she realized as her cheeks heated. “He doesn't mention creasing the shell.”

“Any other omissions?”

“Several.” Critical, damning omissions that deserved the dismal grade slashed across the top of the parchment. She sighed and let the scroll curl up. “Oh, Ronald.”

“By rights, he has no business in my class. I never thought I'd see the day that Longbottom outperformed Weasley, but the tide has definitely turned.”

“This is my fault.”

“Partially, for buoying his grades.”

“No, it's my fault he's here. I pushed him to come. I convinced his parents he needed to finish his schooling—“

“So you're completely to blame.”

Something in his tone had changed, and she peered at him in the dim lighting. “You're teasing me?”

“I am.” He leaned back into the light. “Mr. Weasley had ample opportunity to stand his ground. Even now, he could admit he'd made a mistake and request the headmaster to redact his enrollment. It's clearly documented in the student handbook.”

“He wouldn't do that.”

“No, he'll likely drop out around March and never sit his NEWTs instead of doing the intelligent thing. The self-preserving thing,” he added in a sneering tone.

She studied him for a moment. “What makes you so certain he wouldn’t stay and sit his other NEWTs?”

Snape’s eyes glittered. “Idle staff chatter. I’d wondered why he bothered to return, given his obvious lack of interest. You just explained it.”

“Even then, he knows people in the Ministry. He has a future—“

“Have you not been paying attention to the Prophet?” He gave her a close look. “The Ministry’s
terrified of breeding pockets of like-minded cronies. That oversight nearly brought down the
government three years ago; it certainly affected Hogwarts. In response, they’ve forced a change in
hiring practices at all levels. Just knowing someone won’t be enough.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “He’d have to prove himself capable of doing the work—“

“And of seeing the job through.” He gestured towards a newspaper lying on the corner of his desk.
“How many went into hiding rather than carry out their duties? Given this reality, what message
would leaving school improperly send?”

Nothing good. “Is that why the Ministry made Hogwarts change OWL requirements for subjects for
us?”

“Out of pity, since you’d suffered enough?” He laughed dryly. “In part. We’re encouraged to make
it easier for the veterans.”

Her fingers dug into the padding on the chair's arms. “But that—that cheapens all of our marks.”

“Congratulations, Miss Granger. You've uncovered one of many thorns in my side.” He shrugged.
“Regardless, I hope you see how easily you're convinced to cave to his demands and how little that
sacrifice earns either of you.”

“I have to tell him.”

“No, you don’t.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I care for him—“

“Stop. You may tell him whatever you wish, but you are not compelled to. If you tell him what he
must do, and he does it, what will he learn, other than to please indecisive Miss Granger? Besides,
has he ever followed your strictures?”

“Sometimes.”

“And sometimes crushing defeat teaches more effectively than well-meaning rescue.”

She slumped back into the chair, watched the silver threads in her badge glisten as she breathed. “Do
you talk to all the Slytherins like this?”

“I do. Why shouldn't I? Who else in this school will see them as individuals with their own potentials
instead of fanatics with an air of corruption?”

She frowned and shoved the crumpled handkerchief into her pocket. Couldn’t argue with him on that
point. No one in her House thought any differently than what he said.

“Now, it's half-past, and you have a choice. Either we maintain the charade of your detention and
you assist me with inventory in the Potions classroom or we retire to my chambers and continue our
other discussions. I need assistance counting bottles and jars, no handling of ingredients.”

She raised her head. “I have a choice?”

“You always do. Every action is a choice, Miss Granger.”

“What do you want?”

“Makes no difference. I will follow your lead.”
“Are you angry at me?”

“Still this concern with my feelings.” He inhaled slowly, exhaled slowly. “I admit to being disappointed and angry earlier. Since we've talked, I'm cautiously hopeful that we've reached an agreement.”

“If I choose to do inventory, can I, we, can we talk later?”

“I would be a bigger dunderhead than Weasley if I didn't accept you might not feel social after our chat. Yes, my door remains open.” He lifted his right hand with the index finger extended. “But if I catch you making the same error in judgement, I'll treat you as the soft-minded Gryffindor you would have proved yourself to be.”

“Instead of as a Slytherin.”

“Instead of as a young woman who has outgrown the confines of her childhood.” He picked up his wand from the desk and canceled the spell on her badge with a wave. “Choose quickly since either activity will take time.”

Hermione gazed at the office door. He was right. She didn't want to talk to him further. She didn't want to talk to anyone, really. His admission that he'd been disappointed in her had deflated her, not that she'd expected him to say otherwise. The expression in his eyes during class, both after he caught her and in today's class, had been enough.

“If it makes your decision easier,” he said, “I'd almost prefer that you opt for inventory. I don't want your curiosity to be tainted by any complicating emotions like guilt or gratitude.”

“What would we discuss?”

His face seemed to soften, but she wasn't certain if it was just a trick of light. “Consent. Limits. Negotiation. Honesty with yourself. You'll need a clear head.”

“The clothing?”

“That too, although that's more my interest than yours specifically.” He shifted in his chair. “No interactive physicality. I suspect both of us have been affected by the discussion we've just had.”

She hugged her bag to her and stood up. He remained seated as she hovered by his desk and took a quick breath. “In, I think.”

“You think? You're certain?”

Hermione took a step toward the shelves with the hidden door. “Absolutely.”
He waved her before him with a floating ball of light to illuminate the passage. Once inside, he draped his jacket on the sofa.

"Did you bring the garments I asked?"

She opened her book bag and pulled out both the high-necked blouse and her traveling robe. He took the shirt from her and appraised it.

"I don't recall seeing you wear this."

"No, I never have. I bought it last month with the intention of wearing it to the Yule feast."

"Put it on," he said and turned his back to her. She shucked off her school robe and tee shirt, pulled on the blouse, and gave him the all-clear.

He turned toward her and evaluated her. "Your hair—may I?"

Hermione nodded, and he flicked his wand. Her hair lifted from her shoulders, replaced by a different weight at the back of her head. She followed his gesture to look in the mirror and gasped. Her hair was lifted into a smooth twist, loose curls framing her face and accentuating her eyes. It would have taken her an hour of cursing and a jar of Sleekleazy to do it herself.

"I need that spell," she said breathily.

"It's yours," he said and moved to stand behind her. "That is, I created it for you. It won't work on anyone else." His gaze met hers in the mirror, and he rested his hands on her shoulders. "I'll teach it
to you before you leave. Let's consider that as payment due, a fair exchange. Let me look at the
design of this blouse...."

He turned her gently around, looking at the sleeves, the collar, and the fit across her back. As she
faced him, she realized the shirt was very similar to his, and an odd thrill rippled through her.

"I like the sleeves," he said, fingering the French cuffs. "I don't care for the cuff links."

She twisted her wrist to look at it. "They came with the shirt."

"Obviously." A slight sneer to his tone. "May I make some alterations?"

She nodded, surprised, and felt him lightly touching the fabric. The collar rose a bit higher, the shirt
waist lengthened and narrowed to skim the small of her waist, and small pin-tucks appeared across
her midriff, accenting her breasts. She felt a loosening at the shoulders and armpits. He stopped to
assess.

“I may need to adjust the gussets, but I need to see how you move in it.”

She swung her arms experimentally. The changes made the body of the shirt stay in place as she
moved with no riding up. "I think you missed your calling in fashion."

He snorted. "Those must go." He held up his hand and snatched something from the air. "These are
mine." He handed them to her, a pair of silver cufflinks, each monogrammed with a snake curled into
an S with onyx eyes. Green and clear baguettes wrapped around the edges. "Take them, but show
them to no one, and only wear them in my rooms."

He swapped the fastenings for her, handed her the stock links with a grimace. Then he smiled tightly.

"I'm being unfair, Hermione," he said. "In this world, you have little idea what's expected of you.
Most who play in this space understand the importance of visual detail."

She lowered her hands to her sides and stood as straight as she could. Didn’t matter. He’d always
tower over her.

"That's good for now," he said and turned to her traveling robe. "Is this your favorite?" he asked as
he held it gingerly from thumbs and forefingers.

"No," she said irritably. "That is my only traveling robe. I only use it on the Hogwarts Express."

He made a pained expression and dropped the garment on her bag. "We'll address that later."

"Is it not good enough?"

He regarded her under lowered lids. "I did mention this is my interest, my fantasy, correct?"

A light went on. "And I need to look the part."

"More than that. The right clothes will help you act the part, assume the role. With that blouse, now
that I've improved it, those jewels at your wrists, your hair coiffed—how do you feel? You’re
standing more gracefully than you usually do. Could be just the absence of books, of course."

She turned slightly to look at herself in the mirror. "What else should I change?"

He barked a laugh. "Ten years experience, more confidence, better sense of style—but we’re limited
to what’s at hand."
Irritating git—he held her head and made her look at the mirror.

"This expression, Hermione."

She froze her face, trying to capture it. Her eyes were narrowed, her mouth tight, her face flushed, her chin set defiantly. She met his glinting eyes, and a tint answered hers in his cheeks.

"You only ever look like this when you're focused, whether it's from fuming over a troublesome brew or rising to my barbs." She leaned against his chest so his voice rumbled into her. "You lack confidence because you lack experience. Confidence. Not arrogance. Not bravado. That can change, given experience."

He stepped from her, kept a hand on her back until she had her balance. "Come."

She followed him through the door across from the tunnel. His bedroom, dominated by a roomy bed with a green and silver comforter, the posts of the canopy holding up heavy, black velvet curtains—in essence, a Slytherin version of the Gryffindor bedstead in an adult size. He scoffed as he followed her gaze.

"That's not why we're here." The wall to her left disappeared, and she stared at an apparent black hole until she realized she was looking into his wardrobe. "Come here by me," he commanded, and she moved closer to where he stood at the right side. He pulled a garment out and held it to her. "Try that on."

She giggled. "Nothing you have will fit me!"

"Have you forgotten temporary Transfiguration?" he asked tartly.

She grimaced and pulled the cloak on. The fabric was dense between her fingers and felt heavy on her shoulders. It resized around her body. At the irritated wave of his hand, she walked in a circle. The robe swirled around her legs.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"More imposing," she said and wished she could see herself.

"Try this one," and he offered another robe. They exchanged garments, the altered item returning to original as he took it from her.

The second one was lighter at the shoulders, but curiously weighted at the hem. It had a capelet attached, so the skirt of the robe moved differently from the rest. The fabric was both slick and slubby under her fingers and had a musky fragrance.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Raw silk. Impractical. How is the cut of it?"

Hermione mimed a strike. The robe flowed about her as she moved. "I like it. I like the weight of the other one better, but I love this fabric." She bunched the lapels to her face and inhaled deeply.

"Agreed. That will suit you nicely." He held the robe as she stepped from it and put it away. The wardrobe closed up.

"Meaning what?"

Snape smirked at her. "Never you mind. Tea?"
“Be mysterious, then,” she said good-naturedly and took her place at the table while he closed the door to the bedroom. “None for me, though. I’m not thirsty.”

“I am.” He sat, filled one of the nested glasses with water from a blue pitcher, and took a swallow. “I promised you a lecture.”

He did?

“Last time, we discussed consent and touched on limits. Are these clear now?”

“I believe so.”

He studied her for a moment. “I thought you were reasonably honest with yourself. I’m not so sure after my observations this week.”

“I’d disagree.”

The corners of his mouth curled upwards. “Not surprised. Convince me.”

“I knew what I wanted, I just didn’t do that.”

“So you lack conviction?”

“No.” She hesitated. How to explain this? “I felt there was more than one right answer.”

“Remember I asked you what you wanted from our discussions? Your frustration the last time?”
“If I know what I want, I won’t get frustrated?”

He chuckled. “Not quite. Before we play, you must know what you need to be sated.”

Again that word, sated. One sated thirst or hunger. Or lust, or this craving she had she couldn’t identify.

“And if I need something, you’ll agree?”

“Not necessarily. I have limits as well. We’ll negotiate.”

She pressed her fingernails as she recited back to him, “Needs, soft limits, hard limits, negotiation, consent, self-awareness. Makes what Ron wants from me seem simple.”

“Does simple satisfy?” He crossed his ankles and refilled his water glass as she considered.

Increasingly, no. Rather, her willingness to delay gratification was dwindling. Admitting that to Snape, Severus, whatever she called the man sitting opposite her—not so easy. If she’d learned one thing from these candid talks with him, painful admissions were the most beneficial. Still…

“I don’t want to discuss that.”

He blinked, but shrugged mildly. “You know the answer?”

She hummed in response. His gaze hardened and she clarified, “I’m coming to a conclusion on it. But explain this,” she added, plucking at her shirt front.

He tinted, dropped his gaze for a split second. If she’d not been watching him, she would have missed it entirely.

“Just as leather appears to draw you, certain forms of dress draw me. When we play, I would like you to begin in this, dressed formally.” He nodded toward the target dummy. “In a moment, you’ll practice so I can further adjust the fit of the blouse.”

“What we’ve been doing hasn’t been playing, has it?”

“No. It’s been training. Or testing.”

“Of me.”

Snape poured her a glass and set it within easy reach, and she sipped at it. “Yes, as you requested. But I’m learning as well.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“To tell when you’re thirsty, for instance.”

She paused with the glass on her lip, set it down. “How?”

He inclined his torso forward, his eyes glinting, and whispered, “Spy.”

Hermione laughed, watched his face wrinkle. Especially the corners of his eyes—it wasn’t him studying her or considering how next to insult her. His smiles started there, the real ones anyway, then the rest of his face warmed. Such tightly controlled changes—she wished she could unloose him, recalled his orgasm in the classroom, and felt hot. She took a quick drink, coughed into her glass. “I’m fine,” she gasped when he leaned towards her in obvious concern. “Think I’m learning to
read you, too.”

“We’ll test that in time. Now, practice.”

“Wait.”

He flopped back into his chair.

“You said we were top and bottom. I got your message, about what dominance feels like. Does my not being a real dominant matter?”

“What does ‘real’ mean?” He folded his hands. “You’ve never done a scene. I’ve done many. I expect to organize most of the time when we start playing. Just like last week, I’ll tell you what I need, how to strike me. I’ll be on guard to direct.”

“But I can express my needs as well?”

“Of course. I expect, should we keep playing, that you’ll have more control and input into what happens. In time.”

From the way he spoke, he had a timetable in mind: months, maybe even past the end of the school year. She giggled. “Is this diagrammed somewhere?”

“No.” Darkly amused look and a stern glance toward the dummy. “Go.”

She pulled her flogger out, swished it a few times, and began working the target. He stopped her frequently, poked and prodded at her blouse. The garment grew less binding with each adjustment.

"Good." He stopped her and examined the mark with a light touch. "Feel this. I've changed the spell to represent the heat left by a stroke as well." She touched it gingerly at the edge, and he pressed her hand against its center firmly. "Reticence, Hermione? No. Own your handiwork with pride." She met his dark eyes. "Yes, even on me, Hermione. You need to learn this. Confidence." He released her hand suddenly, and his wand moved quickly over the dummy to cast a glowing grid across the surface. He stepped forward beside the dummy and gestured her into position.

"Each of the four intersections is a target. Again, no central targets near the spine. No need to strike in any particular order, but for now, strike each intersection from the top left to the lower right. You'll strike some targets more or less powerfully and consistently than others. Aim to strike each evenly. Working to a pattern will help you identify your deficiencies. Understood? Begin when you wish; rest as you need."

After a while, she could feel herself starting to flag and stopped to rest and examine her work. He was right—the lower targets suffered from too little pressure, obvious now because they were cooler. She met his gaze, eyes hooded, jaw relaxed.

"Pleasure to watch," he said softly.

"Do you watch me in class?" she asked, felt a thrill when he nodded.

"But I try not to," he added, and cleared his throat. "Move your entire body to relocate. Don’t just bend from side to side."

She addressed the target again, stepping around to change her position, and found her throws landing more consistently. Severus told her to stop, summoned one of the dinette chairs, and pulled the wheeled desk chair into the room.
“I’d like to massage your arm and neck, before the muscles seize. If you’re willing.”

“Through the shirt?”

Glint of black eyes. “I’d prefer that for now.”

She offered him her hand. Strong fingers curled around hers, pressed firmly into her flesh. He manipulated each joint, compressed and stretched the muscles, discarded the cuff link on the desk to inspect her wrist.

“It’s completely healed, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

He kept focused on her lower arm, pushed the sleeve back. “Good.”

“It wasn’t necessary.”

No response. The pads of his fingers worked into her, finding and soothing pains she was faintly aware of. “What do you know of anatomy?”

“A little.” She winced as he found a pressure point, and pain shot down her arm before the tension released.

“I’ll give you a soaking oil.”

“I did that last time.” His eyes flicked to hers, back to his task. “Took some bathing salts from Ginny’s toiletries.”

“What kind?”

She shrugged. “I nicked them—didn’t pay much attention.”

He snorted in response. “Not the upright young lady you appear to be, are you? Filching from friends?”

“Ginny doesn’t mind. We trade things like that all the time.”

He scooted the chair to her side, walked his fingers over her upper arm. “You’ll find my potions more effective.”

“I’m sure.”

His hands tightened on her. “I’m serious.”

Hermione lifted her gaze to his, read the caution in his expression. “So am I.”

Severus relaxed his hands, and his shoulders dropped fractionally. He continued to rub her and made his way to her shoulders. She hummed in pleasure, and rocked her head to the left to grant more access. His touch became light and still, then he bounded to his feet. At his sudden movement, the wheeled chair scudded backwards across the rug and fell over; the lost contact made her skin buzz.

“You’d be best served with the soaking oil.” He disappeared behind one of the non-bedroom doors before she had a chance to collect herself.

Hermione stared after him. When she realized he wasn’t returning immediately, she loosened her blouse and pulled it over her head. Just as she picked up her tee shirt, the door behind her opened and slammed shut. She yanked the shirt on, nearly putting her head through an armhole in the
process, and shouted, “It’s safe. I’m dressed.”

He eased the door open and peered through the gap before returning to her. “I’m not accustomed to females undressing in my rooms.”

“I suppose not,” she said and took the pint bottle of purple-colored fluid he offered her.

“It might be stale,” he said, knitting his hands before him. “I haven’t brewed fresh since July.”

She guessed at what he meant. The war had ended the first few weeks of July. Although she’d not completely understood his role, she’d seen him come into Grimmauld Place bruised and limping enough to know he’d seen his own share of action. “Dosage is light,” she said as she read the label. “Quarter cup to a tub.”

Severus tapped the lid of it. “Follow the instructions: staleness only affects the fragrance.”

She unscrewed the top and sniffed it. Grassy with a cloying high note that faded immediately. “What’s it for?”

“Lingering Cruciatius pain.”

A clock somewhere in his rooms chimed nine and followed with a soft melody.

“Severus—”

“Homework. Fine. Keep the cuff links with you and let me teach you the spells for hair and target.”

Once she’d demonstrated mastery of the new spells to his satisfaction, he told her detention was over and picked up his jacket.

“No touching you tonight,” she teased as he buttoned his sleeves.

Severus gave her a smug look. “I won’t be your plaything each time we meet.” He led her through the hall to his office and walked her to the door. When he reached to open it, she put her hand on his forearm.

“We will play some time, like you say?”

“Of course.” He bent towards her, his face very close to her cheek, and lifted her hair with the backs of his fingers.

His breath stirred the curls behind her ear. Her skin prickled. He could only mean to kiss her, as close as he was, and her nipples peaked against her bra. The heat of his mouth scalded, and he hadn’t even touched her.

Then he straightened, pulled the door wide, and pushed her through.

“Good night, Miss Granger.”

She stared at the door as it closed in her face.
Snape shoved the library ladder into place, climbed up to retrieve the text, and decided to rest the book on the top of the case to browse it, rather than have to clamber down and back up when he was disappointed. Besides, seeing him balanced at the apex of ladders nonchalantly reading always sent Irma and half the female students into fits of nerves.

Win-win.

He’d just decided to discard the book as useless when he noticed Granger settle into one of the reading chairs near the periodicals. She deposited a stack of folios on a kick-stool beside the chair—Irma would have fits over that—and bent her head to one side.

After a moment, she cupped her hand over her head and tried to press her ear to her shoulder.

His neck muscles tensed in sympathy.

Probably shouldn’t have goaded her about her timing. Or taught her more technique. Or taught her at all, when it came down to it.

He absently turned a page in the book as he watched her rub neck and upper arm. As effective as healing potions were for relieving muscle strain, they paled before a good massage. If she hadn’t made those delicious little noises—
She jolted, picked up the folios and set them on the low table a few feet away, then returned to her chair just as the librarian rounded the corner.

Snape sniggered down at the unread book before him. Sly thing. How’d she—ah, yes, the shuffling bow wave preceding authority: flurry of students suddenly sitting in their chairs properly instead of sprawling, ruffling of smuggled snacks being shoved into rucksacks.

Irma frowned up at him. He smirked back, and she moved on, shaking her head.

Granger had one of the folios open on her lap and turned the broad pages slowly. He edged sideways on the ladder step to see what was in the book, but couldn’t tell. Large multi-colored drawings, light text. Only when she came to a fold-out did he understand. Anatomy texts.

Then she moved her hand down her neck and shoulder, as though comparing her own body to that in the diagram.

He’d done the same thing. Many times.

He slipped the book back into its place and slid down the lower half of the ladder, another of Irma’s irritants. Pity she wasn’t around to—

“Start of term going well?” The Headmaster stood at the end of the stacks, whiskers twitching. “I haven’t seen you do that since you were a student.”

“As well as can be expected, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore appraised him. No twinkling. Never a good sign.

“I hate to cast a pall over your mood, but something’s arrived.”

“Arrived?”

“Best to not discuss it here. Come with me.”

Snape followed him up a series of private stairs to the Headmaster’s office. Francois Thomas levitated an envelope up to the light and turned sharply towards them when they entered. Hagrid stood to one side, cradling a bedraggled, limp owl in his massive hands.

“Professor Dumbledore, I am certain it’s cursed,” Thomas said.

“I’m sure you’re right about the contents, but it is addressed to Severus.”

Thomas lowered the envelope to Dumbledore’s desk. “Careful, Master Snape. I’ve been unable to identify the hex.”

The address had no honorific, just “Severus Snape, Hogwarts,” in a clean, flowing hand. No return address—unsurprising. Unremarkable paper. He flipped it over with his wand. Nothing on the reverse, nor did he expect it. He cast a handful of identification charms at the thing, just as he had on every unexpected article sent to him for the past sixteen months, felt his magic slide off the cursed object within.

“Dare we open it?” Thomas asked as he craned to look at it.

“By all means,” Snape replied. He gestured at it and stepped back. “This is your area of expertise, after all.”
The Headmaster narrowed his eyes in warning just as Thomas reached out.

“But, I’d rather destroy it,” Snape interjected.

Thomas retracted his hand. “Are you certain? Perhaps there’s a clue, something to—“

“If not in the previous two dozen, why in this one?”

Sixteen months. He’d lost patience.

The Frenchman’s eyes widened. He hooked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and spread his fingers in a shrug. “One never knows. Perhaps a mistake is made, perhaps—“

Snape sent the envelope out the window and shot Reducto after it. Whatever had been in it exploded as his curse hit it, and wind carried away the dust.

“Anything else, Headmaster?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Dumbledore nodded towards Hagrid. “Perhaps you recognize this owl?”

Hagrid lifted the bird toward him, his hands cupped over the bird’s body as if it might struggle, but it barely moved its head. It blinked its liquid black-brown eyes as Snape bent slightly to get a better look at it, and he caught a whiff of some familiar scent. Perhaps the sweetness of hay from the castle stables, clinging to Hagrid’s clothes.

“Curiously colored eyes.”

“My words exactly, Professor,” Hagrid said. “Never seen a bird quite like it. It showed up at the owlery a bit ago.”

“At the owlery?” He extended a finger and rubbed the owl’s forehead. It closed its eyes as though enjoying being scratched. “Why didn’t it deliver the post like all the rest?”

“Wondered that myself, but given the state of it, maybe it just couldn’t take any more. Apparently crashed into a couple of students when it arrived.”

The bird tilted its head upward and nibbled at the tip of Snape’s finger. He waited to lower his arm until it had rested its head against Hagrid’s hand again.

“Yet another mystery. All the other letters came by standard owls.”

“Perhaps you acted in haste,” Thomas said and bobbed his head towards the open window.

“I doubt it.” He glanced at Dumbledore before continuing. “None of my identification spells found anything. Did yours?”

The Defense teacher shook his head. “I tried all the spells known by both our Ministries—“

“And mine covered the gaps in those spells—” Snape said coolly.

“There are no gaps, Master Snape,” Thomas sputtered.

“Thank you, gentlemen.” The Headmaster curved his hand over the owl’s head gently. “Take care of our guest, Hagrid. Francois, I’ll come by to speak to you later. Severus, if you’d linger a moment.”

Snape went to the balcony’s alcove and leaned his hip against the railing. He’d not received cursed
post for nearly two months. Given how the term had progressed, he’d begun to wonder if whoever had sent them had forgotten him. Obviously not.

“I’d ask that you remember Francois is here at the request of two governments and because of public outcry,” Dumbledore said lightly as he entered the alcove and stood beside Snape. “Not at my request.”

“I understand.”

He grunted and rested his hand on the railing. “I argued your case.”

A pair of sculls moved across the furthest part of the lake, the rowers evidently racing, but just as obviously equally matched as they took turns passing each other. From this distance, it was impossible to identify the rowers or tell whose students they were.

“I’ll owl a report to the Ministry.”

“It’s never made a difference.” He turned toward the older man. “Why bother?”

“Both Kingsley and Gawain are pursuing any lead they find. Severus, we all know we would have been crippled without your assistance during the war.”

“The papers sing only the virtues of cooperation and rehabilitation by example. Nothing like what happened after the first time.”

“Surely you recall how much selective vigilante justice the Wizengamot was accused of? Tens of innocents were sent to Azkaban while well-heeled Death Eaters walked free. Not to mention the challenge of keeping the government functioning.”

For a long moment, the two regarded each other. Now would be an ideal time to mention what his Gryffindor students were up to in their tower. Would be…if he were willing to discuss how he knew what they were doing.

The moment passed. Dumbledore nodded toward the boats below. “Your student, Severus.”

So it was. Carl Woolman, a Sixth Year, pulled his shell through the finish pilings, which turned bright green. The boy in the other scull, just a half-boats-length behind, whooped and flung his blue and bronze scarf onto the lake’s surface, where it slowly sank into the water.

“I see the fashion for wagering articles of clothing has returned.” He chuckled. “Fortunately, the merpeople aren’t put out by returning lost items.”

“If we’re done, Dumbledore…?”

“Of course. I did interrupt you in the middle of research.” They walked to the antechamber. “I’ll let you know if I hear any news, good or bad.”

Snape paused just outside the spiral stairs of the Headmaster’s office. No desire to return to the library. The conversation and all its implications had tired him. He headed down to his chambers, drew a hot bath, and stretched out in the tub with September’s issue of Alchemy Times.

He woke up choking. Heaved himself onto the lip of the tub, and sat clutching his knees with wrinkled fingers as he coughed out bath water. Hadn’t fallen asleep in a bath in years, not since, well…when? Probably that first year the Dark Lord had returned and had demanded his presence several times a month, while he himself evaded the lunatic woman the Ministry had placed at
Hogwarts. He plucked out the plug, and watched the water swirl away.

Once he’d pulled himself together and Vanished the ruined magazine, he flicked on the shower. Might as well bathe, considering he’d nearly drowned himself. He scrubbed savagely at his hair. As usual, the hair paste he used to keep things under control turned into a slick jelly as soon as the shampoo mixed with it. He gave it a couple more sudsings and rinsed. Until he’d stroked Granger’s hair, he’d forgotten what hair felt like without a coating of residual pomade.

He toweled himself dry and padded naked into his bedroom. His clothes, which he’d dropped in a pile just inside the bedroom door, had already been collected by the house-elves. Snape dressed, returned to the bathroom, and combed his hair into place, then headed out to his office where a pile of parchments awaited him.
There’s no advantage to finishing early in class.

“In summary, you’ll brew the base today. Thursday, you’ll complete the second part of the creation process. Friday, once your samples have cured, you’ll complete the potion and test it.” Snape paused. “Begin.”

Once released, Hermione and Ginny put their heads close together to chat as they chopped ingredients.

"We would never have been able to make the exploding potions under these circumstances," Ginny whispered after Snape stalked past their table. Hermione nodded, watching the fumes from the cauldron for the first hint of scarlet. She saw it, quickly dowsed the flame, and cast a cooling spell.

“Well done, Miss Granger," Snape said from her shoulder. She jumped and looked up at him.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Bottle and label a sample, and store the rest for Thursday. Since you’ve finished ahead of time, review the storeroom inventory for expired ingredients."

She was deep in the storeroom on a ladder when the door opened and closed. Must be someone else who’d finished early. "I'm back here if you want to help."

"I have no desire to work on inventory, Miss Granger." He'd spoken almost directly beside her, and she looked down at him in surprise.

"Hello, professor," she said. He leaned against the shelves, watching her. "Is something wrong?"

"Are those Slytherin colors at your ears, Miss Granger?"
Hermione smiled brightly. “Not intentionally, sir. They were my grandmother's. Emerald was her birthstone.” She’d never worn the white gold and emerald earrings before. She’d been as keenly aware of possible misinterpretations from those in her House as she was of how Snape might see them.

"I believe those would match some cuff links I had."

She replaced the bottle she had been examining, then turned back to him and took a step down the ladder so they were eye to eye. "I thought the same thing, Severus.” He became more still, as though he held his breath.

“It’s pleasant to hear you say my name, Hermione,” he said at last.

She felt a flutter at her chest. How to respond?

He moved behind her, and she turned backwards on the ladder to face him. "I see you visited our private library. What did you think of my selection?"

Tingling heat rose from her groin. "It was interesting. I wondered if you had marked that."

His brows raised. “You marked a selection in response."

She nodded, tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry.

"Perhaps we can come to a compromise,” he murmured and moved closer to her.

Shrink back or meet him? In her wavering, her foot slipped on the step of the ladder. He caught her and lightly set her on the floor. She'd wrapped her arms about his neck in surprise, and clung to him.

“I'm keeping you from lunch,” he said. He wasn’t letting her loose either.

“'What kind of compromise, Severus?"

"You know what I want, but you’re not ready. In the meantime, I think I can satisfy some of your desired selection. You wish me to follow you.”

Hermione felt her cheeks flush, overwhelmed by his proximity, the smell of him, the slight movement of his muscles under her arms. Not to mention the fact that she’d asked a master spy to shadow her. “Aren’t you worried someone might notice?"

“We can be discreet, can’t we? Certainly I can. Perhaps if you spent less time with your entourage. What class do you have Thursday following Potions?"

"I have a free period directly after.”

"Free study, Hermione."

"I'm caught up on my studies, Severus.”

On a whim, she released a hand to gently push his hair back from his face. He leaned his head into her gesture and relaxed his grip on her.

"Meet me at my office, appropriately attired." He left her alone in the storeroom.

Once she trusted her knees, she grabbed her things and followed the rest of her classmates up to the Great Hall.
“I don’t get it,” Ginny said as they sat down at the table. “I finished up a few minutes after you did. Snape didn’t send me to do inventory.”

Hermione snickered. “He told me when we were at Grimmauld Place last year that I did inventory almost acceptably.”

“So, this is his way of saying you do a good job?”

“I suppose so.”

Ron gave her a skeptical look. “Making you to do his work is a compliment?”

“He is—” She cut herself off as the Potions master strode down the aisle toward the staff table. “He is Snape, you know,” she repeated in a low voice.

“Again, defending him,” Seamus said. He bit into an apple. “I don’t understand you sometimes.”

She glowered at him. “Seamus, we both saw what he looked like when he came back to the house between missions. He put himself in danger, far more than we ever did, as long as we’ve been alive.”

Seamus scoffed. “It’s like hero worship with you, like he’s pretty-boy Lockhart—“

“It’s not,” she said sharply.

“Leave off,” Ginny said. “You’re just pissed off because you didn’t get the grade you wanted on that Astronomy test, Seamus.”

He grunted and bent over his meal.

Hermione spooned some pickle relish onto her plate. “Anyway, I see it as good practice. If I work at St. Mungo’s, maybe I’ll be able to use Professor Snape as a reference—“

“A reference!” Ron said. “Hermione, do you hear what you’re saying?”

“It can’t hurt.”

“It’s Snape,” he hissed back at her. “Remember, ex-Death Eater? Greasy git, bad temper?”

“On our side,” she shot back.

“I think Seamus might be onto something. Mental.”

“Don’t you remember what happened to your teeth back in Fourth Year?” Harry asked. “He wasn’t even going to let you go to the hospital wing.”

Hermione stared down at her food. They were right. None of it made sense, especially not with what she was seeing in him now. How he’d enticed her less than an hour ago. But… “What if that was an act? For Malfoy and the rest. He was still undercover as a spy—“

“No one’s that good an actor,” Harry replied. “It’s like the first week back. He hurt you, then he made you show him the bruise.”

“I doubt he changed his lesson plans just to satisfy his own curiosity.”

“You don’t know that.”
“Like you keep pointing out,” Ron said, leaning close to her. “He’s Snape. The snake king.”

“Close in with You-Know-Who,” Seamus added. “No one will ever know the truth of him. Ever.”

She glanced past Ron’s head. At the staff table, Snape concentrated on his lunch, his brows bunched as he cut at something. He tipped his head toward Flitwick, who sat beside him, then raised his eyes so they seemed to meet hers.

What did she believe?
1 Oct 98, Potions Master's Office

Chapter Summary

It's all about exchange.

Chapter Notes

COMMENTS! Thanks Covered in Books, MizzAdamz, Curlysupergirl, Recks, and 2ndDIVSpartan for the lively dialog on the previous chapter! That's the whole point of social media, the exchange of ideas. After reading through the comments, I decided it's better to just reply here, than try to reply one at at time; honestly, y'all were chatting to one another and didn't need me. Hah! Unfortunately, if I really tell anyone anything, it'll be spoilery, and none of us want that, right? I do appreciate all the comments, and I'm glad you're finding the work compelling and thought-provoking! Quite a complement!

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant USAian!

MANY THANKS: Thanks, Melusin, for offering to beta read and Brit pick. No easy task--I'm high maintenance at times and bull-headed always. Thanks, Mizz Adamz, for playing sounding board as I fine-tune the kink.

Hermione pressed herself into one of the deeper alcoves to wait for the dungeon hallway to clear. Very few students went deeper into the dungeon, toward the Slytherin dorms. Most headed upward. While she waited, she replaced the stock cuff links with those he'd lent her. Given her. She wasn't clear on whose they were now, but they sparkled in the dim light from the torches. Honestly, she didn't know why she was keeping this appointment. Morbid fascination, maybe, like in those stories about how snakes hypnotized their prey. The only way to know was to find out.

At last it seemed the scuffling footsteps had died, and she scooted down the hall to his office.

“Don’t you have a class now, sir?” she asked.

“Third Year, normally, but Professor Sprout borrowed them to brew fertilizer with her Fifth Years.” He wrinkled his nose and draped his working robe over his chair.

Hermione giggled.

"Your robe," he said, extending a hand for the garment.
She shook off the student's robe, and he appraised her. She had worn the blouse and emerald earrings and selected one of her better black skirts: a mid-knee A-line with a slit halfway up her left thigh. She'd opted for her new black shoes with a medium height solid heel and a t-strap; it was as much height as she felt comfortable with, adding only about an inch. He asked her to walk, and she paced the small office, felt his eyes working across her. When she returned to the desk, he handed back her robe.

"I'm not certain about the skirt," he confessed finally. "I don't want to impede your movements."

"I don't think it will," she said. "It looks better than the school uniform skirt, though."

He smiled. "Yes, and no. Certainly, more sophisticated, but there is a certain innocent appeal to the other, and it has fullness...."

"Severus, that's a bit pervy," she said, holding her voice even and mimicking his contained drawl.

His eyes glittered as he gave her a once over, and his cheeks reddened. Slowly, he unbuttoned his coat while holding her gaze, slid it from his shoulders, folded it in half, and laid it on the desk. "As I suggested, I propose we play lightly today. My red deer flogger is prepared in the next room, should you wish to use it. Is there anything particular you've wanted?"

Here it was. "I want to touch you."

He started. "Granted. No touching below the waist."

Her heart pounded. "But above?"

His eyes narrowed, and his mouth pressed into a line. "Accepted. Is that all?"

"Think so."

"I believe you need something else from me."

She stared at him. "I do?"

Severus shook his head impatiently. "How do you feel, Hermione? Still sore?"

"No. The soaking oil helps."

"In future, what might you like to do about that aching?"

"Not wait so long to use the oils." Or soak in the bath...

He moved closer to her and folded his arms. "You need to think in terms of our assumed roles. Perhaps something more directly hands-on might be more soothing, Mistress?" He whispered the last words into her ear.

Her mind whirled. More direct? Hands-on? Was he using Legilimency against her, to see what she'd done after she'd left his office Friday? Couldn't be—he was leading her somewhere. "I'd like a massage, I think," she stammered.

"You think?" His voice held the dangerous edge she was used to in the classroom.

She lifted her chin. The knot of coiled energy in her belly grew as she held his gaze, then Hermione looked pointedly at the shelves covering the hidden passage, not trusting herself to find the right phrase.
He stepped back mutely and gestured to the door as it swung open; they went through. Unsurprisingly, a padded table covered with clean white cotton sheets waited in the center of his living room. She stopped just inside the room.

"Never had a massage, either?" he asked smoothly, dropping his cravat on the desk and opening his shirt at the throat before standing beside the table.

Hermione shook her head. "What do I take off?"

He folded his arms, a smirk of amusement playing across his lips. "Typically down to your knickers. Take out your wand and come here."

She faced him, wand ready.

"The spell is 'Oculos Velo', with the Wingardium gesture."

At her words, a long ribbon spun from her wandtip and wrapped around Severus' head over his eyes. She waved a hand before his face.

"Four fingers," he intoned, and she stopped. "No, I can't see. I can feel your motion, and it's a very Hermione thing to do."

"Thank you."

He smirked again. "Modesty must be preserved." He propped his hip against the table.

She stripped, folded her clothes carefully and placed them on his desk. Paused at the bra, then stripped it off, and tucked it under her shirt. She climbed up, draped the loose sheet over her, lay prone with her face in the padded ring at one end, and told him she was settled.

He removed something from the shelf below her torso. "May I begin?"

"Y-yes." Blind, nearly naked, and exposed. Vulnerable.

She jumped when his palm grazed her upper arm as he folded the sheet back. He hummed wordlessly, laid both hands on her back with purpose, then began working the muscles of her shoulders and neck slowly. Whatever he'd put on his hands smelled of fresh hay. She relaxed under his rolling fingers as his hum separated into a softly sung chant. Knots that had gone unobserved released. He continued across her shoulders, down and up both arms, then returned to her back, as tightness dissolved under his touch.

"Severus?" she asked lazily.

He stopped singing, hands never breaking rhythm, voice somnambulant. "Yes?"

"Why are you a Potions master?"

"We discussed that."

"No, I mean instead of…"

His voice became more alert. "Instead of what?"

"Well…a Healer."

He chuckled, and his voice fell back into a purr. "My interest was in the Dark Arts, Hermione. In
time, I learned I needed to be able to repair the damage, too."

"Is that true for everything? If you learn to destroy, you also learn to repair? If you repair, you learn to —"

"Destroy? No. Usually you only learn ‘either/or’, not ‘and’. Most Healers know very little of the Dark Arts, not more than to diagnose and cure. Dark magic is its own study."

His hands left her, and the sheet settled across her. She sat up carefully and studied him as he stood quietly by the foot of the table, hands folded at his waist. "I liked that. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

She edged off the table and dressed. If this was what he had in mind when he mentioned service, she wanted more.

He’d not moved while she pulled her clothes on. Hermione traced the shape of Snape’s eyes and brows through the blindfold. So much easier to think about touching him when he couldn’t see, when he just waited. And he was so different now than the man who practically mowed down students in the corridors. Passive, receptive, waiting for her to choose the next step.

Imagery from the stories in the magazines blurred together into a path forward.

She moved a dinette chair to the end of the massage table, magicked the table wider and shorter, then returned to him to unbutton his shirt. At her touch on his wrist, he offered his hands to her; she opened first his right sleeve, then his left, then slid the shirt off.

Again, the scars. She traced a few white lines over his chest. He twisted away as she crossed ticklish spots. When she lifted his left forearm to examine the Mark, he growled and resisted her. Hermione ended by holding both his hands, turning them over to study the strong fingers and carefully manicured nails. When she released his hands, he let them drift gently down to his sides.

She moved behind him and guided him by cupping her hands at either side of his waist until his knees touched the chair.

"Kneel," she whispered, "and take position."

He knelt on the chair as he had in the classroom, braced both hands on the table. She picked up his flogger and shook it lightly. He sucked in a breath at the slight flutter of blades.

"Prepare yourself, Severus."

"Yes, Mistress." He sighed and lowered his head.

Hermione brought the first stoke against his left shoulder blade, then targeted his right. Her third stroke fell just left of center of his back, and she felt the rush of watching his skin blush. She paced herself, moved slowly around the exposed bow of his body, rested by dragging the lengths of the blades over him. His entire back had been reddened when she stopped and lifted the whip’s handle to his lips to kiss.

He leaned on the table with his head bowed. She glided forward, concentrating on moving silently, retrieved and opened the jar of unguent he had used on her. She rubbed her hands, warming and spreading the substance, and began stroking his back with even touches. He groaned as she smoothed the cream into his skin. Then she helped him turn and slump on the chair.
Hermione bent over him and kissed him. Severus lined her jawbone with the back of his curled fingers. She withdrew, and tried Finite silently on the blindfold. It disappeared.

He kept his eyes closed for a few moments before pushing himself upright. Hermione nudged his hair off his face, and he opened his eyes.

“Am I released, Mistress?”

"Not yet. Where's your hairbrush?"

He grimaced. "Bathroom, through that door."

She went into a miniature prefect's bathroom. Same standard white towels with the Hogwarts school crest. His brush and comb sat on a wooden cabinet beside an ornate marble wash basin. His toothbrush and a tube of paste rested in a cracked stone mortar beside the sink. He warily watched her approach. Hermione gently brushed his hair, worked tangles out with her fingers, finished by applying a central parting as he commonly did, and pushed it all back from his face.

"I think you need a different conditioner," Hermione mused as she rolled a few strands between her fingers.

"Thank you, Mistress," he replied, a slight acerbity in his tone.

"I haven't released you yet, so stay civil."

He chuckled.

"Maybe I just won't." She grinned down at him.

He gave her a mildly interested look. “I’m willing to tempt the Headmaster’s annoyance if I’m absent from the table. Are you?"

She shrugged and stepped away. "Fine. I release you."

He rose and drew on his shirt. As he buttoned his sleeves, he said, "Overall, a good start. Your rhythm’s improved. For reference, I keep a jar of healing cream in the potions cabinet in my bathroom."

The elation from his praise vanished, and Hermione pursed her lips. “Was there a problem using the massage cream?"

"Minor discomfort, from the mild heating agent."

"I should have guessed!"

"Minor,” he repeated. “I’ll bathe before dinner to wash it off and forego the…conditioner.” He scowled down at the front of his shirt as he paired fastenings.

“Are you angry?"

He regarded her, his face softer than usual. "Do I appear angry?"

"It's hard to tell sometimes. I don’t want to hurt, um…” She broke off in an embarrassed giggle. "Unintended hurt, I guess."

Severus chuckled again, an actual laugh that warmed her through. "Frustrated that you aren’t as
pleased as you should be." A loud ticking sound emanated from his left trouser pocket. "I need to bathe before I join the staff at dinner."

Hermione uncharmed her hair and checked her clothing in the mirror before he escorted her to his office. She hurried out the door to her dorm.
Hermione pelted up the stairs to the Gryffindor dorms. Why the devil couldn't she have had a relationship with someone closer to her dorms? She tripped on the nose of the landing and nearly fell. Was this a relationship? What else could this be? Even meeting to play a sport or chess or form a study group constituted a kind of relationship, didn’t it?

She tested her aching back and arms as she waited to let the Fat Lady open the Gryffindor portal. There’d be no soaking with the healing oil until much later that night, after study hall.

Hermione waved at her friends’ calls as she flew past them up to her bed, scurried to stow the book bag with its illicit contents and her jewelry carefully away, and locked the trunk. The massage cream left a lingering sweet scent on the fabric even after she Cleansed it. Then she dressed and snagged a separate bag with her study materials.

Her friends had waited for her a couple of flights below on the Grand Stairs. They trooped downstairs together and settled at their table.

Snape billowed imperiously to the single remaining seat between Professors Flitwick and Vector. He looked somehow different. She couldn’t put her finger on why, and didn’t want to be caught staring at him, so Hermione limited herself to sneaking sideways glances as she ate.

"What’s with Professor Snape?" Ginny asked. They all peered at the Potions teacher.

A smudgy halo had replaced the heavy curtains that usually framed his face. He irritably batted at strands that drifted near his mouth when he tried to drink. The more annoyed he became, the more
wild his hair became—until Hermione wondered that it wasn't audibly crackling with static.

"Looks like he washed his hair," Harry said.

"Looks like the shampoo won," Ron said, eliciting a quiet titter from his audience before he resumed the discussion of Beaters' bats.

Hermione pushed her peas around her plate as her appetite fled.

The study hall took place in a room at the front of the library where reference materials were easily reached. Hermione dropped her bag on a table and moved amongst the younger students and offered assistance. She kept a casual eye out to see which teacher had been assigned to her group for supervision, but no one occupied the corner table near the door that was traditionally reserved for the professor on duty.

On her third pass amongst the tables, a familiar black shape bent over a pile of scrolls, quill scraping across the parchment as it streamed red ink. At close range, it was obvious the strands stood straight from his scalp. She bit her lip. She’d caused this by suggesting that he abandon the conditioner which obviously kept his hair tame. His discomfiture at being denied his usual restrained image radiated off him.

Once the students’ questions petered out, she settled down with the girls at her table. By coincidence, she was able to see Snape’s figure from the corner of her eye. One of the First Year Gryffindor girls took a bright yellow hairbrush from her bag and drew the bristles through her hair. Snape raised his head at the motion and followed the brush’s movement. Some barely concealed emotion flashed across his face.

Hermione imagined herself invisible, tried to focus on her Alchemy text, and willed time to speed up.

Each time she made rounds, it seemed he’d lost more control. He raked his fingers though his locks, which served only to create bunched snarls. As the end of study hall crawled nearer, he resigned himself to trapping his hair against his scalp with one hand while he marked with the other.

She’d hunched beside one of her tutees to work on an Astronomy problem when the girl with the hairbrush rose, set a blue plastic bottle on Snape’s desk, then beat it to the door with her things.

"What’s this, Miss Koobas?"

The girl—what was her name? Yes, Lauren—froze. “Sir, it’s…” She edged sideways toward him and whispered, “It’s moisturizing spray.”

He picked up the bottle with his fingertips and examined it.

"I, my whole family actually, we have very fine hair. It’s always dry. Even if it gets moisture, it doesn’t keep it. The castle seems to make it worse, especially when I come up from the dungeons...” She paused and faltered, seeming to realize who she was talking to.

"Go on," he murmured.

“I’m Muggle-born. We didn’t know even my mother’s cousin was a wizard until I got my letter to Hogwarts—but he’s a Potions master in America.” As she continued, her words flowed more quickly, but she kept her voice lowered in a conspiratorial whisper. "He specializes in his own line of grooming products.”
Lauren read his hard silence as permission to continue and plunged into an explanation of how hair was constructed and her cousin’s experiments with New World herbals to meet the challenges of different hair types. “Just follow the directions. Don’t brush too much, because that can make your hair greasy, and pomade is so last cen—”

She suddenly snapped her mouth shut. It was as if she’d talked herself out of her personal obsession and realized she was directly addressing Snape.

His eyes remained locked on the girl’s. "Fascinating."

"Isn’t it, sir?" she replied with forced brightness. “My cousin says that, after Hogwarts, I can apprentice with him for a few years. Then I can come back and open my own shop in England.”

"How is it that your obvious passion for cosmetic unguents doesn't seem to materialize in Potions class, Miss Koobas?"

She took a slow breath. "Honestly, sir?"

He raised his brows.

"Well, sir, what we cover doesn't seem very practical."

Silence took the room.

"Not very practical," he echoed, his lips barely moving.

"I mean, it is, in theory. But I don't really want to make poisons... It just seems cruel, sir. I think there's enough cruelty in the world."

"Are you questioning my methods?"

"No, sir. I'm sure you have your reasons. But I can't get too excited about it." She paused for a moment. "You did ask me to be honest, sir." She lowered her head and clasped her hands before her.

"I did, Miss Koobas." He paused, then set the bottle carefully on the desk. "Ten points, Miss Koobas, for exhibiting one of the strengths of your House." The girl’s head shot up, and she beamed at him. He studied her for a moment placidly before he returned to his marking.

She hurried from the room.

Once the sounds of papers being shuffled resumed, Hermione made a final circuit amongst the tables. Her path approached Snape’s desk last, on her return to her books.

"Miss Granger," he said quietly as she passed. She paused, watched as his quill continued to trail across the scroll. "My compliments for running a smooth open study."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, matching his volume.

"You may go."

She moved on, wrapped up, and collected her things. As a group, her tablemates filed out the door, refraining from any nonessential chatter until they were out of the library.

Ginny turned to Hermione in amazement. "I can't believe that just happened. Likely no one else will."
"I don't think anyone will have problems believing," Hermione said, jutting her chin towards the
other students from the study group who sprinted up the stairs, presumably to catch up with Lauren.
"Too many witnesses."

Inside the Gryffindor common room, the mob descended on Lauren, whose face paled with every
series of questions and wave of retelling. She tried to protest, her quiet voice barely audible over the
uproar, and her eyes were beginning to brim.

Enough’s enough.

Hermione stood on the coffee table, folded her arms, and stared at everyone around her, her back as
straight as possible and head high. The babble slowed and people stilled. “What happened tonight is
between Lauren and Professor Snape. Private. We should respect that.”

"But it wasn't private, Hermione," Seamus called back. "From what I hear, it was right in the study
hall."

"That's true, but when people snog in study hall, we don’t go on about it. We're all eavesdroppers in
this case, and we need to be more circumspect."

"I disagree," said Seamus. "I think this is a chance to take the Mickey out of the dungeon bat, and I
don't think we should just let it go."

Lauren hopped to her feet and pointed at Seamus. "If you do, then you're ignoring my wishes, too."
She blotted her eyes with her sleeve. "You think you're right because you hate him, but you're not.
And I'm the one who won the House points, not you."

Seamus scoffed and shouldered his bag. "All right, but you're mucking up what was becoming a
beautiful evening."

The students filtered to their dorms. Hermione and Ginny sat beside Lauren and held her hands.
Harry sat on the coffee table, and Ron propped himself on the back of the sofa.

"I'm glad you said something, Hermione," Lauren said.

"So am I. Why did you give him that?"

"I don't know," the First Year admitted. "But I know how badly my hair reacts when I come out of
Potions class and how much people tease me about it. And I'd just got a new bottle in the evening
post." She sniffled. "I think I'll go upstairs and take a bath."

Hermione stood up. "Sounds good. I like the idea of a bath myself."
**2 Oct 98, Great Hall**

Chapter Summary

Hermione keeps acting oddly. Perhaps it’s the pumpkin juice.

Chapter Notes

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant USAian!*

**MANY THANKS:** Thanks, Melusin, for offering to beta read and Brit pick. Someday I will learn how to use a comma, I promise.

“Hermione, what are you doing?” Ron asked as he set his water goblet down.

She stopped the odd gesture she kept making and giggled sheepishly at him across the table.

"I was thinking about tennis," she said. "It's a Muggle sport, with a racquet and a ball." She sat straight up. “When you want to get better at Beating, is there some kind of training you can do?"

“What?”

Harry replied, "Torso exercises. We lift weights, too."

"Could you show me?"

"Sure. After dinner?"

"I'd appreciate that, Harry."

"Hang on," Ron said. "Since when do you care about sport?"

She shrugged. "I guess I thought I'd try something different."

"Well, do you want me to go with you, too?"

She smiled. "Sure. Let's all go."

The gymnasium was nearly empty. It was Friday night, after all. A handful of students, almost all
Quidditch players, worked out on the machines. Harry took her around and pointed out upper back and arm exercises. She’d tried a few and stood glowering at the final machine. A Sixth Year Hufflepuff, Chris, introduced himself. He was one of the assistant spotters and offered to work with Hermione to develop a plan for herself.

"It might help me if I understood what you wanted to work on," Chris said as they toured the rest of the gym.

"Tennis. I don't know if there's a wizarding equivalent."

"No, but we have something similar." He flagged down a passing girl, her brown hair snugged back in tight plaits and a towel around her neck. "This is Vivi, a Fourth Year, and she’s Slytherin's new Seeker. This is Hermione, and I'm sure you know Harry and Ron."

Vivi smiled tightly when she glanced at Ron and Harry, and her cheeks reddened.

Chris continued, “Vivi somehow managed to get a squash court added back in her Second Year.”

The girl’s blush deepened. “It wasn’t like that.”

Chris chuckled. “You can explain, then. Hermione wants to get better at her tennis game.” The boy darted off to tend some students across the room.

Vivi brightened. "Oh, I'd love to have a partner. I even have a spare racquet I can lend you."

"I'd like that," Hermione said.

"I usually do solo drills Sunday mornings. We can meet around eight-thirty."

Hermione beamed. "It’s a date. How did you manage to get your own squash court?"

“It’s because of my mum, really,” Vivi said with a giggle as they walked towards the exit.

“She’s on the board of governors?” Hermione asked.

“No, she’s a Muggle. She teaches tennis and squash, and she’s always encouraged me to be active. My first year here, that woman….” She trailed off and glanced around at them, her eyes wide. “You know, that woman.”

“What woman?” Hermione asked.

“The…” Vivi leaned towards them and dropped her voice. “The toad. She taught—”

“The toad!” Ron exclaimed, and both he and Harry snickered. “You mean Umbridge?”

“Not so loud!” Vivi whispered. “The professor takes points if we disrespect teachers or staff.”

“He’s never overheard Malfoy,” Harry replied.

Vivi made a face. “Anyway. Umbridge. She made me so nervous, I kept playing handball in the dungeon corridors after hours. I completely forgot that the professor’s chambers were there.”

“What’s handball?” Ron asked, but Hermione spoke over him.

“I imagine that might cause problems.”
“It did. Professor Snape confiscated almost all my balls in a month. He wrote to my parents to complain.”

“That must have been worse than a Howler!” Ron said. “Blimey, what was that like?”

“I don’t know what a Howler is,” Vivi said dryly. She patted her brow with the towel. “Mum and Dad convinced him that having a squash court would keep me from driving him batty.”

“And Snape bought that?” Ron said in amazement as they entered the short corridor leading to the Main Hall.

Vivi turned on him, her eyes flashing. "Professor Snape. I don’t expect you to understand, but he takes care of his House."

Hermione cleared her throat. “Just because the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin is traditional, I don’t see any reason we have to participate in it.”

“You sound like Dad. He was in Ravenclaw himself. He admits I take a lot after mum, though.” She snapped her head to the right and smiled. "Good evening, Professor."

Snape paused to return her greeting.

"You know Hermione, sir? We’re going to start playing squash together."

"Indeed." His eyes glittered under half-drawn lids before he swept on.

Vivi squeezed Hermione’s arm. "I'm excited. I'll try not to be too hard on you, but you’ll catch up fast.” She left them and headed down to the dungeon.

"Well that was interesting," Harry said as they climbed up the stairs towards the Gryffindor dorms.

"Yeah," Ron chimed in, "it's like suddenly Snape's human and all."

They split up in the Common Room. Hermione headed off to the girls’ dorm, Harry dropped onto a couch beside Ginny, and Ron trudged to his own dorm to locate his homework. He’d just fished his half-finished Herbology scroll from under his bed when he heard the door click shut.

“We need to talk.” Ginny stood at the end of his bed and glowered down at him.

Ron clambered to his feet. “What about?”

“You and Hermione.”

“What happened?”

She folded her arms. “She told me what you did after the tryouts and at the Three Broomsticks. I don’t like it.”

He scoffed. “Are you barking?”

“You pressured her to get you off, under the stands. And groped her. In public.”

“I didn’t!” His face burned. He crumpled the scroll and tossed it on the bed. “I cuddled her a bit—"

“Pushed her in the corner and felt her up, like some common—“
“Hang on! Maybe I came on a little strong, but it wasn’t like that!”

“Not the way she described it.”

“And when did she tell you this?”

“Last Sunday. I couldn’t believe it, not until I saw what you did Tuesday night.”

He thought back. Tuesday night’s Quidditch practice had gone great. Man, he’d been on form. When he’d landed, when Hermione had come onto the pitch, he’d—

“I just kissed her.”

“You mauled her and grabbed her bottom, Ron, in plain view of everyone.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I was mortified for her. Didn’t you see how red she got?”

“So I embarrassed us a little. I apologized, right then.” He snorted. “It’s no worse than what Dad does to Mum.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “Since when has Dad ever done that to Mum away from home? And Hermione’s never been that physical, Ron. Never.”

He stared at her. “So, what are you saying? Not to touch her?”


“More polite? Slower? Me?” He paced to the end of the bed and back. "Ginny, she tries to bite me!"

"In bed? So?"

"So? It hurts! How can she want that, but not like when I—"

"Cop a feel in public?"

When she put it like that...

"Harry and I leave marks—"

"I am not discussing what Harry Potter and my sister do together in private." He sat down on his bed heavily. “I don’t understand, Gin. She's changed. She keeps saying things happened during the war.”

“That’s all she's told me, too.”

“Cormac.”

“Maybe.” She settled on Harry’s bed and faced him. “Maybe what happened after.”

Mentioning it brought back the feelings of helpless rage when he'd heard she'd been caught. He'd battled his frustration at everyone: Seamus, Harry, Dumbledore, the whole Order, because they all had been focused on the final assault. There’d been no time or energy to try to find her. Once the fighting had died down in the Manor proper, Snape had sent word through Seamus that he’d found her and the others locked in the dungeons beneath. Ron had raced down to her; when he got there, it seemed as though she’d just been waiting patiently for a train. He forced the snarl of emotions away
again. "It was so busy then. Too much..."

“I know.” She kicked her heels against the bed-frame. "She mutters in her sleep now, Ron. She never did that before. I've brought it up, but she...”

"She won't talk to me, either."

They regarded each other in silence before Ginny began picking at a loose thread on the bedspread.

“Okay,” Ron said eventually.

“'Okay,' what?”

“I'll try to be slower and more understanding.” He cocked his head. “D’you know she’s going to start working out with that Slytherin girl, Vivi? Playing some kind of Muggle game.”

Ginny’s head popped up. “When did this happen?”

“Just tonight. That’s where we were, down in the gym.”

She hummed. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing. Might do her good to have a way to work off her frustrations.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. The Slytherin Seeker, that Vivi.”

Ginny got off the bed. “I heard you. There’s only one Vivi in the whole school. I don’t think Hermione will talk Quidditch. She hardly understands it, anyway.”
When Ron invited her to come and watch Quidditch practice, Hermione declared her intention to spend the day studying in the library. The team stumped out of the Common Room while she packed her satchel.

The moment she got to the fourth floor landing, any desire to study disappeared. She leaned over the bannister. Students trekked down and out to the Entrance Hall. Sunlight and fresh air sounded compelling.

But when she reached the Entrance Hall, her feet carried her towards the stairs leading to the dungeons. She veered off, plopped onto a bench, and clutched her bag to her chest.

What was wrong with her?

She’d surely seen enough of Snape this week, between his cornering her Tuesday, what they’d done Thursday, the incident in study hall, his seeing her with Vivi the night before, not to mention class—and she’d asked him to stalk her, not the other way around.

It couldn’t hurt, could it, just to go down and see if he was free? Ask him again about apprenticeship?

No, he’d see through that. She needed something more plausible.
A pair of Ravenclaws walked past, arguing about lunar effects on—

Wolfsbane. She could ask him about brewing Wolfsbane potion.

If she encountered him. If he were in his office.

She headed down the stairs.

Someone had propped open the door to the Potions classroom, and the murmur of conversation floated into the corridor. Hermione peered in.

Four or five of the tables were occupied with clusters of students. All Slytherin. They seemed to have arranged themselves roughly by year. The chattering came from the largest group, who had several cauldrons brewing. None of them paid the slightest attention to her as she stood just beside the door jamb.

At the front of the room, closest to the workroom, Candace had a table to herself. She tended an elaborate setup: retorts and a range of flasks, flames set to different temperatures, two silver cauldrons with stirring rods charmed into motion. The complexity alone lured Hermione in.

“Potions or Alchemy?” she asked.

Candace twisted her lips as she nudged a fresh flask under the retort’s mouth. “Mostly Potions.” She gave Hermione a sidelong look. “What brings you down from the towers?”

“Bored, I guess.”

Candace huffed a laugh.

“What’s going on?”

“Them?” She nodded her head toward the other tables. “Practice for Potions Club, but the Fifth Years are studying for OWLs.”

“And you’re studying for NEWTs?”

“Me? No.” She killed the heat below the retort and cleaned the vessel with a spell. “It’s an independent project of sorts.” She combined the contents of the cauldrons into a third flask, set a Chilling spell on it, and lowered a thermometer into place. “It’s for me.”

“The potion?”

“Helps me sleep.” Candace studied the temperature and stirred in the distilled liquid collected from the retort. The fluid in the flask turned silvery-blue. She poured it carefully into a pre-labeled bottle and stoppered it. When she started cleaning her equipment, Hermione joined in automatically. By the time they’d finished, the rest of the students had cleared out.

“Marsland, update the inventory sheet before you leave,” Snape said as he emerged from the workroom. His eyes narrowed when he saw Hermione. “Miss Granger, rather far from the library, aren’t you?”

“Actually, I came down to ask about a potion.”

He folded his arms; Hermione caught Candace’s quick smirk as she bent over her own satchel.

“And?”
“Wolfsbane. Is it as difficult to brew as it’s made out?”

His brows lifted. “Considering half the ingredients are restricted, and it’s beyond your skill level, I don’t see how it could interest you.” He swept around the room, sending stools back under tables and generally tidying. Candace collected her things and left the room. The door swung shut behind her.

Once the latch closed, Snape crossed the space between them in a breath.

“Why are you here?”

“Wolfsbane. Really. It’s full moon this coming Monday, and Remus…” She trailed off. No way she could bluff her way through with him eyeing her so skeptically. “I don’t know. I just wanted to come down.”

“I suspected as much.” He jerked his head towards the door. “Leave.”

She sighed, retrieved her bag, and started to go.

“Wait.” He hesitated. “Come with me.”

Hermione followed him out of the classroom and into his office. He sent her ahead of him into his chambers and disappeared into the other room off his living quarters. He returned with a bottle. "I made fresh healing oil. I've seen Vivi at play."

“And she'll wear me out?” Hermione asked as she slipped the bottle of lavender-colored oil into her bag.

“She will. Sit there and turn your back to me,” Snape said, and pointed at the sofa. Once they’d both sat, he slowly rubbed her shoulders and arms. Hermione relaxed into his hands.

"I've never really talked to a Slytherin student," Hermione said. His massage didn't change, and he didn't reply, so she continued, "I used to try, the first couple of years, but then it got too difficult. So I'm excited about working with Vivi. And it seems the muscles used for racquet sports are similar to..." Babbling. She shut up.

"She's Half-Blood."

"She mentioned that."

He said nothing else for several minutes. "Miss Koobas left me a bottle of her cousin's shampoo yesterday morning."

Hermione smiled. She could see the quiet First Year shyly leaving the bottle on his desk alongside her Potions sample.

His hands stilled and tightened on her shoulders. “Why did she approach me Thursday?”

Hermione turned towards him, and his hands fell off her as she did. “You heard her. She said the same thing to me that night. Her suggestion seems to have helped you.” She reached up to brush his hair back, and he pulled away from her. "What's wrong?"

"I won’t be mocked."

“That's not how she is—”
“Your House chose this week to undermine me.”

“I have no idea what—“

His eyes flashed, and he spoke softly through clenched teeth. "If I find you encouraged—“

“I had nothing to do with it!” she snapped. “In fact, I stood up to the entire Gryffindor Common Room and told them to leave you both alone. I'm angry that we eavesdropped, but it couldn't be helped.” Hermione started to rise, but he pulled her back by her wrist.

“I didn't mean—“

“To doubt Lauren or me?”

“It just—“

“Came out that way?”

His hold on her loosened as his eyes unfocused. "I believe you,” he mumbled. His attention seemed elsewhere, and she took advantage of the lapse.

"You should." She wrenched from his grasp. "It was an act of kindness you seemed to accept on Thursday. What changed?"

Snape lowered his gaze. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it—”

“Not like that, anyway.”

He jerked to his feet. “Or brought you here.”

“You shouldn’t have attacked me,” she said hotly. "Especially since it was groundless. Besides, don't I have better things I could use against you if I wanted to embarrass you?"

He looked down at her, his expression blank. Then his mouth twitched, he dropped to his knees at her feet, and bowed his head over her lap. "Forgive me."

Hermione stroked his hair automatically, unsettled by his rapid mood changes. He turned his head. She caressed his face, and he kissed her fingertips. Warmth tingled between her legs, and she let her hands fall to her sides. “You can’t buy mercy.”

He lifted his head, rested on his heels, and fixed her with a heavy stare. “I don’t mean that.”

“What do you mean, Severus?”

He grimaced. “I want your hands. On me.”

This was crazy. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“Then...where? How?”

“However you wish. Not below the waist. For either of us.”

“Why? Why should I?”

His shoulders drooped slightly. “I can’t speak for you.” He dropped his chin, and his hair fell
forward. “Please. If you wish.”

Leave. Now. Just get up and go, she told herself, but she stayed seated. So much was wrong: his kneeling at her feet, practically begging for her touch; her echoing hunger to do so; a nagging awareness that she’d brushed off her friends to chase this thing inside her, that she’d paused just shy of turning a corner….

Snape wet his lips, but didn’t stir. He waited, like he’d wait forever. As he should. Hermione nudged his head upward with her knuckle under his chin, but he kept his eyes downcast. Fitting, somehow. He didn’t deserve to look at her, certainly not while insight into what she wanted incinerated the world beyond his rooms.

“I can do what I want?”

“Above—“

“The waist.” Hermione hunched forward. “I want to see you come.”

His breath hitched, and his eyelids jerked. “Granted. Blindfold.”

She cast the spell; the tension in his jaw seemed to lessen. Hermione unbuttoned the collar of his coat and studied his cravat. Similar to her father's neckties. She leaned forward to examine the loop of cloth and freed the ends from his coat. She untied the first knot, then the second, and dropped the ends loose. At her experimental tug on the band of cloth at the front of his neck, the ends slithered upward, and she pulled the cravat free. Hermione giggled.

"Pleased with yourself?" he asked dryly, brow quirked under the blindfold.

She snorted and opened the buttons down the front of his coat and shirt before pushing the garments off his shoulders as one piece. The fabric bunched around his upper arms. She traced the lines of the worst of the scars across his upper chest.

He twitched, and she grazed his nipples with her fingertips so the buds of flesh constricted.

"Where'd this come from?" she asked, fingering a long jagged whiteness that slashed down his sternum at a slight angle.

"Dolohov," he responded in a gasp, twisting from her.

Hermione blinked. "I thought Death Eaters didn't fight amongst themselves."

"Hah. Shows what you know. He doubted my sincerity." He turned his head aside. "I won’t speak of this."

She nodded, remembered he couldn’t see her, and added, "Okay."

She inhaled at his neck and concentrated to extract his odor from cologne, shampoo, a new scent she guessed was Lauren’s moisturizing spray…. He smelled warm. Spicy. Hermione knelt beside him and spanned her open mouth across the side of his neck. He leaned his head away from her; she bit again, harder, as his muscles tensed against her.

She sat back. If he’d been Ron, he would have barked at her. Instead, he offered more of himself to her. So she approached again to nibble a line down his neck and shoulder, where she sucked and nipped, and left a reddened bruise surrounded by the indents of her teeth. She repeated the process on the right side; his whine as she chewed into his shoulder spurred whatever raged within her.
Hermione shoved him onto the floor on his back, trapping his sleeved arms at his sides. She straddled his thighs, splayed her hands against his lower ribcage, and continued exploring and marking his flesh. She sank her teeth into the edge of his left pectoral muscle while rolling his right nipple between her fingers. He winced and rocked his hips beneath her; she moved across his chest, leaving a trail of saliva and bruised skin. He’d hardened under her, and she forced herself to not grind against him, although her knickers were soaked through. She reached the ribs at his right side and forced her face between his arm and his torso to gnaw at the flesh there, ripping another ragged gasp from him. She sat back, and he brought both hands to her thighs to press her down.

It was something Ron would do. Had done.

"Let go," Hermione hissed and rose up with an effort to free herself. She slapped at him until he released her and rested his hands to the outside of her knees.

She pulled her wand from her pocket and cast Incarcerous to secure his wrists to the floor. She dragged the tip of her wand across his chest, tracing the line of bites and bruises, and he shifted as his chest heaved. What was that spell Viktor had taught her? That clever charm to create a tiny wheel of sparks to appear at wand tip? Viktor had used the snapping electricity to drive lines up her back; she’d found the mild shocks to be wildly exciting. That was it—she cast the nonverbal and traced the line of her bites, this time with the wheel of sparks. As she neared his belly, he arched suddenly with a strangled cry.

"Enough?" she asked, lightly tapping her wand tip around the curve of his lower ribs.

"No...more," he moaned, rolling his head against the floor.

"Okay, no more. I'll stop." She canceled the spell and held her wand away from him.

He growled in frustration. "If you stop now, I'll—"

"What?" She leaned in close to his face, and he strained to reach her. "What will you do? You're at my mercy now, Severus."

"Yes," he hissed. "Now. Not once I'm free." He wriggled his torso as much as he could, grunting with the effort.

Hermione tapped his cheek with her flats of her fingers, a cross between a caress and a light slap. "You're forgetting who I am," she cooed at him.

He huffed, swallowed, and whispered a phrase at her, his voice rough. "Same gesture as with the Velo spell. But you must verbalize it with intent." She repeated the phrase back at him; he nodded at her pronunciation. "Yes, very good. With conviction, as with the flogger."

"What does it do?" she asked cautiously.

"Nothing to you. To me, for me. Please, my Mistress."

She leaned back and cast the spell.

His hips bucked again, and he groaned in pleasure. "Again!" he pleaded, as a blush rose from his navel to his clavicle. He pressed his head against the floor.

"What is this spell?" she demanded, grasping his chin hard.

He panted and jerked his face free from her. "Pleasure spell. Acts upon the target to stimulate the
erogenous zones. Greater resistance, greater result."

"Meaning the more you fight, the more you're aroused?"

He hissed in response, and she raised the wand, hesitating. She cast it again, and he thrust upward her, grunting heavily, and she realized he was coming beneath her. At last he lay quiet, his breathing slowing and deepening, and the pallor returned to his skin. She canceled her spells on him, but he didn't move except to rest his hands on her knees.

"Severus," she said. He hummed in response but didn't open his eyes. She waited for a moment, rolled off, stretched out on an elbow, and watched him until he looked at her, his dark eyes hooded.

"If I could reward points for that, Miss Granger..." he murmured, allowing his voice to drift.

"Ten points?"

He chuckled lazily. "Oh, many more than that." His gaze fixed pointedly on her waist. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Her wand’s handle jutted from her pocket. She pulled it out and offered him the handle, just as if it were his flogger, and he pressed his lips to it.

Then he twisted around, reseating his clothes, located his own wand in his coat sleeve, and wordlessly cleaned what was likely a mess in his pants. “Where did you learn that?”

“Viktor Krum. He taught me a few others, too.” She took a breath to continue, but he shook his head.

“Leave it for now.” He rolled his wand between his fingers thoughtfully. "I trust you know to use that spell judiciously."

"I know." She sat up straight as a thought occurred to her. “Why would you need a pleasure spell like that?”

He scoffed. “I’m sure you can think of reasons people might like to have a seductive advantage over others.”

Hermione’s jaws tightened, and she fought back the urge to scrabble away. “To force…”

His eyes glinted.

“Viktor Krum. He taught me a few others, too.”

"I suppose Muggle-borns wouldn't know to ask."

She hugged her knee to her chest. "That's awful. Sex crimes are terrible, but if you can do this," she gestured at him, "and then Obliviate..." The memory of a wand tip flashing white blinded her, and she blinked her eyes rapidly to clear them.

“Hard to argue rape if the victim appears to have consented or doesn’t remember.” He touched her leg. "It's supposed to be covered in Fifth Year Defense, but generally gets overlooked."

"But what we did—"

"This? This is wholly consensual, Hermione." He sat up and took her hand. "And I trust you to use it appropriately."
"Meaning, during the next Potions class when you're acting the prat."

He scoffed. "I'll assume that's a joke."

"Of course," she replied, her voice rising. "I wouldn't—"

"I know you wouldn't. You hesitated even when I asked for it. That's the only reason I was comfortable teaching it to you."

Hermione considered. "Do other students ask to be taught?"

A sneer flitted across his features. "Answer that yourself."

"Stupid question."

"One of the few from you, on the whole." Severus watched her closely. "What are you thinking now?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was thinking that spell would be more effective as a non-verbal. For seduction, I mean." Hermione blushed, stammering slightly. “If I wanted to entice someone, that is, I’d rather not make it obvious I was bewitching him."

"In most circumstances, yes." He lowered his lids, breathing imperceptibly.

She regarded him. "You specifically want to hear the words...to actively resist the spell." His eyes gleamed more brightly for a moment.

"Too clever by half," he said softly. He looked down at himself. "You marked me well."

"I thought so." She stroked his chest and was gratified at his shiver. “Getting chilled?"

"A bit. May I dress, or would you like to repackage me?"

"No, you do it. I like watching your fingers work."

"Indeed?" He fastened his shirt and coat with the innumerable buttons, straightened his clothes, and cast about for his cravat. "Even in class?"

She hummed more enthusiastically than intended, and he looked at her.

"Rather strongly stated."

"I mean it." She sniffed and drew the tie from under a throw cushion that had fallen on it. “I’m not alone.”

“I believe I’ll ignore that information.” He held out his hand.

Rather than give the strip of silk to him, she pulled it between her fingers. Unlike her own school tie or her father’s ties, it was square-ended and of uniform width. "It’s different from any other tie I’ve seen."

“It’s a cravat.” He lowered his hand.

“You don’t even tie it the same.”

“With a Windsor? No.”
“Can you show me?”

“You took it off!”

“Well, yeah…”

He scoffed and, with a wincing expression, smoothed his shirt collar around his neck. “Recall how you ended? Put the middle across my throat.”

Hermione folded it in half to find the center. As soon as she lifted the band to his neck, he swayed backwards from her.

“Is that wrong?”

Severus eyed the cloth as though it had grown fangs. “No. It would be faster if I—”

“If you’d rather…” She offered it to him.

“It…” He cleared his throat, nodded sharply, and leaned towards her. “Loop at the front, bring the ends around the neck. Even out the cloth. Now, overhand knot—that’s tight enough. Overhand knot the other way, like a square knot—good. Think you can remember that?”

“I’ll practice.”

His eyes narrowed before he smoothed the tie into place and finished buttoning his coat. “I’m sure that’s not necessary.”

“I always thought ties were a great mystery, before I came to Hogwarts.”

“Why?”

“They’re masculine, something I never… Dad used to tell me it was like lace for him. A symbol of the mysterious opposite sex.”

His lips puckered, as though he held back a chuckle. “You live too deeply in your head, Miss Granger. Now, you may not be missed, but I need to get back to my work.” He rose and offered her a hand. “I’ll escort you out.”
3 Oct 98, Potions Master's Office

Chapter Summary

Alone in his office, the Potions Master muses over events in his life.

Chapter Notes

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant USAian!

MANY THANKS: Thanks, Melusin, for offering to beta read and Brit pick. Someday I will learn to commas and stuff. Thanks, Mizz Adamz, for playing sounding board as I fine-tune the kink.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snape shut her out of his office and leaned on one hand against the door, fingers pressed hard against the wood.

What’d he done?

Goaded her.

Begged.

His nails scraped against the grain.

He’d yielded to the craving that had begun raging as soon as she’d stepped though this very door two days before. He rested his forehead on his upper arm.

Thursday had nearly sunk him. The image of her in his office bloomed against his closed lids. She almost twinned the creature who’d haunted his dreams ever since he’d seen the image the first night he’d spent in the Slytherin dorms.

The handful of older boys had barged into the First Year’s room, and Lucius had locked the door.

“Rite of passage, boys,” he’d said, and a couple of Fifth Years had handed out slick magazines from a plain cardboard crate. “Last one to cum on this gets to eat it. First one keeps the box.” Lucius placed a biscuit on the floor in the center of the room, then looked around at them as they stared disbelievingly at him. “Get to it!”
Snape had been the only boy in his year who’d seen lads’ mags, thanks to the indifference of his father and the older boys in Spinner’s End. Even so, he’d never dreamed of wizard pornography, and the moving images more than made up for the lack of color.

He’d won the box and, for the first time in his life, had become the center of male awe as the owner of a dozen (slightly-used) girlie mags. He’d hoarded them that night, sat propped in his bed with the curtains closed and his wand lit, and paged through each one until he saw Her. Unlike the rest, she didn’t stretch her legs wide or curl coquettishly with her knockers squeezed forward. Instead, she stared him down, turned slightly so that the thongs of the flogger at her hip brushed her knee; her deep inhale strained the pearl buttons on her shirt. Behind her, a naked man lay with his striped back on display and his hands bound at his waist.

There wasn’t another image like it in the entire pile. Sure, the lacy underthings and nude bodies interested him, so he kept claim to the whole stack until the end of the year. But She became his, or the other way round, and She stayed in his school trunk, to be taken out only for special occasions. Throughout the year, several of the others got confiscated by the house-elves when the borrowers carelessly left them stuffed under mattresses. (Each confiscation of the illicit materials won the guilty party a week’s detention with Filch, a sentence that stayed in place.) After the Leaving Feast, he followed tradition and gifted the remainder.

But not the issue with Her. She was still in his school trunk, nearly thirty years later. She’d been joined by others over the years, better quality, Muggle and magical alike, but it was She who woke him in the midst of his wet dreams.

And Granger had stood here, where he stood—in the same severe shirt and hair style—and glared at him.

Well, not quite. She’d been confused at his request, though she’d humored him, and her expression suggested unease more than either confidence or disdain. When she’d relaxed enough to tease him by mimicking him, her chin had lifted, and he’d caught a glimpse of Her, enough to make his heart race. He’d had to focus to keep his hands still as he’d taken off his coat.

The blindfold had calmed him. Flesh memories took over as soon as he touched her. He knew the landscape, although her unclothed frame was far more delicate than he’d expected. Luscious, that forced restraint of bending his strength to her. Every press of his fingers into her reminded him how gentle he must be, so the straining muscles of his hands became his world.

And the trance, when it came, took his words.

He hadn’t realized he was singing until she’d spoken. Where’d Mother’s song come from? He murmured the words now under his breath until he felt strong enough to step away from the solid door, retreat to his desk, sink into his chair, and press the butts of his palms against his eyes.

Granger could have ordered him to the floor right then, and he would have dropped, so deeply he’d fallen into the well of submission. Her order to kneel came as though scripted, and the tails slapping his skin drove him further inward.

Just like today, he’d surrendered. She’d been stern, and he’d been blinded by the memory of her in his office, so he did what he did in his dreams. He’d knelt and begged.

He’d been still numb when he’d gone upstairs to dinner that night until he realized his mistake. His hair had never cooperated after puberty; he’d adopted his father’s grooming habits from desperation, right down to the Muggle pomade. As if the evening’s spectacle hadn’t been enough. Friday morning, he’d overheard his Third Years marveling that Longbottom had dared to teach his subject
to Pomona’s class. Snape’s hands fisted against his temples.

But all of it, every bit of it, was overshadowed by what she’d just done.

To think, he’d nearly driven her out of his dungeon.

When he’d been coming to terms with his own interests, he’d resisted any bondage, first because it terrified him and then because he feared for his hide. He trusted his tops and his fellow bottoms, Muggles all, but he doubted he was the Dark Lord’s only spy, and it took just one person with a need for revenge…

His last domme had initially suggested that he allow her to bind him for his own safety. What if he lurched to one side right when she landed a more punishing implement? After a few sessions, she had been quite comfortable with his self-restraint. Impressed, too. And she’d rewarded him.

He’d gone back to her for several years until he’d decided it was too risky to continue. Not just for him, either. Snape closed his mind to that line of thought.

He rubbed his wrists. Incarcerous, he trusted. He could cancel her spells easily. He’d tested it as he lay under her—canceled and reapplied her Binding spell on him with her none the wiser. Best to let her think he was secured when he wasn’t. He’d have to clarify that with her, make sure she knew confinement had to be negotiated in advance.

Being trapped by his own clothing, though…

He reached for his cravat, but stopped and brushed it with his fingertips. She’d put it on him. Ridiculous. He’d have to take it off to sleep, and he pinched the cloth only to hesitate again.

He’d worn a collar. A play collar, certainly, but a collar nevertheless.

Granger saw nothing symbolic in what she’d done.

His domme, though, she’d made him understand the significance. If only for the time he’d paid for, if only in her rooms, if only in fantasy. His neck had felt naked when she’d taken it off at the end of their time together.

Instead, he unbuttoned his coat and shrugged it off his shoulders, recreating the limited range of movement. No, he’d never fantasized being incapacitated like that. He’d had to quell panic when she’d first put him in the position, and he’d considered bucking her off him and safewording until she’d started with…it.

The spark wheel. He’d taught himself that spell in the Slytherin dorms from a translated book he’d liberated from the Black house, a book now buried in his rooms. For months, he’d used it on himself in secret before he sprang it on Regulus as a prank; the boy had gone shrieking from the dorm in the usual pureblood terror of electricity.

Finally, someone had used it on him, and it was exactly as he’d dreamed. Wished she would have drawn out the torture, ranged it over his naked body—he’d even welcome her Binding spells—no, it wasn’t time for that. If it ever would be.

Snape pulled his coat back on, but left it undone. Each session he’d paid for had included an hour of quiet on his own. There was always a pallet to lie on, if not a proper bed, and blankets, water, typically an electric kettle should he want tea. Whenever possible, he’d indulged himself, more from wanting his money’s worth than any other reason. The wisdom of it made sense now. He felt as uneven as he’d felt Thursday evening, and it wasn’t just the nuisance of his appearance.
He flicked his wand to silence his door alarm. His schedule was clear for the rest of the day. After a cup of tea, he'd nap, and then he'd be himself again.

Chapter End Notes

**And now a word from the author**
I'm putting the posting of this work on hiatus. I'm not abandoning it. I'm not abandoning you.

*Why are you going on hiatus?*
I've been running my betas into the ground with weekly updates. I've also had some life issues that have kicked my rump. On top of that, I've had some very good feedback from fellow authors, and I'm acting on their suggestions.

*What's happening to Cantata?*
I'm restructuring the unposted parts of Cantata into 5-10K word chapters. Right now, most of the chapters are 1200-1800 word chunks. Longer chapters will largely cover a whole week at a time and should fix the pacing issues. I'm also going to finish writing it totally (into final draft, ready for my betas), rather than having it at the 70% mark.

*When are you coming back from hiatus?*
My plan is to do all this in two months, which brings me back to you in May 2014.

*Are you changing the posting frequency?*
Depending on how quickly my betas and I work though the final clean-ups, I'll either do weekly or biweekly updates. Either way, they will be regular and largely released around Tuesdays. My goal is to finish posting a completed work by the end of 2014. I've been dancing with this since November 2012, and it's time for it to go so I can get on to something else.

*How can we be certain you're coming back?*
I'll post updates and whiny comments on my blog (link in my profile). And I'll continue to check reviews and respond to those. You can always hassle me there or on LiveJournal.

Also, if you have an AO3 account, you can subscribe to the story and get alerts when I start posting again. It's worth the wait for the account to be generated.

*Any requests for us, your devoted readers?*
Yeah, don't ding me a bunch of kudos. In the long run, this is the right thing to do and will make all of us a lot happier.
Oct 4-10, 1998

Chapter Summary

Hermione remains oblivious to the dangers of Slytherin House, much to Ron's exasperation. Professor Snape continues to lay groundwork for his future.

Chapter Notes

**Housekeeping:** Cantata returns. Thanks for letting me take a retooling break. Updates will occur at a slower interval, but I think everyone will be happier.

**MANY THANKS:** Thanks, Melusin, for volunteering to muck the Stygian stables of my punctuation. You'll be pleased to know I use the word "got" in casual conversation now.

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant (but malleable) USAian!

---

Sun, 4 Oct 98, Great Hall

“Hermione!” Ginny called and beckoned her down the table. “How’d it go?”

Hermione took a seat between Ginny and Harry. She looked spooked. “Good, I think. I’m swapping squash lessons for tutoring in Charms and Transfiguration. But….” She leaned to one side and peeked around Ron towards the Slytherin table. “Something happened.”

She bent over the table and, in a soft voice, told them what had happened. After Vivi had taught her how to play, she’d invited Hermione down to the Slytherin dorms.

“Vivi was showing me albums of her mother’s trophies when this gong sounded.”

“Gong?” Ron asked.

“Yeah. A gong. Turns out that Professor Snape leads a weekly House meeting on Sundays.”

“Why?”

Hermione shifted in her seat. “To talk about what’s going on in the House and the school. Who
needs to talk to him during office hours. That kind of thing." She started to add something, but pursed her lips with a glance further down the table.

Ron followed her gaze. Seamus and Dean were joking loudly with some of the risen Sixth Years.

"Vivi suggested I Disillusion myself so I could listen in. It was a really stupid thing to do."

Harry sniggered. "No worse than Ron and me using Polyjuice to get in."

"Loads worse. People knew I was there. They’d seen me with Vivi. And they brought it up in the meeting." She lifted her head a little to glance over Ron’s shoulder again. "Pansy started in on Vivi, with Draco practically cheering on the side."

"And Snape was there?" Harry asked.

"Yes! He didn’t let it go on long, though. Most of the House stood up for Vivi—I think that’s why Snape stopped it, actually. It was looking ugly for Pansy." She shuddered. "All I wanted to do was get away."

"Wait," Harry said. "In front of Snape?"

"Yes." Hermione’s eyes were wide. "I couldn’t believe it, either."

"Just because you were there?"

"Not really..." She paused. "Because I’m Gryffindor, and Muggle-born, and...." She looked at Ginny with a serious expression. "Lauren came up."

"The hair thing?"

"More specifically, the gossip around it. Someone told one of the Slytherin students I made people drop it in the Common Room—"

"And spoiled our fun," Seamus interrupted. He and Dean had stopped behind Hermione on their way out.

She spun to face him. "It wasn’t right. Regardless, Gryffindor seem to be the only House not talking about it."

Seamus barked a laugh. "What you mean to say is the only students who aren’t acting normal are Gryffindors!"

"That doesn’t make it right!"

"No—but it explains why Draco keeps glaring at us," Dean said. He tugged at Seamus’ sleeve. "Come on, before we catch whatever Hermione has."

"They have a point," Ron said, as Seamus and Dean headed away.

"That I’m dangerous to be around?"

"Not that. Maybe, but what I meant was that we’re drawing attention by not playing along." Her eyes narrowed. "You aren’t seriously suggesting I should have let that go on?"

She didn’t get it. She really didn’t.
“Hermione,” he said in a lowered voice, “there were two Prefects in the Common Room, and neither of them said anything."

“Because both of them were in Lauren’s face,” Hermione shot back.

“Because it’s Snape,” Ron said. “Blimey, what’s happened to you? It’s like you have gone soft on him—“

She snatched an apple from the bowl in front of her. “I have essays to write. “ She leapt up and ploughed into Neville as he tried to pass her.

Longbottom helped her get her balance. “I had hoped to run into you, Hermione."

“We managed that."

“I...” He glanced over at the rest of them before continuing. “I need some help with some homework Professor Sprout set."

“I’d be happy to, Neville, but I thought that was more your area."

“Oh, it is. But I think you can help. Can we meet somewhere?“

“I’m going up to the Common Room right now to work."

“Great!” He beamed. “I’ll explain on the way."

Ron stared at their backs as they walked toward the door.

###

Once they left the Great Hall, Neville drew near to Hermione and pitched his voice low. “It’s actually Potions I need help with."

Hermione looked up at him. “Potions? You know, I had wondered why you were in the class."

“You mean because I didn’t get in the first year?” He looked sheepish. “Well, Professor Sprout talked me into taking Potions since they’d lowered the O.W.L. requirements for us. “ He dropped his voice to a whisper. “She’s been tutoring me, but she can’t help this weekend."

“But why?“

“It’s useful for fertilizer, cures, and feeding solutions. And for working with potioneers and apothecaries. I’ve been exchanging owls with a lot of Herbologists. They’ve all given me the same advice that Professor Sprout did."

They stopped at a landing to let the stairs shift.

A thought occurred to her. “Can you pass your N.E.W.T. with just one year?“

“Dunno. I’m not planning to sit it."

“I’m confused, Neville. Why put yourself through this—“

“And not sit the N.E.W.T.? Most of the Herbologists I’ve corresponded with know of Professor Snape. They figure if I can come out of his class alive with decent marks, it says a lot about me. “ He smiled shyly. ‘I’ve even got two potential offers once I leave.”
Snape’s comments to her the prior weekend echoed in her head. “Are you hearing that a lot, that daily performance in school is mattering more than NEWTs?”

“Not more than. Complementary. But I think it applies more to us, those who returned. Gran keeps telling me not to slack off, not to ‘rest on my laurels,’ as if I had any.” He stepped aside as a Ravenclaw student rushed past. “Professor Sprout says almost the same thing. Actually...” He broke off with a chuckle.

“What?”

“Professor Sprout says it’s almost as if it were designed to work in my favor. If we hadn’t had the war, and the Ministry hadn’t made Hogwarts change enrollment policies for us, then I wouldn’t have had a chance to get some advanced Potions under my belt.”

They climbed a flight in silence. At least she and Neville were on the same page about life after Hogwarts, whatever Ron might think. To help him, Sprout had carved out time just for Neville—and Snape had complained to her about being busy?

“How is she finding time to do that, between teaching and being over Hufflepuff?”

“She squeezes me in on evenings and weekends. We met before term started, and I explained some of the problems I had brewing. Like fertilizer—there are better ways to explain how to calculate percentages of ingredients.”

“Fertilizer.”

He smirked. “Yeah, pretty boring. But she’s noticed over the years that a lot of students had the same problem I did. But when Slughorn taught Potions for two years, the problem went away.”

She nearly stumbled up the stairs. “Because of Professor Snape.”

“That’s our guess.” Neville sighed. “I think he’s smart, but I don’t think he’s a particularly good teacher. Not for everyone, anyway.”

No, he wasn’t. His intimidation tactics, which he seemed to reserve for non-Slytherins, complicated even the simplest things. But Neville had continued—

“—let me lead the brewing part last Thursday.”

“Excuse me, I got distracted. Led what last Thursday?”

“Professor Sprout asked Professor Snape if she could cover the Third Years’ Potions class on making fertilizer, but she let me teach it. I did pretty good, too.”

Hermione halted on the seventh-floor landing and gawked at him as she recalled Snape’s comment about her House undermining him. “Let you lead the class? Can she do that?”

He shrugged. “Back when she was a student, some of the advanced students became teacher’s assistants, and she thought it was a good way to build up my confidence.” Neville studied her. “Hadn’t you noticed how much better I’m doing in Potions?”

“I...” She’d been concentrating so hard on acting like nothing was going on, she’d stopped paying attention to much else. “Not really.”

“Well, he’s not holding me up as an example anymore. He’s mostly leaving me alone, except for last
Friday. “He smiled ruefully. “If anyone’s his target now, it’s either Seamus or Ron. He’s not even picking on Harry like he used to.”

---

Mon, 5 Oct 98, Hogwarts Castle

As soon as was politic, Snape fled the Monday evening staff meeting, hurried down the path to Hogsmeade, and Disapparated to an alley on the outskirts of Holyhead. The Sand and Scuttle pub wasn’t more than a few minutes walk. He slipped from one shadow to the next and paused at every sharp noise until he tugged the creaking door closed behind him.

His arrival drew no attention, although it was a solidly Muggle place. The few patrons kept focused on the television mounted behind the bar. Eventually a dumpy woman twice his age emerged from the back, took his order for a pint, and clunked the glass before him without much more than a grunt.

Now, to wait. He’d no idea what his quarry looked like. Twenty-four, she’d said, and she’d wear a blue cloak. The Potions Master who’d recommended her hadn’t provided any physical description, but had assured Snape even he would find something commendable.

When the door gusted open, he knew she’d arrived. Only a witch would pair that shade of livid turquoise with a corn-yellow muffler. And fuchsia hair.

“Professor?” she asked as she extended her hand to him.

He ignored her hand and gestured toward the bench opposite him. “Miss Graham.”

“Juniper,” she replied and sat. “Please.”

“Miss Graham,” he repeated firmly. Her brows lifted, but she remained composed. “Your Master suggested I meet you.”

She nodded once. “He said you anticipated the need for an apprentice next school year.”

“To begin the week after term ends, yes. The first week of July.”

“But term doesn’t start until September.” Graham tilted her head slightly.

“You’ll need the time to acclimate. To learn the syllabus and learn your way around the castle.” He took a sip of ale. “If that appeals…?”

“It meets my timeframes. I expect to complete my apprenticeship end of March. I had hoped to return home after—“

“And home is where?”


“Canada? Why didn’t you study at the Mida Grove in Ontario?”

She sat back from the table, into shadows.

“My great-uncle is director of Mida Grove’s School of Apothecary. The family thought it unwise.”

That made sense.

She continued. “He thought I’d benefit from travels abroad, especially since the war is over.”
Snape settled against the backrest. Miss Graham was older than he’d been when he’d started teaching. She certainly seemed composed; she didn’t fidget through his long silence, although she did scuff her shoes under the table.

“Why might your Master have recommended you?” he asked.

“I assisted my uncle in his private apothecary for several years and was a Potions tutor at my school before I graduated. Left. She stalled and snorted. ‘I’m not accustomed to your system.’

“What years?”

“Middle to high school.”

His brows drew together. “We don’t—”

“Roughly ages twelve to eighteen,” she clarified.

“What do you know of Hogwarts?”

Miss Graham’s eyes flicked sideways before she shrugged and sighed. “I’ll be honest. Only what I’ve read. Is that a problem?”

“Are you familiar with our Houses?”

She hadn’t moved, but had her hair darkened?

“Generally. Enough to know it’s foreign to me.” She smiled apologetically.

No House awareness. He prolonged a drink. Houses kept order, drove competition, built walls. She’d be a human Confundus Charm. Snape set down the empty glass and softened his expression.

“And you’re needed here?”

“My great-grandmother. She remained when the rest of the family emigrated in the twenties. I’m executor of her will.”

A burst of laughter rose from the bar in response to something on the television. Snape extracted a notepad from his coat pocket and began the interrogation. Graham flew through the subject questions without issue; her responses on classroom discipline seemed acceptable. She’d be lenient with students, much less exacting than he was, but sharper than Slughorn; his own House would eat her alive, should she be put over them as Potions Mistress.

That wasn’t his problem.

He accompanied her from the pub and shook her hand before she twisted away in near silence. Well done. Of the half-dozen available candidates he’d turned up, she had the fewest shortcomings and her outsider status appealed.

He moved into the darkness at the far end of the alley before Disapparating back to Hogsmeade and slipped into the sub-dungeons through the back way.

“This and that, and Lupin’s Wolfsbane for November,” he said to his workroom once he’d sorted through the skimpy stack of potions orders. Ironic that Granger had asked about Wolfsbane over the weekend.

He drummed his fingers on the table, and the loose pile of coins jingled. Before the Tower, he’d
received three times as many orders a month. He had a couple of free hours now, the rest of the
week’s evenings were clear, and he could spend Saturday morning in Hogsmeade sending owls
across the country. It’d keep him busy brewing and teaching and tending House—tasks he needed to
focus on.

He lost himself in the process and only came aware of the passage of time when he set his alarm to
let the cauldron simmer for fifteen minutes. During the break, he divvied up the cash. A fifth into the
Hogwarts’ drawer, for supplies he’d borrowed and for his time, the rest into his own lockbox under a
flagstone beneath the desk. He prepared orders for inventory replacement and set those aside, just in
time to wrap up the rest by nestling the vessels deep in the darkest corners of his workroom.

His workroom. He looked around at the space. It wasn’t his, per se. It was the classroom’s
workroom, intended for the advanced students to experiment and help prep for the lower classes.
He’d had limited success getting any of the N.E.W.T. students interested in either of those activities
for years, especially after the bother over Slytherin’s Heir. Couldn’t blame them. Who knew what the
future would hold, so why prepare for it?

Besides, it kept Dumbledore from following him into his designated workroom because that room
had become his private storage space the previous year. Just skirted the school’s rules with that little
change. He felt certain his personal residence would draw the eyes of his attackers. It was just a
matter of time.

First, he’d brought in the enchanted bookshelves, along with the books they contained. Strictly
speaking, half those volumes were banned from campus because of content, and a double handful of
the rest were banned for other reasons. He secured them all with Shrinking and Obsfucating Charms
and kept them behind a surface layer of mostly uncontroversial books. What little printed matter he'd
left behind at Spinner’s End wouldn't interest even a Fortean Times researcher.

Then he’d brought the furniture and the artifacts—the pieces he’d collected over the years because he
loved the clean lines but had never used, the few domestic leftovers from Mother’s side—all
Shrunken and stuffed into boxes on the shelves. What would the old man make of the tiny bedroom
suite, doll-sized dining table and chairs, collection of teacups that would fit in a tablespoon? Didn’t
matter.

The teachers’ handbook clearly stated that Hogwarts was not to be used for personal storage. All
staff, except the Gameskeeper and the Groundskeeper, were expected to live off campus when the
school was not in session. He’d had to have a special pass to stay the summers after he’d saved the
old man’s life.

He hung everything on Dumbledore’s good graces if any of it were discovered. Tenuous. Oh, he’d
relied on more slender threads before. The real threat would have been Filch, if they hadn’t reached
an understanding his first year of teaching.

Some days, he wasn't certain why it had seemed so important to keep the objects close (not so the
books; that made sense). He'd pulled the boxes out a number of times, feeling oddly juvenile as he
set the fragile things out on his worktable. Would be so easy to smash each with his fist—but he
didn't. He'd considered writing names on the boxes: Minerva, Filius, Septima. In the end, he just
stowed it all away and tried to ignore the gnawing feeling of incompleteness.

Snape secured the workroom door behind him, did the same with the classroom door, and headed
upstairs to the Astronomy Tower. Once there, he leaned against a merlon and let one leg dangle over
open space. He had a book in his pocket, but no motivation to read it. Instead, he counted the
constellations overhead and listened as owls called from the forest across the lake.
He’d slept more this past weekend than he had in years. The long nap after she’d left his office had been followed by an early evening; Sunday, he’d fallen asleep while marking essays and had been wakened by his watch alarm for dinner. Each time he’d roused in the night, he’d just relived the exquisite shame of begging for pleasure Saturday, of losing himself once again in her presence, knowing she was just as wet as he was hard, and had wanked himself back to sleep.

Which sounded like a good way to pass the time right now. No one came up here on Mondays—

Snape pinched the webbing at his thumbs and both his earlobes. Wouldn’t do to be interrupted in public in this state of arousal.

He scooted up out of his slouch and stretched. He’d had bruises to admire for days now. And bite-marks. None of his tops had left him with those. He’d certainly left his share on working girls over the years; a few of them had gnawed back.

What she’d done was different, an outgrowth of her naive enthusiasm. She bit. Sucked. Probably clawed, too. Did she yank hair? Kick her heels? Did she grunt or squeal when she came?

He garroted his thoughts. No reason to ponder any of this. She wanted to learn dominance. He yearned to submit. If she favored him with something more, well...

No. He’d compromised enough already.

He took a cleansing breath, cast a floating magelight, and drew his paperback from his pocket, an anthology of dark stories and unfinished novels. So fitting. Better to concentrate on his own realities.

——

**Sat, 10 Oct 98, Quidditch Pitch**

“Good one, Freddy!” Ginny shouted.

The reserve Keeper had flipped upside down to nab the Quaffle just before it entered the lowest Goal and righted himself with a smooth loop. He tossed the ball back into play, and the team zoomed toward the opposite end of the pitch.

Hermione watched the action for a few minutes before returning to her Alchemy notes. Professor Tuttia had been serious when he’d warned the class at least one of them would need Calming potions before the end of the term. The gap year of the war hadn’t helped. She’d forgotten too much.

A pair of Chasers blew by just over her head. She scrambled to keep all the papers in place. One more book, and she’d have enough weights. She rooted in the false bottom of her bag.

Her journal! She’d worried on the Hogwarts Express that she’d left it in her bedroom, that her mother might find it, that her protective spells would fail, but she’d stopped worrying once Snape had given her something else to think about.

Then she’d wished she’d had it to write in.

She cancelled the charms and riffled pages. Originally, she’d had the idea to keep a diary, but after that morning outside Diagon Alley, she’d confined herself to her hopes and fears. Mid-winter, a whole section had been filled with notes on potions for wounds, minor explosives, poisons, delayed-action acids, adhesives…. Then there were pages of summarized arguments, as the Order had struggled internally to agree on what needed to be done.

She flattened the book open to a pair of pages where she and Ron had played cribbage one evening.
He’d made notes on the Muggle game. She’d—she squinted at the page—she’d kept tabs of who’d come and gone: “Remus, 19:05-19:32; Tonks, 19:15-19:32; SS 18:52-19:06/19:35-20:08; Harry, 20:01-20:53”

That’d been the week before she’d ended up in the dungeon under Malfoy Manor.

She turned crowded pages without looking at them until she reached blank sheets and pulled out one of the pens she’d liberated from her father’s surgery. Where to begin?

Ginny sounded her whistle, and the teams swapped ends. Ron and Harry called to her as they flew over, and Hermione waved up at them.

Writing down what she’d done with Severus seemed indiscreet. Perhaps the questions she’d come up with? What did she find arousing? What were her limits? Why did he want her dressed like that?

How had it changed her?

That seemed like a good prompt. At least it had answers.

She’d had to alter her schedule so she could practice, both with the flogger and for squash, and it had to be outside of her normal hours. Just slipping to the Room a couple of times on weekends wouldn’t do. Some time scrutinizing the school's rules on curfew during the pre-dawn hours had produced a loophole. She adjusted her alarm clock, and now left the dorms a few hours before the castle stirred each morning. The Room obligingly provided. On days when she’d planned for targets, she got a gently-lit space with properly configured practice dummies, a collection of other types of whips and floggers, inscrutable furniture and devices. On game days, she got an outfitted squash court, complete with posters of practice routines and equipment. Both configurations included a nicely-stocked bathroom. All she had to provide was herself, fresh clothing, and the duplicate flogger (which she preferred out of loyalty).

Monday, the first day she’d tried this, Hermione had raced down the back ways and winding staircases to the library, avoiding the main stairs where she was most likely to encounter her friends, and timed her descent. Plenty of time. If anyone questioned her whereabouts, she could always claim to have been in the library studying.

No one would be the wiser.

In fact, Thursday morning she’d actually had to test her planned subterfuge against Snape and her friends, who simultaneously arrived just outside the Great Hall. He acknowledged her with a squint of suspicion. She’d joined her friends, sheepishly adjusting her satchel on her aching shoulder as she babbled about having been in the library preparing for a test. Their greetings and teasing delayed them enough that the Potions master impatiently brushed ahead of them and flung wide the door. They followed in his wake.

Snape. She tapped the biro on her chin.

He’d seemed to be everywhere this week. Even this morning, when Hermione had trailed down to the pitch while the team practiced, he’d stalked past her toward Hogsmeade. She’d collided with him on a landing of the moving staircase when she was descending to Charms class; another day, she’d passed him motionless in an alcove of the Main Hall as she scurried towards Alchemy. Each time, he’d made eye contact with her, his eyes gleaming as they bored into hers.

Her pen trailed a shaky line. She’d had asked him to follow her, after all, and he was doing so.

In retrospect, it wasn’t as sexy as she’d thought it would be. “Creepy” was a better word. And it
doubtless cut into his time. She’d ask him to stop, tell him that she’d made a mistake. Chalk another one up for indecisive Miss Granger.

As Severus, the enticing Jekyll of the Potions master’s chambers, he’d probably alter his plans without complaint. Mild sarcasm, she supposed, and he’d give her one of those little crinkly-crows-foot smiles that made her feel gooey just imagining.

But Snape-Hyde, who ruled the classroom with a caustic tongue? It was as if someone were playing a trick on her with Polyjuice. Surely one man couldn’t swing from extremes in temperament as he did? The class of the silver bubbles had become a much-discussed anomaly, proof for the Gryffindor boys that their Potions instructor was indeed losing his marbles. Ron argued the case the loudest in the Common Room that Wednesday when he and the rest of the team had piled in after practice when she was wrapping up an Alchemy essay. Years of mixed allegiances and punishment by Voldemort had clearly damaged Snape’s brain. Hermione had bit her cheek and massaged her neck.

“Watch it!”

She looked up just in time to cower over her papers as a Bludger rocketed towards her. A Beater’s bat somewhere behind her thwacked the ball back down into the pitch as a flurry of red robes dived into the stands.

“You ok?” asked Ginny, who held her broom in a hover a few feet above Hermione.

“Fine. Didn’t see it coming.”

“Usually, they save the real fire for matches,” the red head replied. She smirked down at Hermione’s spread of papers and objects. “Wouldn’t you be better off somewhere less windy?”

“Probably, but then I wouldn’t be supporting the team, would I?” she replied good-naturedly. “Doesn’t your side need you?”

“Not really. We’ve moved on to Keeper drills.”

So they had. Only Ron remained in position while the rest of the team pelted Quaffles and Bludgers toward him.

“I’ll work Ron for another twenty minutes, then we’ll let Freddy have his chance, and call it quits.”

“That gives me just enough time to wrap this up.”

“Great. Once we’ve had lunch, you can spread it all out again in the library.” She shot upward about twenty feet and caught the Quaffle that had been heaved erratically in her direction. She rejoined the melee at the end of the pitch, while shouting threats of accuracy drills.

Hermione glanced over what she’d written. Mostly about her. Some about him, the mystery of him. A collection of fragmentary images of what they’d done, how she’d felt, accompanied with a handful of doodles. One paragraph about Ron carping in the Common Room about how his schoolwork cut into his Quidditch practice and speculating on whether his brother would still need his help at the shop come summer.

She closed the journal, reapplied her privacy charms, and tucked it back into the secret place of her bag, then set about packing up.

The thud and shriek stopped her.
A bundle of robes tumbled from the goal, and two bodies fell apart on the ground. Hooch and the rest of the players raced together, and Hermione clambered down the stands to get closer.

Freddy wasn’t moving and the coach crouched over him. Sarah, one of the reserve Fifth Year Beaters, seemed to be struggling to sit up; Ginny held her down.

“What happened?” Hermione asked one of the Ravenclaw students leaning over the rails.

“Collision. Sarah’d chased a Bludger in too close, and Freddy zoomed up to block the Quaffle.”

Hooch had Levitated both students. She barked out a series of orders to clear up the pitch and floated the players toward the castle. The remaining players obeyed, their expressions somber, and the students in the stands spilled onto the pitch to help collect equipment.

Most did, anyway. Several figures remained motionless in a shadowed part of the stands opposite. Hermione strained to make out any details. When the tallest bent to slip under the curtain of the stand, his hair burned white in an errant sunray.

Malfoy.

---

**Sat, 10 Oct 98, Gryffindor Girls Dorm**

“*Why’s a pretty wandering the streets so early?*”

Then the dazzling light.

Hermione’s eyes snapped open. She lay still and panted until her hands stopped trembling, then sat up, shoved herself to the head of the bed, and hugged her knees. So vivid; she could almost feel the press of bricks against her back. Looking at her diary must have brought it all back.

"Hermione, are you awake?” Ginny peeked through a gap in the curtains, her wand dimly lit.

“*A dream.*”

"What was it about?” asked Ginny.

“I-I don’t—something from last year.” She slid out of bed. "I think I'll go to the Common Room and settle down."

Ginny followed after her. "I'll keep you company. It’s not even midnight."

They huddled on the sofa before the fireplace. The wind clattered the window panes while the kettle boiled.

Ginny poured water into a couple of mugs for cocoa. Steam coiled around the kettle’s spout. “Do you remember much of it?”

Hermione pulled her dressing gown tighter. Too much of it. She rocked back and forth. The flash meant something. Every time she thought or dreamt about that morning, the brilliant light interrupted. “Some.”

Ginny handed her a mug and sat hunched beside her. “Care to talk?”

The warmth from the ceramic vessel worked into her fingers. “You can’t tell anyone. Not Harry, not Ron, not your mum, no one.”
The red head nodded solemnly, eyes wide.

“Last November, I had to run errands. For the Order. I went early, to avoid drawing attention, and…” She sketched out what had happened, the assault, the two rough men coming upon easy prey, one at either side of her—

“But they…they didn’t…?”

“No, I managed to get away.” The cocoa sloshed her lip when she drank, and she wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “Ever since, if people snatch at me—”

“You jump.”

“And….” She paused to watch foam swirl in her cup and forced herself to sit still. “Their hands were on me, Gin. Through clothes, but…”

“But still.” Ginny leaned against her shoulder. “You never told anyone?”

“No. It was my own idiocy. Lucky I didn’t run into any Death Eaters.”

“Ron would—“

“No.” Hermione jerked away from Ginny and glared at her. “I don’t want Ron’s pity. I felt stupid—feel stupid. It was my fault. It was so close, Gin. They could have…”

“But they didn’t.” She reached slowly out, took the empty mug from Hermione’s hands, and set it gently on the coffee table. “How did you get away?”

“Can’t remember. It happened too fast.” And the flash, I can’t see past the flash, she thought, and cupped her hands over her eyes. “Just, I was struggling, then I was on the street, then I went back to Grimmauld Place and took a shower.”

She grasped Ginny’s hand. “I’m a mess, Gin. I kept thinking, as soon as things got back to normal, once I got into a routine, it would get sorted. But it doesn’t. It’s just more things to think about. School, tutoring, what I want to do after school, Ron, what Ron’s going to expect after George and Angelina—”

“After George and Angelina what?” Ginny demanded, her voice rising sharply.

Pants. “They’re engaged.”

“What?” Ginny bounded to her feet. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Ron told me. I—he told me it was a secret. He got a letter the first Hogsmeade day.”

“No kidding.” Ginny glowered into the fire before dropping back onto the couch. “Well, it’s a stupid secret. Everyone likes Angelina; we all knew both George and Fred fancied her. We’d been waiting for her to pick.”

Too bad the choice had been made for her. Hermione watched Ginny from the corner of her eye, but the red head’s expression was blank.

“So, Ron,” she said at last, and turned to face Hermione. “I think you should tell him.”

“No!”
“Well…I think he’s concerned and confused.”

“I know.” Hermione slumped back into the cushions. “He’d asked if we should break it off.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Because I thought once we got further into the term…”

“And it hasn’t improved.”

Hermione shook her head. “I wonder sometimes, if we hadn’t felt so rushed, if we’d spent more time—I don’t know—dating and making out, instead of just leaping into bed…”

Ginny hugged her shoulders. “Mum said the same thing. That you two went from making cow eyes at each other to rumpy-pumpy too fast. But she admits she and Dad did the same, then had Bill.”

Right. Immediately had a baby. Hermione bit the inside of her lower lip. It wasn’t her place to say anything, and she liked Bill… She glanced toward Ginny, who had settled into the back cushions and was quirking her mouth.

“I can’t see you happy to settle down with a litter of Weasleys right quick.”

“My parents would kill me!” She pulled a knee to her chest. “Anyway, I think I just need time. Would you be angry if I cooled it with Ron? For now, just while I get my bearings?”

Ginny scoffed dismissively. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Ron?”

“Ron’ll get over it—he’d probably do what he wanted to do then, and leave school to help run the shop. Piss off mum.” She rubbed Hermione’s ankle. “The team would miss him, especially now that Freddy’s out for a few weeks. Harry would too, but he’d survive. And it’s not like you’re saying forever.”

“No.” Hermione knitted her fingers together around her shin. “I care for him.”

“Love him?”

“I…” She hesitated, and Ginny’s brow lifted. “I do. I think. I just feel like I closed things off. Like I’m waiting for a cloudburst.” She sighed. “I told him once he had the emotional depth of a teaspoon, and I feel like that’s me now.” She closed her eyes. “What I’d give for a dose of dreamless sleep.”

Ginny turned sideways on the couch. “Speaking of potions… Do you remember that time I came downstairs at Grimmauld Place? Snape was brewing, and you were chopping ingredients?”

Hermione squinted down at her knee. “I’m not sure…what happened?”

“Well, it was a few days before Christmas. You’d originally taken him lunch, but you didn’t come back up. You’d been gone for a while. Dad made a fresh pot of coffee and thought Snape would like some. You know how we never knew what he wanted.”

“That I recall.” She chuckled. Still didn’t, but she was getting an idea.

“Dad sent me down with a couple of cups. He was talking to you. Casually. So unlike him.”

The memory bubbled up, bringing with it the dankness of the basement. His voice was distorted, as
if it came through water, but it grew clearer as the memory strengthened. He’d been dispelling her notions about teaching while he brewed, unusually chatty for a change. She’d wanted to argue back, but had held her tongue. Snape had bent over his cauldrons, so intent on his work that he’d seemed distracted when he’d spoken. Ginny had crept down the stairs about then, and he’d gone quiet.

“What about it?”

“I’d never heard him talk to anyone as though he thought they had a brain, other than another teacher or Dumbledore. It made me wonder—” She cut herself off and twisted her mouth.

“What wonder?”

“What he thinks of you, really.”

“He’s been pretty clear on that, I thought.” Not privately, of course, although she was beginning to wonder herself. “Last time I checked, he was still calling me ‘Little Miss Know-it-all’.”

“Yeah…but he doesn’t seem as irritable when he says it now. And he calls you ‘Granger’ sometimes, too. Maybe he’d changed his mind, after working with you last year.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.” Hermione feigned a yawn to get them off the topic. “I think I might try sleeping again.”

Ginny rested her fingertips on Hermione’s shoulder. “And Ron?”

Ron.

“Soon, Hermione. I know he can be irritating—”

“I know. He deserves better, Gin, I know. This week, I promise, as soon as I figure out how and what to say.”
Chapter Summary

Quidditch weights heavily on everyone's minds, since the Slytherin team is obviously up to something and Ginny is determined to be a good Captain. All except for Hermione, who is considering her own future.

Chapter Notes

MANY THANKS: Thanks, Melusin, for volunteering to muck the Stygian stables of my punctuation. You'll be pleased to know I use the word "got" in casual conversation now.

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content written by unrepentant (but malleable) USAian!*

Tues, 13 Oct 98, Great Hall

Hermione pecked the crown of Ron’s head and hustled off to Arithmancy. Ron and Harry watched her go and didn’t budge from the table.

“Ninety minutes ’til Transfiguration. Want to go down to the pitch?” Ron asked.

“Nah. I want to go over my Herbology homework. We have practice tonight, anyway.” Harry unrolled a scroll and spread his notes before him. “I read a few things on training in the last *Quidditch Monthly* that it’s possible to overexert and set yourself back.”

Ron slumped onto his elbows. “That’s making it sound like work, Harry.”

“Well, Ginny seems to think it is. And she’s tense because Madam Pomfrey won’t let Freddy back on the team for another week at least, so you might want to keep your head down.” Harry dug his fingers into his hair. “D’you recall what Sprout said about additives to dragon manure composting?”

“Pulverized bones,” Ron replied absently. Hermione had come to stay during the summer of the Quidditch World Cup, and they’d puttered around outside—

“Really?”

“Mum uses it on her garden.” And Hermione had mentioned to mum how her own mother used fish
meal, or something, that attracted the cats—

“But Sprout…she’s not your mum, Ron. There was something specific, though….”

“Shrake bones.”

“That’s right.” Harry made a note. “For calcium and trace minerals.” He twiddled his quill in his fingers and narrowed his eyes at Ron. “If you want to go on, go.”

“No.” Ron traced the grain in the table. “So the Map is broken?”

Harry sighed. “Remus sent it back to me last week. He said my dad and Sirius had worked on it the most, and he couldn’t figure out how to fix it.”

“Nothing on it works?”

“Well…not quite. It works on the public areas and all the Houses’ dorms.”

“Public areas. Like the Library?”

Harry bobbed his head. “The pitch, the Halls, classrooms, that kind of thing. Doesn’t show the teachers’ offices or quarters any more, or the kitchens.” He plucked at his lip. “Places where students might reasonably be, if you think about it.”

“ Weird.”

“Why do you care? Not like we’re trying to track Malfoy or Umbridge any more.”

He was edging into mental territory for certain, and he hesitated. “It’s something Lavender said—”

“Oh, man, Ron.” Harry dropped his quill. “You’re not back to that again. Hermione loves you.”

“No, hear me out.” He leaned toward Harry. “You know I said Lav said Hermione wasn’t in the library a couple of Saturdays ago? She asked Gin this morning why Hermione had started getting up really early, before sunrise.” Ron frowned and screwed up his eyes. “Apparently, they’d teased her about it this past Sunday night, and she went off in a huff.”

“Huh. Well, she does that.” Harry turned to his homework then glanced back up. “You weren’t going to spy on her, were you?”

“No, no, I just wondered.”

Harry’s quill scratched across the parchment. Yeah, Hermione did that. Yeah, she could be secretive and cagey. But he couldn’t explain why he felt something had changed, and he couldn’t make himself ask her directly. How she walked as though the crowded corridors were empty. How she spoke in a voice that didn’t allow for argument. How she skirted direct questions, pushed his scrolls back into his hands…

“She won’t look over my homework anymore.”

Harry scoffed as he marked a correction. “Considering what you did in that Potions exam? What do you expect?”

“That was weeks ago, Harry. She can’t still be angry.”

“Remember the thing with Scabbers and Crooks? You two didn’t talk all year.”
“Yeah, that was bad.” And Scabbers really being the man who’d betrayed Harry’s parents to He-Who—Voldemort, Ron told himself forcefully—that didn’t help one bit. It made the orange behemoth out to be some kind of hero.

Ron sighed and pulled out his Transfiguration homework. It was the last class of the day, but that was the only good thing about it. McGonagall’s classes had become more demanding. More than he’d expected. He had been struggling to keep up before with Hermione’s help. Now… He pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. If she was willing to tutor Slytherin’s Seeker, maybe he could ask her to tutor him as well. Formally. Not at the same time though, so he could maybe sneak in a kiss or two.

Or…he let his gaze trail along the sparsely occupied Slytherin table. If she taught them both at the same time, maybe he could get the inside story on their Quidditch strategy. That might encourage Ginny to take his side more, instead of telling him to back off Hermione and nagging him to pay more attention in class.

He looked down at his homework. Half the words didn’t make sense. He flipped pages in his school book until he found the glossary. He’d written most of it the night before, as the wireless blared dance tunes, and Dean and Seamus argued over…something. The essay hadn’t seemed as important as the letter he’d got from George that morning, asking him why he didn’t just tell Mum and Hermione he’d had enough of school and come and work at the joke shop. He’d finally set the Herbology work aside and drafted a letter back—several letters, actually, each one sounding more and more like he was trying to convince himself, not George. Why staying made sense. Why the N.E.W.T.s were important. Why he needed to think about some unimaginable future.

When he pitched the fifth version into the fire, he wondered when Hermione would come back.

She’d bounced in around nine and had plopped down beside them, eager to hear about their day. Until Ron had made some comment about a difficulty he’d had with Charms.

Instantly, she’d gone stone quiet. Ginny had ended up working with Ron because Hermione had excused herself and gone up to the girls’ dorm. She’d not come back down.

“I need to ask her out.”

“What?” Harry asked, meeting Ron’s eyes with a startled expression.

“I haven’t been out with Hermione for weeks. I need to ask her out.”

“Hogsmeade’s this weekend. Go to Puddifoot’s.” Harry had returned to his work.

“She hates that place.”

“There’re other places.”

“Wish we could go down to Diagon Alley.” Ron grinned to himself. Yeah, Fortescue’s. That’s what she needed.

“Can’t, though, you know that.”

Ron huffed and focused on his essay. Hermione had a free study period between Arithmancy and Transfiguration. Usually she came to the Great Hall to join them. When she did, he’d invite her to lunch in the village somewhere.

An hour-and-a-half later, they headed up the stairs to class. Hermione had never appeared. Ginny
had, though, and mentioned that Hermione had muttered something about researching something in
the Restricted Section for Charms. They weren’t too surprised to find Hermione in the
Transfiguration classroom chatting with Professor McGonagall.

“Then studying abroad might be the best course, Professor?” she asked.

“At this time, Miss Granger, especially since you’ve achieved some notoriety in this country through
your efforts during the war.” McGonagall folded her arms and tilted her head in thought. “I’ll owl
some enquiries on your behalf, if you wish.”

“I’d like that. It’s not that I want to go, really, it’s just that—”

“Go where?” asked Ron.

“Abroad, after I finish my N.E.W.T.s.” She smiled at Harry. “It’s not your fault, Harry, but I feel like
I missed a lot with all the interruptions over the years.”

Harry laughed. “Like spending months Petrified in Second Year?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Exactly. And now’s the time to start looking.”

“But it’s still early!” Ron dropped his bag on his desk and stared at her. “N.E.W.T.s are months
away—”

“It’s halfway through October, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall said sternly. “Miss Granger’s quite right.
It’s never too early to make plans for once you leave Hogwarts.” She turned away to sort papers on
her desk.

“You’re barking,” Ron whispered hotly at Hermione. “Months and months.”

“Not so far way,” she replied. “Percy told me he started looking the end of his Sixth Year. It took
him a whole year—”

“Percy’s a prat,” Ron broke in. “Of course it would take him a long time. But you’re pleasant to talk
to. And pretty, besides.”

Her brows arched. “Are you suggesting I rely on my looks?”

“Not at all, but it can’t hurt. Anyway, why worry? Your husband will work, right?” Really, why she
couldn’t see the difference between Percy and herself he couldn’t—

She froze, and her face grew white. “So I should just plan on staying home, is that it?”

Behind her, McGonagall had locked her gaze on him as well, and Ginny stared at him open
mouthed.

Hermione inhaled slowly. “My parents brought me up to make my own way, Ronald, not to ride on
other’s coat tails.” Her cheeks blazed, but she kept her eyes on him. “I want to actively improve the
wizarding world, not just loll around letting it carry on.”

Then she sat down, and McGonagall called for their parchments.

When class was over, he chased her down the corridor. “Hermione!”

She ignored him. If anything, she went faster. Bugger. He loped after her down two flights to the
First Floor and pushed students out of his way until he was close enough to catch her elbow.
“Hermione!”

She spun around and backed against the wall, away from the Grand Stair landing. “What?”

“I didn’t mean that—”

“Really? Didn’t mean that my best aspiration should be to find a good husband and settle down? Maybe pump out a brood of kids as well?”

“I didn’t mean that.” He sighed heavily. “You’re nothing like Mum. I know you’d never be happy just tending the house.”

Her face softened. “I’m glad you understand that, Ron.”

“I just…don’t go away, Hermione. I’ll miss you.” He rubbed his hand over her upper arm. “We’ve been through all this since the beginning. You can’t believe—” He stopped and glanced around. Not too many people near, but he lowered his voice anyway. “When you were captured, I thought I’d lost you.” His throat closed, and he couldn’t make himself continue.

Her gaze shifted to somewhere over his shoulder, and he made himself ignore whatever had caught her attention. Someone brushed past him, and he identified the shape. Snape. No wonder. She’d been distracted by the git. Ron leaned forward and lifted her chin. “I really didn’t mean how it came out.”

She nodded and put her arms around him. “I believe you, Ron.”

“I noticed you’d scheduled time for us to have lunch at Hogsmeade,” he said into her hair. “If you’re interested.”

She craned her head to look up at him. “Not Puddifoot’s.”

“Maybe that cafe down by the Quidditch equipment place.”

She put her hand on his arm, and they started toward the Great Hall. “That would be nice. We could talk.”

“And maybe I can convince you to tutor me as well.”

Hermione stopped. “Was this just to butter me up so I’d do your homework?”

He shushed her quickly. “No, just, I’m having a hard time, Hermione. I mean, you’re tutoring Vivi —”

“Vivi does her own work, and she’s teaching me squash in exchange.”

“So I need to give you something in return?”

Her brows pinched, then she nodded. “Because if you don’t, then you won’t take it seriously. I don’t have a lot of time this year. I need to know you’re committed.”

Bloody Hell. Where’d that come from? Committed. Serious. “Like what?”

She pressed her lips together. “Every time you ask me to look over your homework, it needs to be the right length already and basically complete.”

“Hermione, that’s impossible—”
“I won’t help you otherwise. All I should be doing is offering suggestions. And, and, I’m not sharing my notes with you anymore.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Too bad, then.” She turned, and he started toward her.

“Okay,” he said quickly.

“You accept my terms?” Her brows lifted.

Terms? His jaw dropped. Like talking to…he didn’t know who talked like that. “Essays done before you look them over, and I need to take my own notes.”

“Right.”

“And you’ll tutor me.”

“Which means that I’ll help you understand, not that we’ll spend the time snogging.” She pointed at his bag. “We can match up some time on the revision tables.”

He nodded rapidly. “Fine. Can we do that at dinner?”

“I’d be happy to, Ron. Let’s go and get a seat.”

---

**Thurs, 15 Oct 98, Hogwarts Library**

Hermione, Ginny, and her friends took over their usual table in the corner for Thursday night’s open study and watched the room fill up.

Ginny leaned close to Hermione and whispered, “There’s a lot more Slytherins tonight than usual, aren’t there?”

Hermione kept her face neutral. “More than three is unusual,” she whispered back as she glanced around. Vivi waved at her from a tableful of students with green and silver badges.

Angela, Hermione’s fellow tutor from Ravenclaw, plopped her bags and books beside Hermione and sat beside her. “We have a full house tonight.” She glanced around curiously. “But still no Lauren?”

Hermione winced. “Lauren really is the retiring sort. All the fuss set her on edge. She even had to go to Madam Pomfrey that weekend for a calming draught.”

“Well, it kept the Ravenclaw Common Room buzzing for a few days.” Angela winked at Hermione. “I heard your House was not permitted the drama.”

Hermione groaned. This had got completely out of control. “It was the right thing to do.”

“I’m not arguing,” Angela said, holding her hands up. “That just added to the fun. How have you been this week?”

“Good. Sore. I’ve been working out, swapping exercise lessons for tutoring.” She stretched her arms, wishing that she still had some of Severus’ healing oil.

She got up to start making her rounds. Vivi insisted that she sit at her table and help the group of Slytherins with Transfiguration. She was deep in theory when one of the boys stopped her.
“What’s wrong, Joseph?” she asked.

“Professor McGonagall talks about transfiguring things beyond what’s in the exercises. I know you can do transfigurations on things that you been taught in lessons. How?”

“That’s the art! Once you have the theories, then you see how the theories can intersect and split and be recombined.” His sullen expression was proof enough that he wasn’t following. “If I remember right, you’re pretty good in Charms.” He glowed a little at the praise. “With Charms, you have to combine particular words and gestures to get an expected result. If you mix up the phrase and the gesture, you can’t predict what will happen. The gesture does a kind of thing, and the phrase directs the magic. Follow?”

The boy dipped his chin in agreement.

“Say you find a phrase that does what you want. Then you play with a vocabulary of gestures to come up with an ideal combination. Clear?”

He nodded again. Papers rustled behind her at the teacher’s desk, but she carried on.

“Transfiguration is just like that. Each Transfiguration theory achieves an end. You decide what you want the end result to be and back into it, one step at a time. You’re a Fourth Year, right? Remember back in Third Year when you learned the Silencio charm—”

“No, you don’t.”

“No?” A memory flooded back of sitting in the Common Room as she tried to mute one of the twins. “I swear I remember doing Silencio….” She paused. “Oh, yeah, I worked through the Fifth Year book that year—”

“You did the Fifth Year book in your Third Year?” Joseph asked, his eyes big.

“I borrowed it from the library and worked through it on my own. For a challenge,” she added quickly, as expressions of disbelief bloomed across the faces ringing her.

“And what year do we cover Polyjuice potion?” asked someone behind her.

“That’s not part of the curriculum, but I—” She fell silent and turned slowly to face Snape, who occupied the teacher’s chair and rested his clasped hands on the desk.

“Yes?” he prompted.

Her face burned. “I researched it in my Second Year.”

“Did you? Whatever for? Boredom?”

Was that a smile around his eyes? “Sort of. I’ve often wondered what it would be like to be taller. That seemed like a way to find out.”

“You’re babbling. Should you attempt a Polyjuice potion,” he drawled softly, “it’s critical to avoid cross-species mixtures. Recovery requires very clever potions work.”

Of course, Madam Pomfrey probably had consulted with him on her case. “I’ll remember that, sir.”

He gave her a bland look and resumed his marking.

She turned back to the table. “Any other questions?” They shook their heads, and she retreated to her own table and school work.
When the students shuffled out at the end of study hall, Hermione waved her friends off, seeing no reason to hold them up while she packed. She had just picked her bag up when it was taken from her hands.

Snape held her satchel and beckoned deeper into the alcove.

“Professor, I—”

“Come here. I’ve set a silencing spell. I want to talk.”

She sat beside him on the bench.

“I wasn’t aware you’d mastered Fifth Year spells in your Third Year.”

“I didn’t mean to brag.”

“That’s not bragging. It’s impressive.”

Her face flamed again.

“Do you realize when you’re aroused you blush exactly the same way?”

“Professor!”

He closed a hand on hers, and his brows lowered.

“Severus,” she corrected herself.

He sighed. “I’d like to engage your services, if you’re inclined.” His eyes glittered.

She swallowed. “It’s late—”

“Not now,” he said softly, and set a pint bottle of the healing oil on the table before her. “Freshly brewed last Sunday. I’ll keep refills in my private store. No need to remove screws; your name will open the cabinet.”

“Thank you, Severus,” she said, using the stowage of the bottle in her bag as an excuse to lower her eyes. Wonder how long it took him to work out how she’d stolen that vial? As she fiddled with her bag, she asked, “Could you n-not follow me? It’s not…I’d expected…”

“No. I’d like to engage your services, if you’re inclined.” His eyes glittered.

She swallowed. “It’s late—”

“No,” she peeked up at him. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t well-thought out.”

His expression was mild. “Realizing fantasy isn’t simple. I’ll stop.” His fingers traced over her upper back, sending a shiver through her, and she met his gaze. “You’re bolder when I’m blindfolded.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No apologies. Blindfolds simplify many things.” He rotated her with light pressure on her upper arm to face from him and began kneading her shoulders. “Your marks have staying power.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No apologies. Blindfolds simplify many things.” He rotated her with light pressure on her upper arm to face from him and began kneading her shoulders. “Your marks have staying power.”

“Still?” It’d been, what, two weeks since she’d pinned him down in his chambers?

“Just faded this week,” he said, his mouth close to her ear and his breath hot on her skin.

“Severus,” she whispered warningly.
“Fine,” he replied, and his hands left her.

She faced him. “Is that why you said that, to watch me blush?”

He smiled cryptically. “When we meet again, I’ll teach you some additional spells that you can use during our sessions.”

“Like the arousal spell?”

“No. Variations of spells you already know.”

“When?”

His eyes hooded. “Next Friday night, after dinner?”

“Not this week?”

“No.” He drew out the word, the pucker accentuating the curves of his lips. She wanted to trace his mouth with her fingertip, and her hand had lifted from her lap when there was a shuffle near the door.

“Hermione?” Ron’s voice sounded distant through whatever spell Severus had cast.

“I should go,” she said.

Severus smirked and canceled the spell with a flick of his wand. Hermione took a deep breath, settled the bag on her shoulder, and rose. The heel of her shoe caught on the bench; she tripped, and he lunged forward to catch her elbow. After she’d collected herself, she gave Severus a lingering look and left the alcove.

Ron was waiting for her outside the library. They walked hand in hand up the stairs, but then he pulled her into a niche on the second floor and pressed his mouth to hers. She squirmed against him, and the bottle of oil dug into her as she backed into the wall. When they broke, she gasped for breath.

“Where were you hiding?”

“I wasn’t. Someone wanted to talk.” She wiped her lips with her fingers. “Come on. Let’s get upstairs before Filch finds us and gives us detention.”

---

**Sat, 17 Oct 98, Hogsmeade**

Hermione’d agreed to meet him for lunch at Aggie’s at noon, after she’d finished whatever research she was doing in the library. Ron had staked out an outdoors table at the corner of the cafe’s space and kept scanning the crowds for her, but hadn’t seen her yet.

He checked his watch again. Quarter past twelve. She was never late. Early, yes. Surely this couldn’t be payback for the dates she’d scheduled for them and that he’d blithely ignored.

She just wasn’t that catty. Right?

“Ron!”

He jerked his head around to the left. Neville came towards him, a good head over the students he was ploughing through. As he neared, both Luna and Hermione came into view, following at
Longbottom’s heels. All three of them sat down at the table with him.

“It’s my fault we’re late,” Luna said. “Neville and I got into a discussion about Nargles, and the library doesn’t have any current bestiaries.”

“I still don’t know what they look like,” Neville said.

“I can draw a picture while we wait for our food.”

Hermione handed Luna a scrap of paper and a pencil stub. Immediately, Luna bent over the paper, describing the various features of the creatures as she sketched one out.

Ron fixed Hermione with a glare and bobbed his head towards the other two.

“Oh, Ron, I hope you don’t mind. Neville and I were working this morning, and he’s never been here.” Hermione gave him a broad, warm smile, and squeezed his hand.

“And Daddy’s dropping off next week’s *Quibbler* for me up at the owl office,” Luna added, glancing up from her drawing. “I’ve never eaten here, either.”

Lunch wasn’t the cozy success he’d hoped for. Every bit dragged on. Luna, apparently, had stopped eating meat. She and Neville worked out swaps of ingredients while the waitress eyed them both with amusement. Hermione wanted to be certain that no house-elves were laboring unpaid in the kitchen, which led to the waitress, Rona, buying a button from her. After the food came, the dissection and redistribution of Neville’s and Luna’s meals caused another round of haggling. It was nearly two when they finished.

“Ron, it’s been lovely, but I really should get back to my homework,” Hermione said, as she laid her share of the tab and tip on the table.

“I thought we could, you know, spend some time together.” Alone, he thought loudly. He settled on bobbing his brows toward Neville and Luna, who were digging through her purse for change.

“Okay,” Hermione said brightly. “Honeydukes?”

“I could do with some Pink Coconut Ice,” Neville said.

“Can you get me a Chocolate Wand, if I pay you back?” Luna asked. “I need to go and meet Daddy now, or I’d come along.”

Ron heaved himself to his feet. No, this wasn’t what he’d wanted at all. To make matters worse, Neville kept bumping between him and Hermione the whole way to the shop, so he couldn’t even hold hands with her. Honeydukes was wall to wall with Third and Fourth Years. He trod on feet with every step and finally told Hermione he would wait outside.

As he jostled his way out the door, he got turned backwards avoiding a group of girls with oversized Sticky Lickers, which randomly extended foot-long, twisting candy tongues in any direction. Ron crabbed sideways and collided with someone who shrieked, “Watch it, Weasley!”

“Blind Keeper—that’s Slytherin over Gryffindor for certain!”

He stumbled backwards and stopped himself against the wall. He’d run into Pansy, who was clinging now to Teddy Nott’s arm.

“I’m not blind,” he shot back. “I was getting out of that lots’ way.” He gestured toward the clump of
girls with their writhing sweets.

“Too bad Quaffles are smaller than I am,” Pansy said. “If you can’t see me, you probably won’t—”

“I won’t be crowded on the pitch because your team will be too busy playing defense.”

“That so?” She smirked. “That’s not the way Draco tells it, from what he’s seen.”

He had no idea what she was rabbiting about. “Malfoy’s never been to one of our practices.”

Both she and Nott chuckled. Pansy turned to go. Nott made to follow, then lunged out and shoved Ron hard towards the shop window. He caught himself—just—on the wooden window frame and made a grab for Nott’s sleeve, but he spun, and the fabric slipped through Ron’s fingers. Ron shook his fist under Nott’s chin, and Nott raised both hands in innocence.

“Ronald!”

Ron snapped his head around. Ginny stood, arms akimbo, dead in the middle of the street with Harry beside her.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as she stormed towards him.

“He tried to push me through the glass!” He glanced towards Nott, who backed away.

“Who did?”

“Nott!” Ron gestured towards the two, but both snakes had disappeared. “And...Pansy. They were both here—”

“I don’t see either of them.”

“What’s going on?” Hermione asked as she emerged from Honeydukes.

“Ron was starting a fight with Nott—” Ginny said.

“I was not!”

Harry made shushing noises and herded them around the corner into the alley. When both Weasleys started to protest, he jerked his head towards the street. “Are you nuts? Snape was on his way!”

They fell silent just as the Potions master swept past the mouth of the alley.

Ron turned back to his sister. “I wasn’t starting a fight,” he said firmly. “When I left the shop, I bumped into Pansy, then Nott tried to send me through the window.”

“Just because you ran into Pansy?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Neville—” Hermione interrupted in a breathless voice and darted onto the street to grab the lummox where he stood gazing blankly around. They drifted after her and collected in a bunch, just as Ginny launched into him again.

“I don’t really care who started it or why. Our match with Slytherin is just five weeks away. Keep your nose clean, or I’ll have to drop you to Reserve Keeper.”
He spluttered. “I didn’t—”

“I don’t care!” she repeated in a loud whisper. “I have enough problems. I’m struggling in Charms and Transfiguration, and I can’t get a good read on the Slytherin playbook.”

“You said they were using the same strategy as last year,” Harry said.

“That’s what I thought until I overheard the Ravenclaw Chasers talking—”

“Oh!” Hermione squeaked. “I meant to tell you—Vivi told me last Tuesday that Candace rearranged the team. She’s not the primary Seeker anymore.”

“Malfoy is?” Harry asked.

“That’s what I gathered. She didn’t want to talk about it.”

“That seals it, then,” said Ginny. “That’s what the Chasers must have been talking about. Even more reason we need to watch their three o’clock practice. Come on.” She turned towards the castle, took two steps dragging Harry with her, and looked back at Ron. “Come on, Ron.”

He wavered. On the one hand, Quidditch, the House Cup, Harry, and his sister. On the other, the awkward date with Hermione, who hugged her Honeydukes package to her chest with both arms.

“Go on, Ron, we can meet up later,” Hermione said. “It’s okay.”

Sat, 17 Oct 98, Hogwarts Library

Ron found her in the Library, nestled into the biggest study corral at the windowed end of the Ancient Runes shelves. He leaned against the wall as she started stuffing things into a satchel.

“How was your afternoon?” she asked.

“Frustrating. Every time we got close enough to see anything, a damn snake would come up and pester us. We ended up on the Astronomy tower, sharing Harry’s Omniculars between us.”

Hermione chuckled.

“What’s funny?”

“I can just see you three, like the Three Graeae—”

“The three what?”

“The Three—it’s from the myth of Perseus. Never mind.” She stopped fiddling with a quill and studied him. “Want to go down to the boathouse?”

Blimey, she’d not asked him that for a while. A bit of privacy; they could dig out some of the blankets Hagrid kept there for the Firsties—

“Just to talk, Ron.” She smirked a little. “And wipe the drool off your chin.”

“That obvious?”

“Always.” She swung her bag over her shoulder. He trailed after her down the stairs, but when they got to the boathouse, they found half the Slugs and Bugs Club mucking about in the water with nets.
Hermione headed outside, and they sat at the end of the dock.

“Bummer,” Ron said.

She shrugged. “It’s okay.” She leaned against a piling and folded her hands over the strap of her satchel. “We need to talk, actually.”

The backs of his hands chilled from the wind off the lake. “About?”

“Me. Us, I suppose.” She looked down at the water. “Me, mostly.”

“Okay.” He waited, but she watched the water. “Hermione?”

“I need time.”

“I know. We talked about that.”

“No. I mean, we did, but I…” She lifted her eyes. “And I mean it, Ron. It’s all me. I’m just trying to make sense of…"

“Of what?” He couldn’t hear the other students in the boathouse anymore. “I’m trying to not push you—"

“It’s not you.”

“Someone else?” Bloody Hell. “It’s not over what I said Tuesday after Transfiguration? I’m sorry—”

“No! I mean, no, it’s me.” She swallowed and went back to staring down. “I hoped I’d be able to…” Her knuckles had grown white. “I need time to myself.”

“That’s why I’ve been—” He stopped. “You want to break up.”

“Not really. More like a… a breather.”

“A breather.”

“A time out.”

“I get it.” He sagged against the piling behind him. “A break.”

“Not permanently,” she said quickly.

“Just for now. Right.” Should have guessed this was what she’d wanted to talk about. No wonder she’d brought Neville and Luna. She never meant it as a date.

“Is that okay?”

“You’re asking me?” He stared at her. “What am I supposed to say? No?”

“Maybe you’d rather it was permanent? I mean, you did offer before—”

“I suggested because it seemed like you wanted to break up. You didn’t, and now, a month later—”

“I know, but I didn’t know at the time.”

“Know what?”
Her brows bunched together. “That I needed more time.” She looked back toward the boathouse. He followed her gaze. Shapes of students moved against the glass. “I’m sorry. Just for a while, ’til I—”

“Figure it out.”

“Yeah.”

“How long?”

“’Til winter hols?”

Christmas. Warmth filled him. It’d be like a present; she’d be happy again, focused on—

“Just in time for you to get cranky about N.E.W.T.s,” Ron said, intending to poke fun.

Hermione winced. “If you’d rather, we can just—”

“No, I’m not waiting ’til the end of the year. At least I know what to expect. Just promise me something.”

“Anything, Ronald.”

“Tell me what you have to work out. Not now, not this year even, but some time.”

She rubbed his knee. “I will.”

“And…” He hesitated. “Can we keep it quiet? Just to keep the rest, like Lav, from, you know, caving to my animal magnetism.”

Hermione snickered as she stood and stuck out her hand to help him up. “Sure, Ron, but I’m pretty certain you’re safe from Lavender.”
Oct 18-24, 1998

Chapter Summary

Dangers lurk in the dungeons of Hogwarts.

Chapter Notes

**MANY THANKS:** To Melusin, without whom I'd still be randomly applying commas. To MizzAdamz, for services rendered that will not be named. To the cheering squad on LiveJournal. The heart's still pumping because of y'all.

**POSTING SCHEDULE:** Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday, if there are holidays. This chapter's a day early because I'm eager to post it.

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.*

Sun, 18 Oct 98, Boys' Dorm

“The girls will be here soon, Ron,” Neville said.

Ron shoved the pillow off his face and pushed back the curtain. Bright. “Time is it?”

“Sevenish.” Neville yanked a jumper over his head. “Better dress.”

“Hermione’s seen me in less, and Ginny’s my sister,” Ron said as he sat up in bed. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “Who thought this early on a Sunday was a good time for this, anyway?”

“I did.” Seamus jerked the sheets off Ron, who shouted in protest. “Get up.”

Ron rolled out of bed, pulled on jeans and a tee shirt, and collapsed back onto the mattress. “Where’s Harry?”

“Showering,” Neville replied, just as Harry opened the door. His hair dripped onto his shirt; both girls followed him into the room. Hermione perched on the foot of Ron’s bed, and Ginny sat cross-legged beside her.

Harry levitated his trunk from under his bed, landed it softly, canceled his wards, and gingerly opened the lid. He extracted one of the bottles from within and held it to the light. Hermione sank to
the floor beside him and peered into the amber liquid.

“"The recipe says it should be a rich honey color with light viscosity,” Hermione said.

“"Looks like it to me,” said Harry.

She put both hands around the bottle and took it from him to inspect it more closely. After a minute of very gentle handling, she set it back into the trunk and repeated the process with another bottle. “I think they’re curing well.”

“When will they be ready?” asked Seamus.

“Another sixty days.” She moved out of the way so Harry could reseal the trunk and move it out of sight. “They’ll be very volatile for the next fifteen days, then they’ll stabilize.”

“And they’re good for a year after that?”

“Yes, but they start losing power six months after they’re mature.”

“We need to use them by the end of the school year, in other words,” said Dean. “Anyone put thought into what we’re going to do and how we’re going to get there?”

“Whole thing’s a bloody hare-brained idea,” responded Seamus. “We still don’t have a target.”

“Luna and the Ravenclaw girls have been trying to keep an eye on Malfoy, but they’re not getting anywhere,” said Ginny. She looked sideways at Hermione. “Maybe you can.”

“Can what?” Hermione replied. “You mean Vivi?”

“She is Slytherin.”

Hermione leaned against the post of the bed. “I’ll try, but she already told me she doesn’t have much to do with him outside of Quidditch. Not much during Quidditch, either.”

“Any more details on how Malfoy became their regular Seeker again?” Ron asked.

Hermione huffed. “Like I said—Vivi won’t tell me. She just said Candace had rearranged the team, but she has them all practicing everything.”

“We learned something when we saw them practice;” said Ginny. “It’s like they’re playing old Slytherin against new Slytherin—frankly, I think Malfoy is making a play to take over the team.”

“Not a chance,” Hermione said. “Not from what Vivi says.”

“You know why, don’t you?” Harry asked heatedly. “It’s because of what happened: the Order taking them in and protecting them. And after what he did, or was going to do on the tower that night—”

“Which was?” asked Seamus, his eyes bright. “I’ve never really heard what happened. The Prophet only says it was inconclusive.”

Harry scuffled backwards on the carpet to brace his back on his bed. “I was there, and I don’t really know. Dumbledore put a Bodybind spell on me when I was down below. I couldn’t see well. Then Malfoy was there, and Dumbledore said he knew Malfoy wouldn’t kill him. Then the Death Eaters came, then Snape, then things happened.” He closed his eyes. “Jinxes flying everywhere, several people shouting hexes—the only voice I didn’t hear was Snape’s. It was mostly over when the spell
canceled. I went up the stairs and stunned Malfoy.” He opened his eyes and focused on Ginny. “Then Snape was tending to the Headmaster’s arm and telling him what an idiot he was.”

“What?” Seamus exclaimed.

“That, and a few other things about being tired. I couldn’t hear what Dumbledore said back, but Snape swore at him.”

“What does that have to do with Draco?” asked Hermione.

“He has to show up Snape now, doesn’t he?” said Ron. “It’s obvious, really.”

“It’s not obvious,” she said. “I can see him wanting to prove himself, to do something splashy to clear the Malfoy family name. But the Headmaster wouldn’t have let him come back if he thought Professor Snape—or anyone else—would be in danger.”

“Not mortal danger, Hermione.”

“Embarrassment? Humiliation? What can he do that Professor Snape didn’t already do to himself?” Her eyes widened, and she put her hand over her mouth.

Ron chuckled. Seamus smirked as well. “Serves the git right—but yeah, I think that’s part of it, and that he has one more chance to win the House Cup for Slytherin.”

Hermione shook her head and tutted, then asked, “Harry, do you remember anything else from that night?”

“That I haven’t told you all the other times you’ve asked?” Harry snorted. “Snape kicked each of the Death Eaters in the ribs to figure out which were alive, and I don’t mean like they do in films. Viciously kicked them. He put some kind of Bodybind or Incarcerus spell, or both, I don’t know, on the two that were alive and on Malfoy, even though all three were out cold. He doesn’t take chances. Then he asked me how I was and sent me down to find help.”

“You never mentioned that.”

“It’s just common sense, isn’t it? We all did it when we were fighting, Snape too, seeing who was hurt. Don’t you remember? Hermione?”

She had an odd expression on her face as though she were about to cry, then she rubbed her upper arms. “Sort of. I try not to think about it.”

“I’m starving,” Ginny said quickly. “And we have the pitch at ten for two hours.”

“I’m meeting Vivi at nine,” Hermione said. “If we finish in time, I’ll come down and watch.”

“Be sure you don’t bring her,” Ron said. Hermione squinted at him. “She’d spy, Hermione.”

“She’s not like that. Nor is Candace. They’re actually quite friendly.”

“Candace? You’re chumming up to their captain, too?”

“Not ‘chumming up.’ Just being cordial.” She slid off the bed and straightened her jumper. “I have several classes with her this year, and we’ve had to work on Potions inventory a couple of times.”

Ron followed them down the stairs to the boys’ bathroom door and asked them to wait for him below.
Hermione wasn’t in the Common Room when he came down from showering, but Harry and Ginny were sitting together on the couch.

“She went back upstairs for her books,” his sister said.

“She’s taking books to meet Vivi?”

Ginny shrugged. “It’s Hermione.”

After about ten minutes, Ginny went upstairs to see what was keeping her. She returned alone, her mouth pressed into a line.

“She says to go on.”

“Is something wrong?” Ron asked.

“She won’t say what. She’s writing in her journal.”

“Journal?”

“Yeah.” Ginny took her jacket from her hook in the hall. “She started doing that after she got rescued, remember?”

Ron shook his head. “I don’t. Harry, do you?”

“I was a little busy at the time.”

“Guess so. Months then?”

“Maybe longer,” Ginny said. “I remember her writing when we were at Grimmauld Place, too. Since she got stuck doing some of the brewing when Snape couldn’t help, I figured she was taking notes for that. Maybe not.”

They’d just got coffee when Hermione finally joined them. She dropped her satchel on the bench beside her and made herself a bowl of yogurt and fruit.

“Work it out then?” Ron asked.

“Work what out?”

“You were writing.”

Hermione shot a glance at Ginny. “Sort of. Has anyone seen Vivi?”

“Right there,” said Ginny. She pointed her fork at the door. Vivi made a beeline to their table. She and Hermione spoke at the same time.

Hermione smirked and waved her hand. “Go on.”

“I can’t play today.”

“And I don’t feel like playing,” Hermione replied. “That works out.”

“Candace scheduled practice at nine.” Vivi sat beside Hermione, opened her mouth to continue, then glanced around. Must have realized the Gryffindor Quidditch team was ringed round her. “So I can’t today.”
Candace stopped behind Vivi and tugged at the younger girl’s plaits. “Not talking strategy, I hope?”

“You know we have the pitch at ten,” Ginny said to the Slytherin captain.

“We’re not practicing there,” Candace said frostily before turning to her Housemate. “Vivi, you can go back to your Muggle games next week. Right now, the team needs to chat.”

The two girls left and made their way to the Slytherin table.

“Guess you can come and watch, huh?” said Ron.

Hermione gave a quick nod. “And before then I can work on my Ancient Runes research.” Her gaze shifted from him to something behind him and closer to the teachers’ table. Ron craned his neck to see what had her attention.

Snape and Dumbledore walked slowly down the central aisle, heads close together. The Headmaster scowled at something Snape held cupped in his hand before he jammed his fist into his robe pocket. They exited the Hall at a brisk pace.

Sun, 18 Oct 98, Potions Master's Office

Bong.

“Hear that? Your punishment begins at the final bell.” He couldn’t see past his matted hair. She cackled, cracked the single tail again. His balls crowded against his groin, and Snape heaved on the rope, but the granite door didn’t move.

The massive tower clock chimed.

“No escape for you, little man.” His calves gave out, and he collapsed. Hemp fibers clawed his skin, but he kept leaning into the harness. Bent as he was, he could only see the glossy toes of her boots as she crossed just out of reach. “Again. Pull.”

Bong.

Not a clock. He struggled to free himself from the damp tangled sheets and the afterimages of the dream. Door alarm. Snarling, he snatched up his wand and Vanished the bedclothes and curtains. He staggered to the wardrobe, jerked on clothes, cast a spell to fasten closures.

Bong.

Was that the fourth chime? How many had he missed? Concern spurred him down the tunnel; he threw open his office door, and a Disillusioned body tumbled into his chest.

“It’s me,” Marsland said, pulling away from him. He shut the door while she canceled her spell. Floral nightgown, lavender robe, hair loose on her shoulders—a month in, any student who woke him at whatever forsaken hour this was had better have a good reason. Glanced at the clock. Half four.

“I heard something on my way back to the dungeons. I know I shouldn’t have been out so early, but I was hungry.”

“What did you hear?”
“I couldn’t tell who it was. They’d disguised their voices.” She shivered. “Something about hunting Gryffindors, but I didn’t hear any specific names.”

“When? Where?”

“Round the back way from the kitchens, next floor up. I came straight here.”

“Stay.”

He closed the door behind him and hurried deeper into the dungeons, treading as lightly as he could. Heard nothing as he went, saw nothing—wait—

Flicker of light on the arched roof of the dungeon. He was a hundred feet past the dorm entrance, fifty feet away from the steep stair leading up to the second basement and down to the sub-dungeons. Forced his burning lungs to work as silently as possible and crept closer. Someone stepped from the lower level, familiar shape with a lantern. Filch.

The damned cat followed, headed straight for him.

Snape sagged against the stone wall and willed his blood to uptake oxygen faster while a cramp knotted the arch of his left foot. Cat and man drew near.

“Professor, I heard students conspiring.”

“I was warned. Any idea who?”

“Mrs. Norris followed them into the lower levels, but I couldn’t keep up.” Filch raised his lantern to peer at Snape’s face. “Two or three of them, in full robes and hoods.”

“Mine?”

“Couldn’t say. Assume so. Who else would go so deep?”

No reason to chase after them. Both sub-dungeons were warrens of dead ends. They stared at each other. Long acquaintance and years of patrolling the castle together simplified much of their conversation. Not even the frustration of knowing the quarry had escaped needed to be shared.

The cat weaved between her master’s feet, chirruped around a mouthful of something. Filch bent, petted the cat’s head, rose with a small object.

Snape recognized it immediately, plucked the thing from Filch’s palm, and started back to his office while the older man chased behind. He paused to send the caretaker through the hidden door into his antechamber then entered his office.

Marsland bolted upright in the armchair, a half-eaten apple in one hand. “Anything?”

He grunted a negative. “Filch heard them as well and followed them down below. How long were you summoning me?”

“A couple of minutes. Just a little longer than usual, sir.”

“Keep this to yourself until I tell you otherwise. Can you construct some reason to occupy your team this morning until our weekly meeting?”

“Madam Hooch suggested some drills we could do in the gym.” She covered her mouth and yawned.
“Go back to bed, Marsland. Whoever it was has gone.”

He watched her until she’d turned the corner, secured his office, and went back into his rooms. Filch had busied himself with tea things and had a kettle near the boil on the stove already.

“Students,” Snape said and collapsed onto the opposite end of the sofa from the cat. The other man growled in agreement, filled the pot, finished setting out some digestives. He’d learned the trick of flavoring tea with sweets from Filch, as well as a handful of other Squib-tricks. Once he’d grown attuned enough to magic to sense traces of its use, Snape had purposely relearned non-magic methods to cover his tracks. It’d been one of the few times he’d benefited from having had a Muggle father.

Filch brought him a cup. “Who told you?”

“Miss Marsland.”

“Lost some in the war?”

“Cousins, Muggles. Happened over summer hols after the tower.” Snape sipped at the tea. “Lived down the lane from her, heard the screaming. Hears.” He’d supplied her sleeping and calming draughts for months before she learned to brew them herself. Strictly speaking, he shouldn’t have taught her—his preferred medicinals used controlled ingredients—but it was a minor reprimand if he got caught. And she was of age now.

“Pity. Good player. What’d she hear?”

Snape told him. They sat in silence, which Filch broke when he set down his cup.

“Headmaster needs to know.”

“I’ll do it. My students, my House, my dungeons.”

“Your problem.”

They both snickered darkly.

“I’ll tell him at breakfast. Minerva won’t be happy.”

“Never is. Be glad to see the back of that lot.”

No need to explain. The Weasley twins, Potter, Potter’s father—had to be a hereditary thing, the affinity for trouble. Snape eyeballed the older man covertly. He’d probably be retired by the time the next generation of ginger irritants descended.

Filch heaved himself to his feet. Snape led him out the official front way through his office, then returned to bathe and figure out how to present this twist to Dumbledore.

When he picked up his brush, he remembered he had another wrinkle to sort.

*Granger.*

“What the devil?” The Headmaster bent close to examine the tie badge. “Haven’t seen one of those since the seventies.”

Snape shoved it back in his pocket. “Of course not. He’s been sporting it since term started.”
Dumbledore straightened. “That’s a serious accusation, Severus.”

“Offer me a better explanation.” He glanced meaningfully at the tables full of students on either side of them, and they strode from the Hall out into the vacant courtyard.

“Malfoy should know better,” Snape said, placing the trinket into the Headmaster’s open palm for closer inspection. “He’s got to know he’d be suspected.”

“Blinded by ambition, perhaps.”

“Like most of my House, I presume?”

The old man made a dismissive noise, and Snape held his tongue. Best to let him come to his own conclusions.

“She said ‘hunting Gryffindors’? Was she certain?”

“She was.” He paused. “They didn’t take Longbottom’s teaching Potions in my place well—”

“It did the boy good, Severus. Let’s not address that again.”

Fine. “Hermione Granger was in the Slytherin Dorms last weekend.”

Dumbledore’s fingers jerked tight on the badge. “Why?”

“She’s become friendly with Vivi Pembroken over squash, as I understand it.” Snape wove his hands together. Patience, disinterest, neutrality.

“Have you read Lucius’ letters to the Prophet?”

“I have.” He hummed. “The girl would be a good target. Muggle-born, friend of Potter and blood traitors—”

“Severus!”

“Not my opinion, Headmaster, surely!”

“Nevertheless.” Dumbledore returned the badge. “Until we know exactly who’s involved, what they intend, I think discretion is the best course.”

“Minerva—”

“I’ll discuss it with her.” He turned to look across the lake and the valley. “I want to avoid vigilantism amongst the returning students.”

“You’re suggesting that the students not be told?” Shades of the basilisk!

“That’s right. Until we have a known suspect. I don’t want innocents unfairly targeted. Your House has suffered enough. To that point, send your Gryffindors to Filch or one of the other teachers for detention.”

Blast. He’d have to tell her himself. “Understood.”

“Severus, try to contain the information. We don’t want to tip any hands. I’ll tell Minerva the same.”

“Miss Marsland is aware,” he replied. Good snake, well-trained.
“Credit to her House, Severus. And a strong captain. Rolanda mentioned some drama in the team?”

“Drama? No, a minor clarification.”

The Headmaster left him outside the Hall, turned to move further into the castle. Snape watched him go before heading toward the High Table. To his right, the Slytherin team had taken over the last quarter of the House table with Marsland in the middle. On his left, most of the older students of the Gryffindor team clustered together. Granger sat bookended by the Weasleys. He took his place at the table’s end and munched a corner of toast.

She needed to stay out of the dungeons. That simplified things. Just tell her. After he’d just been instructed to keep it to himself. No, “keep it contained” were the exact words. He’d put the onus on her. A threat against her specifically. She’d see the reason to stay away and not prattle to her little friends.

*Maybe not so little,* he amended himself as Neville unfolded from the bench to tower over the others.

Was Malfoy leering at the bunch of Gryffindors leaving their table? And Parkinson? Snape reached for the pitcher of water as pretense to peer at them. Theodore Nott sat on Malfoy’s left, his hand over his mouth, while Malfoy smirked.

The Headmaster could wait for more proof, but Snape had enough to work with.

**Tues, 20 Oct 98, Dungeon Girls' Toilets**

Hermione slammed the cubicle door shut, flung her robes and skirt out of the way, and got seated just in time to let loose. Ancient Runes had run over—Professor Babbling had gone onto one of her obscure tangents—and Hermione had had to pelt down seven flights into the dungeon for Potions. Eight flights. That last stair surely must count for two.

She checked her watch before getting reassembled. Cutting it close.

As she washed her hands, the main door swung open. Pansy sashayed in and propped herself on the basin counter.

“Granger.”

“Hello,” Hermione replied evenly. She reached for the hand towel, and Pansy whipped it out of reach.

“Bet you think you’re clever.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. Cozying up to our reserve Seeker and our Captain.”

“Pansy, we never talk Quidditch—”

“Oh, I’m sure. Draco said you’d deny all attempts to spy and get an edge.”

Hermione wiped her hands on her robes. Had to be a way out of whatever this was. “Draco’s wrong. I couldn’t care less—”
“That’s why you only date Quidditch players, right? Only hang out with Quidditch players? Because you don’t care about Quidditch.” Pansy slipped off the counter and folded her arms, blocking the door. “Very likely.”

“Pansy, we’re going to be late—” She stepped to the side, but the other girl mirrored her. The bell rang for class.

“That’s your concern, not mine. Professor Snape doesn’t take points off his own House, and he won’t put me in detention.”

“I don’t think we should test that.”

Pansy whipped out her wand. “What should we test, then?”

Hermione crouched into a dueling pose, her wand in her hand. “Pansy, you’ve made a mistake—”

“No. Haven’t.” She sent two jinxes towards Hermione, who parried both. “Stay away from our House, Granger.”

The door opened again, and Candace stood gaping. “What’s going on here?”

“Just making a few things clear to Granger,” Pansy said. She slipped her wand into her sleeve.

“You can stand down, Pansy,” Candace replied. She gave way to let the older girl leave and turned back to Hermione. “She’s not been right since the war. Stay for a bit. We can walk in together.”

“We’re both going to be late,” Hermione said as Candace went into a cubicle.

“All three of us are,” Candace said when she came out and washed her hands. “How’d you get down here so fast from Ancient Runes?”

“Ran.”

“I had to knock Third Years over the bannisters.” She smirked Snapishly.

“Pansy said Professor Snape won’t punish you.”

Candace raised a brow. “Really? Well, that was before the war ended, wasn’t it?”

Snape stopped mid-sentence when they entered and rested his fists on his hips. “Nice of you to appear, Miss Marsland, Miss Granger. You both can join Miss Parkinson in detention this evening. Seven sharp, this classroom.” As they took their places, he spoke again. “And ten points from each of you.”

“Even Slytherin, sir?” asked Draco, his voice lifting in surprise.

“Any student in this school, Malfoy.”

Both the Slytherin girls were waiting outside the Potions classroom when Hermione arrived. Pansy slouched against the wall. Candace sat on a bench with her Runes book open on her lap.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, and Snape stalked toward them from the gloom of the dungeon. “In.”
The Potions classroom door swung open. They followed him in, and torches glowed to life on the walls. The classroom storeroom door was already propped open.

“I’m behind on inventory. Miss Marsland and Miss Parkinson, you’ll sort out the class stores. Miss Marsland, you’re in charge, since you know my system. Miss Granger, you’re in the workroom with me. Leave your gloves; you won’t need them.”

Pansy snickered as Hermione followed Snape into the back workroom. Candace said something brusquely in response.

He’d moved to the farthest end of the room, and she trailed after him. “Sir, I’m really sorry I was late.”

“Never mind.” He waved his wand lightly. “You mustn’t breathe a word of what I’m about to tell you.”

Hermione set her bag on the table beside her. “I promise.”

His eyes flickered to the door. “Miss Marsland heard a credible threat against you Sunday morning. You’re not safe in the dungeons or any other places my House considers its domain.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. She said the speaker used a voice-alteration spell. I’m investigating.”

“But….”

“No. It’s over, Hermione.”

“Severus, we can—”

“No.” He pulled a stool from beneath the table and sat on it, drew a basket of bottles toward him. “Enough. Take a quill and keep count.”

She slumped against the table. Just when she’d started to get the hang of what they wanted, the crazy longing for more— “No.”

“Miss Granger?”

“Hermione, Severus, and I’ve mastered Disillusionment and self-vanishing—”

“—Granger, we can’t—”

“You’ve already broken the rules. We both have. I’ll book office hours—”

He clamped his hand on her shoulder, his black eyes intense. “You listen to me—”

She swatted him from her and stepped away, her arm cocked. He froze, his hand extended.

“I don’t like being grabbed.”

“My error.” He retracted his hand slowly.

“I want this, Severus, whatever it is. As do you. It’s my choice to make, isn’t it?” She fished a stool from beneath the table and sat just out of his reach. “If whoever made the threat doesn’t know they were overheard, and I change my patterns, won’t that raise suspicion? You won’t identify them
“How like a Gryffindor to risk your life—”

“Like you risked yours for us.”

Snape stared at her.

“You keep giving me detention in class as a cover, and I’ll Disillusion myself when I come downstairs.”

He folded his arms. “Indeed. And should you be discovered?”

“Did you know Pansy tried to jinx me in the toilets today?”

The muscles of his face tightened. “She attacked you?”

“Tried to.” She started. “Is she one of them?” If she was, then Malfoy was. He might have put her up to it. “I’ve half a mind to—”

“Stay right there. I just told you; I can’t answer that question.”

“Did you tell the Headmaster?”

“I did, and he wanted to try to lure these whisperers out.”

“Professor McGonagall?”

“I left that in his hands.” He tilted his head. “You don’t trust him.”

“I didn’t, didn’t say that,” she stammered.

“It’s all over your face. But you trust me,” he added slowly.

“You’re a known quantity. I know when you’ll snipe, you never back down, and I’ve never known you to run.”

“You’re flattering both of us.” He removed the bottles from the basket and placed them in rows.

“Then we’re on for Friday?”

“And what fiction would you prefer as a basis for detention?”

She laughed, and his eyes glittered. “I’ll give you a reason.”

“And what do you offer in return for my indulgence?” he asked as he counted bottles and made ticks against the inventory list.

Her stomach sank. She was already trying to fulfill his fantasy. Nothing to offer. She slipped off the stool and stood close to him so their robes brushed. “What do you want?”

He paused, then turned his head to look over his shoulder at her. His hair curtained most of his face, and his eyes gleamed. No help from him, then. What could she offer to entice him? A lure, something valuable.

“I’ll reward you,” she whispered and pressed her hip slightly against his as she bent over the table beside him. A wash of power rose up, and she added, “If you’re good.”
He exhaled slowly and returned the pressure of her hip as he held her gaze. The simple contact made her knees weak, a physical reminder of what she’d just suggested. He wet his lips.

“Good?” he echoed, so softly she had to move closer to hear. “By whose standards?”

“Mine,” she whispered back. Had she lost her mind, flirting with Snape during detention with two people in the other room, one of whom had tried to assault her? Any moment one of them could walk in, find her and their Head of House lying pressed together on the worktable. Her heart pounded so loudly it nearly drowned his sneered challenge.

“Empty Gryffindor boasts. Do you even know what you’re suggesting?”

Hermione felt immobilized. Her mind spun; the moment was escaping, her one chance to coax him. She ran her palm over his back, knotted her fingers into his hair, pulled his head to hers, and kissed him. He curled towards her as he yielded to her. She flicked open a button on his jacket and pushed her hand into warmth underneath. It was all she meant to do, really, but her fingertips grazed over a peaked nipple, and she ground it between her thumb and forefinger knuckle. He growled, and his tongue writhed against hers. She withdrew all at once and left him slack-jawed.

“Convinced?”

He wiped his mouth with the backs of his fingers, his eyes still locked on hers, then worked the button into place. “Nearly.”

“What do you need me to do? Make you grovel? Call you names, like Bellatrix did?”

“What?” He jerked upright and his face hardened.

Backpaddle. “That’s why you’re turned on by this, isn’t it? It’s what Volde—”

He thrust his face close to hers with his teeth bared. “What put that idea into your head?”

“Why—”

“‘Why’ is unimportant,” he said with a snarl. “If my interests had been known, I would have been tortured and killed as surely as if I’d announced my true allegiance to the Dark Lord’s face.”

“For this? But it’s just, you—” She cut herself off. “I thought maybe you wanted—”

“Someone to humiliate me? That it?” He folded his arms. “You just need to slap someone around for a thrill? Is that why you raised your hand to me?”

“No!”

“You feel some overwhelming urge to attack me personally for imagined slights over the years?”

She spluttered. “You’ve been hateful to me over the years, Severus, but that has nothing to do with it.”

“Then why?” He took a step closer so she was forced to look up at him.

“Same reason as you. ‘Why’ doesn’t matter.”

“Get out.” He whirled, dropped onto the stool, and picked up his quill.

Hermione stood still and watched him.
Once he’d finished with the first basket, he Summoned another and started on it. “You’re still here, Miss Granger,” he said without looking up.

She selected a quill and dragged a basket towards her. “I’m sorry.”

They continued in silence for a while, then he left the room. His low voice rumbled unintelligibly from the storeroom. Hermione kept working as she tried to listen. No, nothing understandable.

Snape swept back into the workroom. “Take the chair by the desk.”

She scurried to sit in the chair while he paced the length of the workroom. He made a few passes before he pulled the chair from before the desk and sat facing her, their knees nearly touching.

“You dislike being handled roughly.”

“Most do.”

“Most don’t attack, though.” He folded his hands in his lap. “What else don’t you like?”

“I don’t know.” She tucked her feet under the chair. “Noisy mobs.”

“I dislike it when people I trust make idiotic accusations of me. You’re not to speculate on my time with the Dark Lord, nor on the origins of our shared interests.”

“I apologized. I made a mistake.”

He harrumphed and leaned against the chair back.

“You trust me?” she asked in a small voice.

His gaze moved over her face. “That should be obvious. I’ll permit you to come on some conditions. You’re not to instigate detention. I will handle that. You’re to arrive fifteen minutes before any publicly stated time.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t give my vipers excuses.”

Vipers. Right. “Vivi—”

“Practicing with Vivi will remain an irritant. Only come to the dungeons for class. Otherwise, be sure you’re disguised.”

“What if I have to use the loo again, and I’m running late?”

“Don’t. I’ve already spoken to Babbling again about her deplorable timing. My advice to you, if any class runs past its bell, leave. I’ve said as much to Miss Marsland.”

“Even Potions?”

“Has my class ever run over?”

“Once or twice.”

“In seven years.” He nodded toward the worktable. “Inventory must be finished.”

“It’ll go faster if we work separately.”
When he released them close to eleven, the inventories for both the workroom and stores had been accounted for, and Hermione had updated most of the purchase list. He sent his students away and led her upwards by way of escort.

“Filch has patrol tonight,” he said when they got to the Entrance Hall. “Most of the time, I approve of his severity with after-hours malingerers.”

“I’m a special case.” She caught his smirk only by chance. She walked beside him for a few steps in silence. “What do you call Gryffindors, if you call Slytherins vipers?”

They’d paused, waiting for the stairs to shift into place. He answered without looking at her, his face upturned as he watched the stairs move above them. “Only some are vipers. Cats and cubs. Same as we called them when I was a student.”

“Truffles and birdies, too?”

He snorted. “Hufflepuffs hate that name. Don’t let Sprout hear you.”

“I never use those terms,” she said mildly. “They’re disrespectful.”

He didn’t respond. When they reached the landing for the Gryffindor tower, he moved a half-step behind her and stopped a few yards from the portrait. Hermione whispered the password and glanced at him before she entered. He’d buried his hands in his robe pockets and wore a curiously pensive expression.

Fri, 23 Oct 98, Potions Classroom

Friday’s lesson plan consisted of twenty minutes of lecture, fifteen minutes for exercise and clean-up, and ten minutes of review. For his preferred smallish class of Outstanding O.W.L. students at an advanced level, this scheduling allowed a leisurely pace.

Once he’d finished his lecture, though, he dreaded the outcome of the simple practical and mentally halved the time for review.

If that.

The air above each cauldron shimmered as students concentrated on their work. He wove amongst them. A simple practical, yes, but exacting, precision being the whole point of the lesson. Surprisingly, Longbottom’s brew achieved the right cobalt blue, and the boy dowsed the heat perfectly.

A hissed obscenity caught his attention.

The flame under Granger’s cauldron burned much too brightly. She hunched over her cutting board, and her knife flashed as she chopped frantically. As he neared, the problem became clear. The quarter tip of her knife—her usual knife, he corrected himself, now discarded on the table beside her—had sheared off, and she struggled to mince her ingredients with one of the blunter implements from the class storeroom.

The Weasley girl pushed her own knife across the table toward Granger, but the bushy head didn’t rise. She kept savagely attacking the pile of things on her board as the bottom of her cauldron began to glow, but her angry mutterings became audible.
“Damn him and his blasted trunk—”

“Language, Miss Granger.”

She stopped what she was doing and snapped upright. Her hair seemed alive, and her face was contorted in a snarl. “I suppose I’ll get detention for this too?”

Snape glared at her while he suppressed an urge to laugh. The little Gorgon’s rage completely unseated her elemental magic. Nothing she’d brew in this state would cooperate. “Since you mention it, yes. Seven sharp, unlike that blade you’re slashing about.”

After a moment, she marshaled her expression and visibly relaxed. She hung her head in contrition. “I’m sorry, Professor. My knife broke, and my repair spell didn’t hold.”

He held the broken tip in his fingertips and examined the sheared edge. “Standard repair spells don’t work on enchanted items such as silver Potions knives, Miss Granger. You should know that.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her voice remained studiously civil. “I adjusted for that, sir.”

“I suggest you obtain a new one.” He let the pieces clatter onto the table. “Also, zero for the exercise.” He Vanished the ingredients from cauldron and cutting board with a lazy flick of his wand and turned away before her stare really did turn him to stone.

She didn’t speak a word through the entire review session. Took notes. Paid attention. Never turned to look at her classmates when they spoke, very unlike her. She’d gathered her things after the failed practical and was nearly first out the door, leaving her Housemates behind.

Snape moved to the far side of the room under the pretense of searching the shelves.

“You’re an idiot, Ronald,” the red head whispered at her brother. “I can’t believe you borrowed her knife to do that!”

“She offered. Said it was stronger.” Weasley crammed his equipment carelessly into his rucksack. “How was I to know it would break?”

“It’s solid silver, Ron. She meant stronger for charms,” Potter replied. “Like mine. Not steel, like yours or the Hogwarts’ loaner knives.”

“Why’d she offer, then?” Weasley dropped his bag onto the table with a clunk. “I told her the problem—the lock was sticking.”

“But you said the ward was stubborn, not the lock. Then you just prised the lock off. Can’t use silver like that, mate. It’s too soft.”

“You’ll have to buy her a new one in Hogsmeade tomorrow.” Miss Weasley handed the abandoned knife handle to her brother. “Take this and see what Potage’s has.”

“You need an apothecary,” Potter said. “Potage’s only ever carries cauldrons and steel and iron knives.”

Weasley weighed the knife in his hand. “How much d’ya think this’ll cost?”

Potter shrugged. “Mine was five or ten Galleons—”

“How much am I supposed to get that?”
“That was eight years ago; might be more now. I can—” Potter shut up, and his eyes swiveled towards Miss Weasley, whose back had been toward them, but she’d spun round.

“No, Harry, I think he needs to come up with the money on his own. Or he can ask mum and chance another Howler.” She stormed out of the room, her head high.

The boys stared at each other glumly and followed, the last to leave.

Snape rose from the shelf he’d crouched beside. Repairing the blade would have been a simple thing. He’d had to mend many similar instruments of his own over the years. Knowing that the ginger dunderhead had carelessly sheared the blade, though, and she’d stupidly let him—well, if this didn’t make clear the boy’s true nature, nothing else would.

He tidied the room with a wave of his wand and went to his chambers to freshen up for dinner. As he shaved, he reflected. He’d seldom directly acted against the old man’s orders, but the heady rush he’d had when he’d agreed to let her come had been both delight and lure.

Besides, the plain-wrapped parcel had arrived with Saturday’s post. Its appearance had caused a minor stir on the High Table. Snape didn’t often receive personal packages. His potions orders usually went to the staff room or to the hospital wing. He’d managed to feign disinterest until he got into his office where he’d ripped the brown paper off—to find the bundle gift-wrapped. After a few minutes of glaring at the painfully white tissue paper, he carried it to his rooms and put it on the shelf in his cloak cupboard under the mitts and mufflers.

It had arrived a week early. He’d planned to present it just before Halloween in the hope she’d wear it to the Feast. The muddle Sunday morning had distracted him until he’d gone looking for his fingerless gloves for evening patrol, and he’d been tempted to chuck it in his stove.

But now… his eagerness overrode his cultivated patience. He had to see her in it. Now. Now that she was braving danger, now that she’d defied him and the Headmaster in her desire to explore her own sensuality—he felt sucked into her wake, no longer setting the pace, but compelled to match her tempo.

So when she’d suggested a reward, he’d decided he’d humor her. She wanted more? Fine. She couldn’t fathom how hungry he’d become as she writhed in the bonds of her naïveté, hungry enough to appreciate the ravenous lusts of werewolves.

Lupin’s face barged into his thoughts, a scene from midsummer a year ago soon after the man had married the inconstantly-shaped girl. Tonks. Snape wrinkled his nose as he unstoppered his cologne to dab it on his pulse points. Animagi had never bothered him. After all, that was skill and talent, but barely-controllable communicable diseases and birth defects—his guts wrenched.

The possibilities of fucking a Metamorphmagus, though… A different individual every time, different sex… Did she transform with him so they could couple in the woods like the beast he was? Salivating, rutting, tongues lolling as they panted under a full moon—

He set the bottle down sharply. This line of thought got him nowhere. In hours, she’d be in his office, against express orders from his superior. He’d planned to teach her spells, but the cloak, the threats, the way she’d abused his nipple, her ferocious expression in class—he’d changed his mind.

He wanted more, too. No reason to abstain. Not since she’d practically ordered him to indulge, and by that, had consented.

He smiled at his reflection, erased the ogling leer as soon as he saw it. No, better to restrict himself to
Fri, 23 Oct 98, Potions Master's Office

Hermione changed in a cubicle of the vacant ground floor girls' toilets and cast her strongest Disillusionment Charm on herself. She slipped down the stairs to the dungeon, absently counting the steps, made her way to his office, and tapped on the heavy wooden door, exactly fifteen minutes early. As before, the door opened with a creak and locked behind her as she cancelled her charm, and she followed him down the hidden hall to his chambers.

Once in his living space, he looked her over—hair up-twisted, earrings and cufflinks in place, skirt sharply pressed, shoes gleaming from fresh polish—and he gestured toward his desk. No, toward something on his desk: a soft package wrapped in white tissue paper and bound with a plain, black grosgrain ribbon.

“For me?” Hermione asked, registering the jerk of his head as affirmative. She picked up the bundle and fondled it for a moment before sliding off the ribbon and ripping the paper. Freed, the black fabric of the garment slithered over itself and cascaded away—she clutched her fists before it escaped completely. She located the neckband, swirled the robe into place over her arms and shoulders, and turned to look in the mirror.

It fitted her perfectly, ending mid-calf just below her skirt and spanning her shoulders exactly. The musky scent of silk enveloped her as the material swayed to her movements. She was reminded of her ball gown as the hem of the robe’s skirt swung around her legs. Her fingers trembled slightly as she secured the three stiff silver clasps at her chest, then raised her eyes to meet his in the mirror, just in time to see his face tense and his brows rise in a silent question.

“It’s lovely,” she whispered. His shoulders relaxed, and his lips broke from their tight line into gentle curves. He was worried I’d dislike it, she realized as he appraised her again.

“We’ll begin with theory,” he rasped, and cleared his throat as he pivoted and arranged the target.

“I thought we were discussing spells?”

“Change of plans. We’ll work on flogging instead. While you can simply thrash the subject monotonously, variety is preferable.” He turned back to her, the original flogger in his right hand and a new one in his left. “Implements vary in intensity. This,” he shook the new flogger slightly, “is bison hide. It’s somewhere between the first flogger and the crop.”

“What about the other one you had?”

“My braided cat? That’s closer to the crop.”

“Why not just move closer or use more force?”

“Different sensation. And this is less tiring.”

Hermione extended her hand, expecting to take one of the items, but he moved nearer to the target and began rhythmically brushing the tips of the tails across the skin of the dummy.

“The first strokes whet the appetite and focus the senses. As the strokes continue, you can increase the pressure, slowly.”
“Like boiling a frog.”

He huffed in amusement, but his tempo remained even.

“How do I know when to change?”

Severus dropped his hand to his side as he regarded her. “It’s a dance, Hermione. You learn to read your partner, just as you learn to read when to add ingredients to a potion.”

Hermione studied the flush on the target and tried to capture her worries in words.

“You read my responses remarkably well.” She met his gaze, again just as his expression became neutral. He nodded toward the dummy. “Let me demonstrate how to transition to a different implement.”

He began the easy \( x \) pattern across the target. She edged closer, noticing the blush darkening as he added force to the throws. “Watch,” he said, and he wrapped his fingers around both handles, so both struck at the same time. Flicking his wrist at the nadir of a stroke, he shifted the original flogger into his left hand and glanced at her to confirm she’d seen. His next transition involved sideways strokes where he alternated left and right hands, swapping the floggers from hand to hand between throws.

He stopped, the tails slapped to a halt against his trousers, and he offered the handles to her. Surprisingly, she was able to grasp both handles in one hand; she snickered and grinned at him.

“Bewitched, aren’t they?”

Severus waved her toward the dummy with a roll of his eyes. She took her place, began throwing, and immediately found that her rhythm slipped each time she added and subtracted a flogger, and her left hand throws lacked accuracy and tempo. Hermione grunted in frustration as she continued. After a few minutes, it seemed her rhythm had miraculously improved, the tails falling with a steady beat regardless what stage of the transition she was in, and she glanced back to smirk at Severus.

She heard the music then, a Brandenburg concerto movement, and turned around to stare at the small Victrola on the table behind her.

“You were doing better,” he said, reaching for the needle arm. “Does this disturb you?”

“No, leave it.” She cocked her head, amused. “Is this how you learned?”

“I use music to pace some of my brewing,” he admitted. “It seemed an obvious aid for you.” He paused and stroked the edge of the player’s cabinet. “I’ve been flogged to music.”

“To classical?”

“Some.” Severus raised a brow. “I couldn’t identify it at the time, so don’t ask.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she replied airily and twirled the floggers at her sides playfully. The tails whipped around and smacked against her calves. Hermione hissed, glared down at her left leg where the ends of the new flogger had hit her, and shot a look at him.

He inclined his torso toward her. “Less effort for you, more sensation for me. Practice with just the bison.”

She did, noting differences between how the whips handled, and he offered suggestions as he circled
her. “Rotate your wrist a quarter turn during the throw. Don’t connect, just let the tails fan the air. Strike horizontally with the wrist rotation.”

Hermione stopped suddenly when he was parallel to her. “If I keep going, I won’t be able to play.”

Severus looked askance at her. “Do you want to play?”

She turned to face him directly, her palms hot and slick on the handles, and her belly filling with tremors. “Isn’t that why we’re here?”

He hummed noncommittally, propped his hip on the desk, and tapped a space beside him. She mirrored his posture and waited as he silenced the record player and turned towards her, his lips pressed together. He jerked his chin towards the dummy.

“And do you believe that is the only element of what we do?”

Hermione let her gaze follow his gesture and drift back up his body to his eyes. “No. There’s something between us, that you,” she paused to swallow, “you obey.”

His lip twitched upward. “I think of it as serving.” He waited as she pondered that before continuing, “Up to now. We’ve never really discussed the other elements that I need.”

She raised her brows, inviting him to explain, and he narrowed his eyes.

“Is this a dialog, Hermione. I expect you to engage as an equal partner, at least in this space. That being said,” he added with a sigh, “I’ll lead the negotiation.”

“Are we negotiating now?”

He tipped conspiratorially toward her, and his voice became a low rumble. “As before, I’ll lay out my needs and desires, you’ll lay out yours, and we’ll agree to a general framework.” He raised his fingers toward her. “In general, I need you dressed like this, or similar. You now have two implements you’re welcome to use on me. Do not bind me, not even magically. When you’re ready to begin, I need you to command me to kneel, so I may prepare myself to serve. At the conclusion, I need to kiss the handles of the implements.”

Hermione digested this information as she stroked the tip of her tongue rapidly across the inner surface of her lower teeth. “I used Incarcerus on you before.”

“You did, unnegotiated. I have a limit against that. Now we’ve discussed it and can move on.”

“I didn’t think that was necessary—”

He shook his head with a slight smile. “No need to explain. Behind us. What do you want?”

“...I...want...” she said hesitantly, “I mean, I’d like you...”

He quirked a brow at her.

“I’d like you naked,” she said in a rush as a wave of heat raced upward from her belly.

“No.” He hesitated. “I’m willing to disrobe to my pants.”

“T-that’s fine.”

“Do you want me to strip or would you prefer to undress me?”
The heat was replaced by a chill that threatened to make her teeth chatter. “For now,” she stammered at the floor, “strip for me.”

“Command me as you wish. What else?”

Hermione drew in a slow breath through pursed lips. “I want to touch you.” Did he shiver? “And I want to, I want to come. You too.” From the corner of her eye, she saw him shift slightly; when she lifted her head to regard him, she realized his expression had softened.

“How do you expect this to occur?”

She looked away.

“If you can’t state it directly, Hermione, you’re not ready.”

Challenge. After weeks of dreaming it, whispering the words to herself in private, imagining—a Langlock spell couldn’t have silenced her better.

“Answers that,” he said and started to turn away.

“Lick me,” she blurted. His eyes swiveled towards hers. “I want you to...” She couldn’t continue under his scrutiny, and she lowered her eyes. “Service me.”

“Agreed,” he replied when finally she met his gaze. “Safe words for both of us, and have some water.”

She took the beaker he magicked into existence and gulped at the cold water as he sipped from an identical vessel.

“The kneeling bench.” He transformed the dummy into the low bench with its t-shaped upright, knelt clasping the back, and bowed his head forward. Voice muffled by the padding, he asked, “Does that still seem in line with your throws?”

She mimed striking him. “It does.”

“Good.” He flipped around and sat on the bench. “What else? Forbidden. No bondage. No permanent damage. No lingering marks where they would be visible or hinder my teaching.” He glowered sternly at her. “Hands, face, neck.”

“I won’t do that again,” she replied somberly.

“I’ll hold you to that. Healing salve is on the desk. I’d appreciate your assistance applying it, if necessary.” Severus draped his arms around his knees. “Anything else?”

Hermione shook her head. “Seems to cover it all. Should we start?”

He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. “You’re aroused,” he murmured, as his gaze drifted lazily up her body to her face. “As am I.”

Time seemed to have stopped, and she felt welded in place by the heat of his stare. When the edges of her vision dimmed, she gasped, unaware until then that she’d been holding her breath, and she broke their gaze. He was beside her then, a hand on her shoulder.

“Maybe too much,” he said, offering her a refilled beaker. “We can wait.”

She swallowed a mouthful of water, coughed. “No, I want to try. It’s just, I think I really want this.
What this is.” She searched his face. “Do you?”

He dipped his head, pressed his lips to her temple, and said without a trace of irony or urgency in his voice, “Very much. Begin when you’re ready.”

Hermione wrapped both hands around the glass and sipped again, keenly aware of every muscle moving in her mouth and neck as she drank. She concentrated on the easy lift and drop of a button on his shirt, let the music soothe her. When she felt the trembling leave her belly, she set the glass down, lifted her head, and said as decisively as she could, “Severus, strip and kneel.”

He leaned against the desk at her side, unbuttoned his left trouser leg, dropped the left boot beside her foot, and repeated the process for the right.

“Keeping the socks on?” They were plain black socks, but the right one seemed to have been darned carefully at the small toe with darker-colored wool.

“The floor’s drafty. Unless you’d prefer—”

“No. I’d rather you were comfortable.”

He finished, unbuckled his belt, and peeled his trousers off. These he folded and placed on the desk, followed by his shirt and tie, as he stood away from her and methodically disrobed down to his charcoal boxers. He paused a moment, his chest swelling with shallow breaths, until he inhaled deeply and knelt at her feet, hands palms up on his thighs and his head bowed.

Hermione felt a need to wait…and a rising panic. He’s nearly naked, he’s here, he’s at my feet, he agreed I can touch him—anywhere? I should have asked. What am I doing with Severus Snape naked at my feet. Idiot, she hissed in her head, of course anywhere, he’s mine.

Mine.

With that word, her pulse settled, and she combed her fingers through his hair. He knelt up and followed her motion, leaning a little into her hand, and she stroked down across his smooth-shaved cheek to trace the curves of his parted lips. He kissed her fingers. She pressed her thumb against the center of his lower lip, and his jaw dropped. Hermione stroked the wet inner side of his lips with her index finger before sliding her finger across his teeth to touch his tongue. His breath chilled her dampened skin. As she slowly drew her finger from him, he closed his lips about it and sucked gently.

She shifted closer to him, pressed his head against her belly as her hand roamed as far down his neck and torso as she could reach. His body swayed, and he caught his balance with one hand cupping her calf, thumb stroking over the slickness of her stockings. He must smell the growing wet between her legs; rocking to adjust her weight only served to make her nether lips slip against each other. She caressed his face again.

He chuckled. “Your Severus,” he said softly, his mouth moving against her palm.

Hermione stared down at him, pausing long enough that he tilted his head back to look at her. “Did I say something?” she asked.

The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled, and the smile spread down to his lips. “You said ‘mine,’ and I agreed with you.”

“Oh,” she breathed, and smoothed his forehead with the pad of her thumb before she bent at her waist and nuzzled into his hair. The room seemed to be lightening, signaling some changing phase.
She nudged him from her with the backs of her fingers. “Severus, present yourself.”

She wasn’t sure how he got to the bench, whether he stood or crawled; later, when she tried to recall how she knew when to change floggers, she failed. What she remembered was how his moans and the glow of his skin made her nipples tingle. When fluid trickled down the inside of her thigh, she realized she couldn’t wait. Dropped the whips where she stood, brushed past him, sprawled across his couch, and wrenched her skirt up to her waist. Growled at him as she rubbed her swollen lips through sodden fabric.

He crawled across the floor and leaned on the sofa. After a moment, he pulled the hem of her skirt down and said a single word.

The word’s meaning bloomed in her mind when he repeated himself.

“Yellow, Hermione.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked breathlessly. She was ready; couldn’t he see that? So was he, from the tent in his pants. But his expression had become solemn.

“There’s no need to impress either of us.” His brows remained drawn.

Concern. For her. For himself. The importance of what she’d asked him to do washed over her.

Somehow, he’d been able to check his urges when hers had simply overwhelmed her and rose up fresh the longer she met his gaze. It wasn’t just for him. It was for staying firm with Ron to give herself space, for believing what she’d experienced and seen over idle chatter, for—

“I’m rewarding both of us, Severus.”

How could his eyes have become any blacker? He Summoned her wand from across the room and gave it to her.

“Blindfold me.”

Once the ribbon wrapped round his head, he pressed his lips against her inner ankle, and his breath tickled her through the stockings. She wedged her wand under the cushions and drew her skirt higher as he deftly felt his way up her leg. Severus gasped when his mouth touched the bare skin above the edge of her hold-ups. He paused at the apex of her legs, then nosed inward and tugged the gusset of her panties aside with his fingers. She tipped her hips up just as his lips opened over hers.

Hot, delicious, impossible. Her fingers twined in his hair; she fell back, yielding. She ground against him as reality merged imaginings, and a crest edged near.

After long minutes, nothing. She shoved at the crown of his head. “Stop, it’s not…wait…yellow, red.”

His face was wet, and his brows drawn. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t. It’s good, I mean, what you’re doing, but, I can’t.”

“Shall we stop?”

“No, that’s okay. I panicked, that’s all. I’d rather…just being close is nice.” She smoothed his hair back.

“Fine,” he said, rested his head on her belly, and wriggled both his hands under the small of her
back. Hermione wrapped her legs around his back. He grimaced at the touch on his burning skin; she moved off him, and the heel of her shoe scraped him. He yelped; she jerked her knees from him, and Severus slipped down to sit on the floor while she poured out apologies. Hermione staggered from the couch to collect the healing salve, and hunkered behind him as she twisted the lid off the jar.

“Stop groveling,” he said through clenched teeth as she smeared the cream over his enflamed back.

“Gently!”

“I hurt you,” she moaned, gingerly stroking the cream over the bleeding, puckered line her heel had drawn.

“Stop.” He pivoted towards her, caught her wrist in one hand, and pried the blindfold off one eye with the other.

“What can I do?” she asked, craning to keep his back in sight. “I didn’t mean—”

“Stop,” he repeated. He released her arm, cupped his hand around her cheek, and fixated on her mouth as his thumb glided over her lower lip. Hermione licked her lips, and he mirrored her, then leaned toward her, his eyes glazed.

“I haven’t released you,” she murmured as his breath dried her lips again.

His eyes glittered, and he planted his mouth on hers, and the ribbon slipped back into place. Hermione blindly fished her wand from the sofa and canceled the spell, but he kept his lids shut.

She surrendered as he pressed her down while propped on an elbow to keep from crushing her. She stroked down his body to the waistband of his grey boxers, slipped her hand inside, and glided the skin over the head of his penis as he groaned into her mouth. He broke from her, nipped a line down her jaw to her ear, and purred, “Know what to do with that, little girl?”

Hermione responded by wrapping her fingers firmly around his shaft and tugged. Severus grunted, clamped his hand onto her hip, and held her still as he rutted against her, his eyes half-closed. She pulled her hand free from his pants and pushed his lower lip down from his teeth with two fingers. His thrusting slowed as he focused on her face, and he licked the tips of her fingers. She pushed her fingers slowly into his mouth, withdrew them, and eased them in again. He smiled around her knuckles, matched his thrusts against her to the movement of her hand. After a while of this, she whispered, “Don’t come.”

He closed his eyes as she pulled her hand from his mouth.

“Not like that, anyway. Show me how to make you come.” She rubbed her fingers, wet with his spit, over the bulbous end of him.

“What?”

She pushed him onto his back, straddled his thighs, yanked his boxers completely down, wrapped her hand around his cock, and pumped. “I want to make you come. Show me what to do.”

He grimaced. “You need—” He reached toward the end table, and she took the hint, leaning over him to drag open the drawer, and grabbed the first thing she found, a mundane white and blue plastic tube with a flip top.

She’d seen a similar tube in her mother’s bed-side cabinet. Never mind. She squeezed a glob into her hand. He took the tube from her and tossed it aside.
“Both hands, like that.” He groaned, guiding her with his fingers light around her wrist. “You twist —” He gasped as she swiveled her hands around the head, slid up and down, fingers interlaced. His thighs shifted under her as he bunched the fabric of his pants down, and he pinched and pulled at the skin of his sac. She kept her right hand moving on his dick while she mimicked what he did to his scrotum before he put his hand on hers and closed her fingers around the base of his balls and tugged.

“Pull a little, like that.” He panted. “Here, you can slap the shaft; do this here.”

She followed along, trying each tug, slap, stroke, until he left it to her. He lay twisting his nipples and bucking under her.

“May I come, Mistress?”

“How close?”

“Very. Almost.”

“No.”

His face contorted as he whined and pounded his fist against the floor. The next word he spoke was a drawn out plea as his abdomen contracted.

“What’s best when you come?”

He tossed his head, and she wasn’t certain he understood until he rasped out, “Keep going.”

“Come.”

Hermione pumped as he spurted across his belly, gentled her stroking into a caress as he softened in her fist. She leaned over him as he lay limp and wasted—not completely gone because he blindly pushed at her skirt.

“Soil, you’ll soil it.”

“I’ll clean it,” she replied, propping herself on both hands to look down at him. “I have my robe, too.” Not to mention she’d already scraped the lube off her hands onto her skirt.

Severus kept his eyes closed. “Thank you.”

“For...?” she asked teasingly.

He huffed. “Thank you for beating me and letting me come, Mistress, and allowing me to service you.”

She Summoned the flogs, pressed each handle to his mouth. He kissed them obediently. “I like you like this.”

Severus cracked open his eyes. “Strapped and spent?”

“Relaxed.” Hermione lowered herself to him, aware he watched her under his lashes, and kissed him. He responded gently, the direct opposite of the savage plundering he’d done earlier. His eyes moved under his lids, and he looked at her when she lifted from him.

“You watch when you kiss?” he asked.
“Not normally.”

“I’m a special case.”

Hermione grinned at his echo. “The most special.”

His lips widened into an unexpected smile, and he glowed, then he drummed her knees with his fingertips. “Am I released?”

She twisted her mouth in mock concentration and chuckled inwardly when his brows lowered as she dawdled. “Okay, you’re released,” she said at last and made to rise from him, but he curved his hands round her hips and trapped her.

“Was this sufficient ‘more’?”

Tension in the soft skin around his eyes, jaw muscles tight—the insight pebbled her nipples and melted something inside. She rubbed her hands over his. “It was perfect, Severus. I’d like to do it again.”

He relaxed again, minute changes.

“And you?”

The tension returned, lessened, but there nonetheless. She steeled herself and hoped it didn’t show.

“I’ve never had anyone erotically…probe my mouth by hand,” he said after a moment. “‘Til now.”

“‘Til now.”

“A novel experience.”

“That’s all you have to say?” She couldn’t keep a straight face. The absurdity of sitting fully clothed on naked Snape in his underwater living room with Bach playing in the background kicked in.

“You’ve done all the rest before?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I have,” he replied dryly. “But I’m getting a chill.”

“I noticed,” she said and traced a finger over the goosebumps on his left forearm. He bumped his hips against hers, and she toppled off him, laughing as she rolled to the floor. Hermione curled on the sofa as he wiped himself clean with his handkerchief and dressed. He started to pivot from her when he did up his trousers, grunted, and remained facing her.

“Would you like different music?” he asked.

“No. Doesn’t matter to me.”

His brows flicked. “If I recall, your parents are dentists.”

“They are. How’d you—” She covered her mouth and felt a blush warm her skin as he regarded her calmly. “That had nothing, I mean, it just happened—”

“Indeed?” He snapped his shirt sleeve straight to button it and took a couple of swaggering steps toward her. “I never considered a longing to root around in people’s mouths a heritable trait.”

She gave herself over to giggles as he sat at the other end of the couch.
"Explains a lot."

"Like what?" she gasped out.

"That first time you kissed me, you kept running your tongue over my teeth."

"Noticed that?" Hermione snuggled into the corner of the cushions and studied him. "You’re teasing me again."

He flashed a smile. "You should dress."

"Here?"

He stiffened. "I’d prefer—"

"Can’t take teasing back?" She winked at him. "Mind if I change in the loo?"

The skirt cleaned up easily and everything fitted nicely in her bag. When she reemerged, dressed in jeans and robes, the room was tidied. The green pouffe was back, the black bag and tube of lubricant nowhere to be seen. He’d made tea again, and a full cup sat waiting for her.

"You took raspberry last time, but not the time before," he said, gesturing with a finger.

"I’ll try lemon this time," she said, spooning one into her tea.

"That knife—"

She growled. "What an idiot. He told me the ward was stuck. I’ve seen him do that, cast charms he can’t cancel. I had no idea he meant the physical lock. Sometimes he just acts without thinking."

"So I heard."

Heard? "You listened in class?"

"Lifelong habit."

"Guess so." Not a polite habit, but she held her tongue. It’d been his job for longer than she’d been alive and had probably saved his life. "What’s worse is it was a birthday splurge my second year. I didn’t need it. I could have used Ginny’s just fine, but it made me happy, you know." She paused. "Do you?"

"I appreciate a well-crafted tool." He nudged his spoon around his saucer. "Turn in the parts with your essay next Tuesday, and I’ll have a go at mending it. Discreetly, Granger."

"You don’t have to—"

"Perhaps I want to." His eyes glittered.

"Payment?" she asked suggestively over the brim of her cup.

He sniffed and topped off his tea. "Not in this case. Birthday presents are different."

"I bought it for myself, though."

"Which means you selected exactly what you wanted."

It was a special knife. Her special knife. A special evening. "Yes, you’re right."
His mouth quirked. “Truly a red letter day when Miss Granger admits someone else is right.” She drew a breath to argue back, but he continued. “After our sessions, do you ever have second thoughts about what you’ve done?”

She blinked, remembered her initial guilt at hitting him with the crop, the recurring guilt over forcing him the first time. *What you’ve done.* Not what they’d done together. “Some.”

“Beyond our discussions on consent, I mean.”

That limited it. “I feel mixed feelings about bruising you. I like doing it, you like it, but afterwards...” She trailed off, studied his trimmed fingernails. “We talked about this before.”

“We did. I wanted to reinforce it. There was no need for you to fall apart over scraping me with your shoe.”

Wave of guilt. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Hermione, hush.” He rested the pads of his fingers on the back of her hand. “You’re not Bella. I expect you to suffer some remorse afterwards. Remember what you just said. We both enjoy the sensation.”

“Do you?”

He raised his brows in query. “Do I what?”

Exasperating man. “Feel remorse?”

“After being flogged and fondled by a witchling student?”

She became fascinated by the engraved crest on the handle of the spoon. When the decoration grew blurry, she rubbed at her eyes. “That was a stupid question.”

“A bit insensitive.”

“Insensitive!” Again she sucked in a breath to retort, stopped when she noticed his mouth twitching, changed her tack. “I’ve never done what we did.”

“I know.”

“No, not that.” She struggled for a delicate phrase. Even after weeks of saying the words to herself, even saying them tonight, she couldn’t make them come out again. “No one’s ever done that to me, not like that.”

Wasn’t prepared for his frown.

“Never?” He peered at her.

“I’ve been...boys have...but grudgingly. I don’t think they looked forward to it.”

“Boys are fools.”

“I suppose.” She set her cup and saucer closer to the center of the table. “It was nice not feeling like...” She hesitated and he waited. “Like it was distasteful. You seemed to...”

“Enjoy it? Yes. Did you?”
“Of course!”

“Well, then.” He sank back into his chair with a smug air of accomplishment. “Something novel for you, too.” He seemed about to add to his comment, but moved his tea things from the table’s edge instead. “I’ll escort you undercover to the Grand Stairs.”

Hermione stayed close to him, touched his arm from time to time so he knew where she was under her Disillusionment charm. Shivers trickled through her as she paced alongside him, his robes licking against hers. Before the stairs, he flicked his hand toward an alcove. She slipped into it, canceled her spell, and continued onto the stairs. By the time she reached the first landing, he’d already crossed the main floor towards a back stair heading down into the basements. As she watched, his shape melted into the darkness.
Chapter Summary

The melancholic last week of October brings the Halloween Feast.

Chapter Notes

**MANY THANKS:** To Melusin, without whom I’d still be randomly applying commas. To MizzAdamz, for services rendered that will not be named. To the cheering squad on LiveJournal, who remind me this can be finished. To Shiv, whose stories make me giggle. To Sh-n-, let the sour feelings fade betwixt us.

**POSTING SCHEDULE:** Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday, if there are holidays.

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.*

---

**Tues, 27 Oct 98, Potions Workroom**

Snape propped his elbows on the worktable and examined the shards of the broken blade with a magnifying glass. As far as he could tell, the break had been clean. No splinters. He set everything down and rubbed his lower lip.

The enchantments themselves, though…not so simple. Special knife, indeed. Must have set her back twenty Galleons at least. All the usual Potions-related spells were present, as well as a couple of Fortifying spells, NeverDull charms for both blade and tarnish, and a Strengthening charm…

How the wretch had broken the thing was beyond him.

Besides the fascinating combination of magics, the physical form was exquisite. Well-balanced, broadened spine for comfort, the finely pointed blade curved beautifully for rocking, delicate chasing of vines and leaves on the handle. He reflected. Her wand had the same floral motifs.

He sighed. The same Strengthening charm that should have made the blade impervious to most rough handling also resisted the usual Repairing spells. He could disenchant it, but he wasn’t certain he’d be able to restore it. Well, he was a Potions master, not a master-of-all-things.

He tapped the broken tip and watched it wobble back and forth. Three years ago, he would have had a list of contacts more than happy to help him. Now… He sucked at his lower lip. Dead, in hiding,
incommunicado, or avoiding him for their own reasons.

Dumbledore would know someone.

Maybe.

Pass the blade off as his own? An heirloom?

Snape picked the knife’s handle up again. Slender. A woman’s blade. “Mother’s?” he asked the room. Slughorn had taught Mother. He couldn’t think of a single person who might recall whether or not she’d had a beautiful silver Potions knife.

He cast a few Lineage charms on it. Curious. It revealed nothing about its owners, maker, age, uses—nothing. Another bewitchment, one that was impervious to Reveal spells. He pulled his stack of spell references closer and paged through them while he recalculated the value of the thing.

Twenty Galleons? Probably closer to forty.

What he would have given as a Second Year to have forty Galleons to splurge on school equipment.

After an hour pawing through every compendium he had in his chambers and office and finding no clue to the anti-Lineage spell, he pocketed the knife bits and headed up to the library. Students scattered before him, a useful behavior most days, especially beneficial this evening since he was able to see Flitwick bustling down the hall ahead of him.

“Filius, a word.” He sat on a stone bench and proffered the handle. “I’m having some trouble identifying a charm.”

Thirty minutes later they gave up, neither any wiser. The best the Charms professor had been able to offer was that a Goblin had been involved in its creation and enchanting, although it wasn’t actually Goblin-made.

“The Headmaster would love to examine that mystery,” Flitwick said as Snape hefted it.

Snape grunted in response and continued on his way.

Tuesday night. He mentally reviewed the study group schedule as he bounded up the Grand Stairs. Library would be crowded, but the sections he needed should be relatively quiet. Hogwarts had a comprehensive curriculum, but lagged behind in metallurgic artifact creation. Well, that wasn’t quite fair since it was such a specialized field.

He found the answer in the twelfth book he pulled in the Restricted Section. The anti-Lineage ward was Dark Arts at its most refined, a ward with both an embedded Obscuring hex and an Obliviate jinx. Break the Strengthening charm, activate the jinx, lose his memory. Brilliant.

Well. He sighed heavily, balanced the handle on his kneecap, and stared at it. He was sitting on the floor propped against a bookshelf, his knees bent, tomes piled around him. Undignified, surely, but he’d spent years hunkered in the same posture in the stacks. Just being in the trough between towering shelves seemed to make him fold onto himself.

“Professor?” Granger stood at the end of the aisle, her arm full of books and a loaded bag on her shoulder. “Did you fall?”

He held the knife handle out to her. “Can’t be mended, Granger.”
She took it from him and slipped it into her bag. Her gaze roved over the books around him, and her brows drew together. Her next question was obvious, so he answered before she could ask.

“It’s a very advanced Dark Artifact.”

Her eyes widened, and her hand flew to her bag. “What do I, should I—”

“Calm.” To her credit, the panic left her face. He outlined what he’d found. By the end of his litany, she’d set her burdens down on the study table between the shelves and was turning the fragments over in her hands. “Might I ask where you purchased this?”

“It was a Muggle antique shop, actually.” She stared at it as she handled it. “It felt warm when I picked it up; they said it was silver. I had someone at both Wiseacre’s and Slug’s look at it, and they said it was a Potions knife, better than anything they had. Guess I should have taken it to Borgin and Burke’s, too.” She scoffed and raised her eyes to his. “I paid thirty pounds for it.”

“A bargain. I was guessing forty Galleons at least. Probably more.”

“Is it safe to keep?”

“I don’t see why not, as long as you don’t try to disenchant or repair it.” At a flick of his wand, his piles of books replaced themselves, and he rose to his feet. “Dark Artifacts are not all dangerous.”

“Thank you, sir. Sorry to have wasted your time.”

“Miss Granger,” he said as she turned to go. She stopped. “It was an interesting diversion, not a waste of time. A unique object.”

She sniffled. “Thanks again, Professor. I ordered a new silver knife this weekend from Slug’s.” She ducked her head and left.

He dragged a stool from under the study table, sat on it, and folded his arms. He’d learned the hard way that if one wanted to protect valuables, don’t let anyone else use them. As soon as a thing was in another’s care, might as well assume it was gone.

Applied to books, cauldrons, knives, emotions.

She’d learn. Painful lessons. Better she was taught by a friend.

Snape flipped mindlessly through a random book until the librarian came round to shoo students out the door. He joined in by targeting the distant corners of the library where he interrupted a handful of lip-locked couples and amused himself by evening out the House point hourglasses in Slytherin’s favor, then went back to his rooms. No patrol for him tonight. He had hours to tend his insomnia.

After making a cup of cocoa, he stretched out on the sofa with a stack of trade periodicals that’d back-piled since term started. Nearly a ritual of its own, the late-October catch-up with the non-Hogwarts world.

The fourth one had a renewal notice pinned to the cover. He ripped it loose and lobbed it into the stove, then pawed through the remaining magazines for notices. None, just the one. Well, the rest would come in time. He tossed the stack on the floor, wondered idly if any of the clerks at the subscription desks would notice when he didn’t re-up.

Likely not.
Perhaps he should have tried to break the Strengthening charm. It would have simplified his life. Decades of memories he’d almost pay to lose, right down to his latest conundrum. The longer she came to him, biddable, hungry, the more she enticing she became. He snickered. Surely must be some simple maths law at work. Increase the desirability of one, reduce the resistance of the other. Of course, she was fulfilling his fantasy: dressing as he directed, wrapping herself in the fabrics he loved, wielding his implements. He’d armed her against his defenses.

He sipped the cooling chocolate. He’d not discussed choice or consent with anyone in ages, certainly not from a philosophical perspective. A bit hypocritical, perhaps, considering how few of his decisions the last twenty years had truly been made under free will. And when he finally took a stand, the result was the same—forced to play a role in someone else’s game, with the added joys of disgrace, death threats, and limited utility.

If he’d been the type to weep over spilled potion, now was the time. Instead, he refilled and warmed his cup.

His office door alarm sounded, and he made his way out to it. Opened it. No one.

“Professor, may I come in?”

“Disembodied Gryffindor voices after curfew?” He closed the door when he felt her brush past him. Granger cancelled her spell and stood with her hands clasped.

“I’m sorry to bother you so late, and technically Seventh Years are allowed out until eleven on non-class nights.”

“Why are you here?”

She produced the knife handle and a scrap of paper. “Sir, I know it can’t be repaired, but can it be altered?” She held the blade over the scrap where she’d drawn a new profile. “It wouldn’t be as long or as pointed, but it would still be serviceable.”

“It’d lose its balance.”

“Not if this knob came off the pommel.” She fingered the decorative dome on the end. “It’s always been in my way, so that’s not a big loss.”

Snape took the knife and paper and scrutinized the drawing. “I think so. I’d suggest an amendment.” At her nod, he drew a couple of alternate tips. “More of a spay knife to this one; this edge would be blunt. Or, a modified Oriental blade, with two sharp edges.” He unrolled a sleeve of instruments and extracted one for her. “It would make a good workman potions tool.”

“The tip would be stronger.” She smiled ruefully. “Not that I’m letting anyone else use it again.”

Good snake. Cub. Witch. He replaced his knife and put the roll away.

“You should have taken this to Professor Thomas, as the school’s Defense teacher.”

“I would have had to explain too much.” She tucked everything out of sight. “Besides, he...”

“What?”

She shifted her weight. “He asks personal questions.”

Interesting. “Like what?”
“Who’s dating whom and how long, ages, things like that. What we do outside of school. It’s not normal. For a teacher.”

“He is away from home.”

“Still...”

“He’s French?” he offered.

Her mouth quirked skeptically.

“Have you spoken to your head of House?” Hoped she took the hint for a formal complaint.

“No. It’s intrusive, that’s all. Uncomfortable.”

“As you will.” He gestured toward the office door. “If that’s all?”

“One more, please. Who would you suggest I take this to?”

Snape settled on the edge of his desk with a sigh. “Filius believes a Goblin was involved in its manufacture. It’s not Goblin-made, strictly speaking.”

“You spoke to Professor Flitwick about my knife?” Her eyes lit.

“In passing. I’m not certain where to point you. Borgin, perhaps.”

“But there’s hope.”

“Within reason and given patience.”

She grinned at him and seemed to dance back and forth before she lunged forward and squeezed his forearm. “Thank you, sir, I really like this knife.”

“Take better care of your treasures, Miss Granger.” He allowed a small smile. She beamed. Snape edged past her, reached for the door handle. By the time he’d pulled the door open, she’d Disillusioned herself. He closed the door once he heard her footstep in the hall and went back to his rooms.

He reheated his cocoa and sagged into the sofa, warming his hands on the cup. She trusted him. Well, why not? He’d not obviously betrayed her. They were both Order members, too. Knew he trusted her. Awful burden, trust.

Consent.

Facets of the same thing. A relationship. Limits and boundaries lost their edges in relationships.

Set the cup down so he wouldn’t be tempted to fling it. Terrible thing to waste good chocolate. Damn her with her warm eyes and tempting curls, the things she knew about him. He should never have offered to look at the knife without an exchange.

No way he’d sleep now, knowing he’d boxed himself into another cage.

He listened to his heart beat five times before he picked the thought up again. Cage. It was exactly the right word. Had been Dumbledore’s tame Death Eater. The Dark Lord’s tame spy in the Order. Apprenticed in Potions to fill a dictated need. Appointed protector of Lily’s son. Now all the needs were done, and he was left with just himself marking time in a world that would happily forget him.
Except one lone chit of a girl asking him for advice on a broken knife.

He planted his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands.

---

**Sat, 31 Oct 98, Hogwarts Castle**

Her original plan had been to practice only on weekdays, but she forgot to change the alarm and decided maintaining the schedule might be a good idea. She slipped down to the Room of Requirement with her laden satchel feeling braver than usual—most people slept in on the weekends—and she relaxed into an easy stride. She was within sight of the Room’s location when a familiar black shape moved from an alcove just ahead of her. Hermione stopped in her tracks and met his eyes.

Snape walked slowly towards her, hands in pockets, eying her intently. “Rather early for a stroll, Granger.”

“Curfew only dictates when students must be in their dorms at night, not when they can leave in the morning.”

“I’m aware,” he replied evenly, walking around her. She kept her eyes fixed forward. Near her left shoulder, he paused and leaned close to her, moving her hair with his inhaled breath. “Fresh clothes, but not bathed yet?”

She felt a rush of anger and embarrassment. “Not yet.”

He didn’t stir. “Difficult, isn’t it? Am I ’sir’ or ’Severus’?”

She glared at him in silence.

“Have you been practicing every morning, in addition to working with Vivi?” he asked.

“I have,” she answered evenly.

“You need to let your muscles rest,” he said, slipping his fingers under the strap of her satchel and taking it from her. She followed him as he opened the room’s door and gestured for her to enter before him. She walked into the dim room, nervous at what she might find.

It was the smallest she’d ever seen the room, a twenty by twenty foot space dominated by a massive fireplace that made the room nearly uncomfortably warm. The floor was covered with plush, reddish carpets. Immediately before her was a prepared massage table; beside the table was a low bench and clothes tree. There appeared to be a raised ring made of polished stone closer to the fireplace. As she drew near to the table, she could hear water moving and realized the ring was a low border around a child’s pool or a tub.

He set her satchel on the bench and hung his robe and coat on the clothes tree, loosened and rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, then waited, his hands clasped at his waist. Hermione put her robe beside his then blindfolded him before stripping to her panties and piling her clothes neatly beside her satchel. Once naked, the air was the perfect temperature. She laid a hand on his left upper arm; he brought his hands forward. She took his left hand and guided him to the table, then crawled onto it.

He retrieved a jar from below her, and she smelled the cream’s familiar fragrance. His hands connected with her upper back, and he began working. Until then, she really hadn’t noticed how sore she was, and she grunted and groaned as he hit tender spots.
“I appreciate the effort you’re making,” he said gently, “but you will hurt yourself if you don’t rest. My role in our little game is much less physically challenging than yours.”

He leaned close to her head and inhaled, the same long intake he’d made in the hall.

“I know, I should have bathed,” she grumbled.

“Not at all,” he replied. “You have a pleasant odor without the distraction of perfumes.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so she kept silent.

He continued down her back to her hips, gently pushing aside the waistband of her knickers, then covered her with the sheet and pulled a wheeled stool from under the table.

“Anywhere else?”

She stretched, sensing for tightness, finding none. “No, you got everything.”

“Good.”

She sat up slowly, still luxuriating. “What next?”

“Many choose to bathe at this hour.” His voice was dry, a hint of amusement. “Obviously, I can’t assist you.”

Once he’d sat on the stool, he hadn’t moved. He sat perfectly upright on the stool, his hands palms upward on his thighs. It was a curiously open pose, as though he were simply waiting for her to ask him to do something. Hermione wrapped the sheet around herself and stood before him, then lightly stroked the line of his cheek and chin. He turned his head a little towards her hand, but made no other movement.

“How would you assist?” she asked.

He wet his lips and swallowed before responding calmly, “I could wash your hair, ewer water over you, scrub your back, enfold you in a towel when you emerge.”

“Just thinking about doing these things excites you, doesn’t it?”

Again, his tongue touched his lips, and he swallowed. “Yes. Being in service to a mistress excites me.” He paused as he controlled his breath. “Being permitted to listen will suffice, my Mistress.”

His arousal and words were affecting her, but she felt her confusion growing. She had done nothing to him, other than allow him to massage her, and he was wound like a spring. Of course, he usually was wound, intense, even when he should reasonably be at rest. She wondered idly if he ever slept. On a whim, she leaned forward and kissed him. His mouth opened willingly beneath hers, and his hands stayed palms up on his legs.

“Just listen,” she whispered when she drew away from him. She tucked her knickers under her shirt and went to the pool.

On the raised border, she found shampoo and soap along with a long scrubbing cloth, a pitcher for rinsing, and a fluffy bath towel. The products all had the same scent as the massage cream. She washed slowly, glanced often at him, lit as he was by the firelight, and caught herself listening to the noises she made in the water. She finished, climbed out, and toweled herself off. There was no reason to wrap herself—he couldn’t see her—so she just approached him, towel in hand, and stood
naked before him, her hair still dripping.

Hermione walked around him then leaned over him from behind—her breasts pressed against his back, and her nipples hardened at the contact—and lifted his chin with one hand so she could kiss him again. Her wet hair fell forward around them, sending a splatter of drops onto him, and his breath hitched. His hands lifted tremulously, as though he wanted to touch her, but was forcing himself to remain still. She dampened at his response.

“You want me, don’t you?” she asked as she straightened.

“I, no...I wish only to service my Mistress,” he replied huskily. He lowered his head and shivered.

One word came to mind.

“Beg.”

He slipped from the stool, pressed his cheek against her shins, and kissed her, his hands covering her feet. “Please, my Mistress, let your Severus service his mistress.” The supplicating tone of his voice triggered something deep in her belly.

Her knees weakened, and she collapsed against the table. Severus lifted her onto the surface. He nuzzled her inner thighs and nether lips, and cupped his hands around her buttocks. She moaned as he lapped across her folds. She snaked a hand over her belly to bury it in his hair while she stroked her own neck and chest with her other hand. Through a fog, she registered the odd little mews as her own noises. He had to hear her—had to be listening—another wave of desire rose up, and she clenched her fist on the bunch of fine, black hair. His cry thrummed against her. Images of him flickered through her mind—standing severe and threatening in the classroom, intently uttering an incantation as Harry’s broom bucked, glowering down at her as she asked yet another question, clinging to the upright as she striped his back, his throaty “your Severus”—and her pelvis clenched her into a curl.

After a while, she crawled back into her head. He hadn’t moved, but lightly kissed the insides of her thighs, just as he’d done the week before. He straightened to stand and wait at the side of the table. The wetness on his face shone in the firelight, and his hair was mussed around the blindfold.

Hermione sat up before reaching out to stroke his obvious erection, and he exhaled slowly. She eased off the table, draped the towel over the stool and sat on it, then pushed his left hip back against the table’s edge. His hands cupped the edge of the table, and the knuckles whitened. She unfastened his trousers and pulled the garment downwards. His boxers tented; she lifted the waistband out and down. She blew lightly at the head; he lifted one hand spasmodically from the table before returning to grip the edge. A drop of pre-cum glistened at the slit, and she grasped his shaft.

“Y-you don’t have to—” he stammered.

“I want to,” she replied. “I want to make you lose control.”

He whimpered. “I’ll want to-to…” His throat flexed as he swallowed. “Must I submit, Mistress?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“Yes, you must.” She leaned towards him, covered his hands with hers, and took the head into her mouth. She’d learned from Viktor and Ron that giving head was the fastest way to get them to come and the most reliable method of stopping them from pawing at her, especially when she knew they were never going to have the patience to get her off. It wasn’t the same with Severus, of course, but she didn’t have any lube. This was fair.
His musk filled her senses. She concentrated on keeping her lips over her teeth as she took as much of his shaft as she could without gagging. His fingers clenched on the table in sync with her bobbing—releasing as she lifted away and tightening when she plunged around him. She wrapped a hand around the base of his shaft, cupped the other around his balls, and squeezed both the same way she’d done the week before. He growled at this—must be a good noise—and thrust his hips forward. His jaw hung loose, his head dropped sideways, his breath became shallow. He gingerly touched her face with his right hand and opened his fingers across her cheek so his thumb rested at the corner of her mouth where the skin stretched. His hand trembled. He keened before fisting both hands into her hair and came into her mouth.

She waited through his final pumps, swallowed, and let him slip from her. His hands dropped and gripped the table’s edge again. Hermione straightened. He slumped against the table and panted. She leaned against him and pressed her lips to his. Their tongues met, and he wrapped his arms around her before he pushed her away while clinging to the table with one hand.

“No, please.” He licked his lips as his chest heaved. “This was wrong,” he ended with a near sob and averted his face.

Hermione put her hand on his jaw and turned his head towards her. He resisted, pressing against her hand, yielded only when his face crumpled into a grimace of pain. “Severus?” she asked.

“Please….”

“What? What do you want me to do?”

He gulped a breath. “Dress...Granger,” he replied with a forced formality. When she didn’t move, didn’t take her hand from his face, didn’t obey, he jerked his head clear of her hand. “Now.”

The heat in the room stifled.

Fine. She stalked to her satchel and tugged her clothes on. He stayed put, propped against the table with his pants and trousers around his knees, his shirt tails loose. She tied on her trainers, then returned to pull his clothes together. He snorted and kicked at her. She sucked in a gasp as she snapped upright and slapped his cheek.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Am I released?”

“Hell, no,” she replied. “Not until you tell me what’s wrong.” He was glaring towards her, or would have been if the blindfold was gone. All the usual tenseness was back, although with his privates exposed the effect was more comical than anything. He touched his left hand to the blindfold, then pushed at his hair.

“I shouldn’t have permitted you to do that.”

“Make you submit to me?” she asked, and he huffed. “Is that the problem, or that I sucked you off? I wanted to do it.”

He dropped his hand uselessly at his side. “I’m still your professor.”

“‘Sir or Severus,’ you said,” she replied mildly. “You’re certainly not ‘sir’ right now.”

“May I dress?”
“No. Explain. Now. And use my title.”

His head twitched, his lips drawing into a line. “Mistress. My pleasure is not important.”

“It pleased me to see you undone.” Her eyes popped wide open at the admission, and her knees went numb. *What?*

“It pleased you to see my shame.” Snape took a sharp breath and added, “Mistress.”

Hermione stepped close to him, pitching her voice low as though she were speaking to a frightened child. “Your pleasure is not shameful, Severus. I’ve seen you come before, why was this different?”

“You, you...swallowed. Why?”

She shrugged and said with forced evenness, “That’s just what I do. I wouldn’t lap it from a bowl, but it’s easier to clean up.”

He leaned away from her. “It’s disgraceful.”

“Is that all? That I swallowed your cum?”

He blushed furiously. “Don’t say it.”

She stifled a laugh. “Severus Snape is a prude? Is that—”

“Don’t mock me!” he cut in, his face livid.

“I’m not... It’s funny, don’t you see? Being beaten is fine, licking me is fine, but I can’t swallow? It makes no sense!”


“No. Take your shirt off and present yourself,” she grated. “I can’t use points or detention, but I know a way to correct your attitude.”

With a snarl, he yanked his shirt over his head and braced himself against the table, head bent forward and the cravat binding his shirt’s collar to his neck.

Hermione’s fingers landed on the disguised flogger in her satchel, and it twisted into shape at her touch. Startled by the nearly live thing in her hand, she snatched her arm away. What was she doing?

She leaned beside him and fisted the hair at the base of his skull. “Behave!”

“Yes, Mistress,” he huffed, teeth bared.

“What have you learned?”

“Mistress may swallow as she pleases.”

“And?”

He tried to dip his head, but she held fast.

“And?” She shook the knot of hair, and he grimaced before replying.

“To speak civilly, my Mistress.”
“Very good, Severus.” She moved away, pulled on her robe, seated her satchel on her shoulder then stepped before him. He’d kept his head lowered, but she grasped his chin and kissed him, then canceled the blindfold charm. “Get dressed.”

He opened his eyes slowly and looked at her, a strange expression on his face, before obediently pulling his shirt down. Hermione backed towards the door, step by slow step, grateful for the countless buttons on his coat he had to close. Snape glanced frequently in her direction, his expression wary. She found the doorknob behind her and paused as he finished fastening his trousers.

“Severus, you’re released.” She darted through the door before he could respond.

Sat, 31 Oct 98, Hogwarts Library

She retreated to the library and buried herself in her work, but things kept pulling her back to the morning’s activities. Someone moaned as he fretted over an essay. Someone rolled a stool over the library floor. Hermione pressed her face into her hands, which still smelled of his massage cream. At last, near lunch, hungry because she’d avoided breakfast, she sat back in her chair, stretched her neck, and grimaced at the memory of his hands on her.

Just then, he swept past the shelves where her study corral was. She considered what hex to send after him, but settled for glaring in his direction. Had he been watching her? Spying on her, after she’d told him not to?

She rose and moved to the end of the shelves, wand in hand, and peeked around the corner. He was gone, lost amongst the stacks. Wait. He was on the other side of her shelf, pulling and replacing books. Jaw set, she shoved several of the books above his head off the shelves with a flick of her wand. He scrambled out of the way and darted around the corner to confront her. His fingers pressed white on the upright of the wooden shelf. When it seemed they’d both been frozen in place, he backed from her, replaced the fallen books, and continued looking through the stacks.

He’d not berated her, punished her, taken points. Hermione crept forward to peer around the corner at him. He had extracted a tome and held it open on his left hand while he turned the pages.

“Can I help you, Miss Granger?” he asked smoothly, without looking from the book in his hand.

“No, sir,” she replied. “I thought I heard some books fall.”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. “You misheard.” He stood perfectly straight, every button in place, glaring white cuffs and collar, robes swirled gracefully at his feet, trouser legs buttoned securely over his scuffed boots. When she lifted her eyes, she found him openly inspecting her.

She nodded, went back to her corral, and packed her things. When she scurried from the aisle, she crashed into his side and knocked books and paper from his grasp. He grunted, and they again stared at each other.

Hermione licked her lips. “Sorry, sir. Did I hurt you?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“I can help—” she said, with a gesture toward the floor.

He leaned towards her suddenly, his voice a low whisper through his clenched jaws. “I don’t need your help.”
“Perhaps you need my permission, sir,” she hissed back at him.

His face flushed, and he drew his robes tight around him. He continued to glare at her as she skirted past, and she tore from the library.

She collected sandwiches from the Great Hall and fled upstairs to the common room where she ate in a corner by herself and plotted how to avoid dinner for the rest of the week. What would Tuesday’s Potions class bring?

And she couldn’t stand the smell of her skin. She was headed upstairs to bathe just as Seamus, Ron, and Harry burst into the room.

“Snape’s lost his mind,” Ron exclaimed.

“Profess—what?” she replied.

Harry nodded, grinning. “I think so. Seamus saw it all.”

Seamus collapsed on the sofa. “Right after you left the library—I saw you two glaring at each other, and you left—did he give you detention?—Then he threw the book he had clear across the room and blew out a window.”

Hermione sagged against the wall. “What?”

“Then Madam Pince shouted at him, and he ran out. Out of the castle, I mean. He wasn’t headed to the dungeons, that’s for sure.”

Had she pushed him too far?

“I stuck around to see what would happen next, but the Headmaster shooed everyone out and repaired the glass, then Madam Pince locked the library doors.”

“Think they’ll sack him?” asked Ron eagerly.

“They’d censure him first,” Hermione replied automatically. “Like write him up formally,” she explained at Ron’s perplexed expression. “I don’t think they can fire anyone on a first offense.”

“How d’ya know this was a first offense?” Ron asked.

“I don’t, but you know he was important to the war effort—I’m sure he’s still stressed over that—”

“You can’t keep defending him,” Seamus said. “He’s horrible, he’s unfair, he’s biased, he’s greasy—what good can you say of him?”

Hermione bit back a cascade of inappropriate responses. She stared out the window, half-expecting to see Snape stalking across the grounds. “He’s always tried to protect us,” she said quietly.

The boys scoffed at her.

“Maybe he’ll just leave on his own,” Ron suggested. “Or shrivel up from embarrassment.”

“Where was he going, Seamus?”

“Who cares? I think towards the Quidditch pitch—hey, you’re not going after him, are you?”

“No, I told Vivi I’d meet her after lunch,” she said quickly as she pulled on her jacket and headed
Cheers rose from the stands, and a player in a blue and bronze uniform streaked across the brilliant sky. Snape stormed down the path that circled the pitch, incinerating foliage along the way.

How dare she! First to dirty herself, then to chastise him, then to-to— He swore under his breath. In the library! As though he were just a student! Intolerable! Like everyone from her House, arrogant, cocks sure—

He made himself stop halfway on the long side of the oval, near the forest, and concentrated on slowing his panting. All he’d done so far was react; he needed to think.

Finished. This thing between them—it couldn’t continue. He strode the length of a stand and back again. Simple. He’d resume taking points and send her to Filch, as he’d been instructed. He had plans for his life and had set them firmly in motion. All this connecting and meeting and-and—

Snape propped his back against a piling, as much for support as to stop pacing. Maybe his mind would stop whirling, if his body were still.

She’d climaxed. He’d brought her to it, but she’d had to utter the spell first.

“Beg.”

His eyes watered; he knocked his head against the wooden upright to shake away an image of her in costume, the bison cat loose in one hand as she said, “Beg.”

Focus. He needed to be free, not further snared.

He sank onto the ground and clasped his knees. Too bad she hadn’t tried to beat him. He could have claimed self-defense, had her driven from the school in disgrace—no, he would have had to explain what he was doing there, too.

Damn. Even his revenge fantasies failed him.

He scrubbed at his hair, then let his head drop back. Not a single visible cloud. Perfect Hallowe’en.

Lily.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and the roar of his pulse quieted. Never failed. Think of Lily, and his thoughts settled like snow in a windless hollow, and each leg of his laid course illumined. Rid himself of this enthrallment and struggle as painlessly as possible to the end of the year. Seven months—surely he could keep detached for just another seven months?

Collected, he pulled out his book to read. He’d barely finished a second chapter when someone rounded the curve of the pitch, the smudge of bushy hair identifying her from afar. Snape flattened the book against his thigh and counted full stops. He needed to be as cold and distant as Herbert’s pole of inaccessibility.

“Come to gloat?” he demanded without looking at her as she drew within a few yards of him.

Granger stopped. “No. Of course not.”

“Then why?”
“I want to talk.” She sidled closer.

“You shouldn’t be here.” When she knelt instead, he rolled his eyes. “Sainted Salazar,” he growled and cast a Disillusionment charm on her. She gasped at the chill. “I can’t be seen talking to you.”

After a tense moment, she asked, “What are you reading?”

“I was reading Kafka.”

“That’s the guy who turns into a cockroach, right?”

He flexed the book’s spine savagely. “He wrote that, but that wasn’t the story I was reading.” Snape glowered where he knew her to be. “You really are insufferable.”

“So I’ve been told,” she replied. “Often. Um. The boys were talking about what you did. Will something happen to you?”

He grimaced and put his gaze on the book rather than address a shimmering patch of flattened grass. “I’ll get a talking to. Not that it’s your concern.”

“No, it’s not.” Some blades popped up as she shifted position. “I’m sorry if I set you off.”

“If? You attacked me in a public space. You threw books at me like I was one of your little friends —”

“You acted like a moody boy.”

“Is that so? I suppose you’re entitled to mete out punishment?” Snape ripped a page as he turned it.

“No!” She scoffed. “I’m not—”

“You were going to hit me.”

“Yeah… But I didn’t.” Her voice dwindled.

“Why didn’t you?” Snape swiveled his head toward empty space, faced forward abruptly. Foolishness.

“I…It would have been wrong. I’d no right, I was angry, but—” She growled in frustration. “I don’t know.”

“That’s a change.”

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

“Then you ran out—”

“Ran out!? I wasn’t certain what you might do to me!”

“I wouldn’t have hurt you.”

“How was I to know? All that ‘hard to decide what to call me’ business and commenting that I hadn’t bathed, then you got all Snapey.” A clump of grass flew upwards and cascaded in shreds. “It was all lovely, then it just—Why didn’t you safe word?”

He supposed her eyes were blazing. No, he wasn’t going to distract himself with that image. Why
hadn’t he? The moment she’d ordered him over the table, he’d known what she’d intended, but he’d complied. Why?

The answer nettled.

“I’d asked for it."

“You thought you deserved it?”

He shrugged. “You seemed to agree.”

She grasped his forearm, slid her hand over his wrist, and meshed her fingers into his. He closed his hand reflexively. “Why?”

“It wasn’t in role, Granger.”

“What?”

“We’d stopped playing, and I fell back on our professional relationship.”

“Instead of calling ‘yellow’?”

“Or ‘red’. And I’m not the only one who can stop a scene. It’s in your power as well.”

Her grip tightened, and she pressed against him. “Red? Was it bad enough to stop? For good?”

Was it? It had been a few minutes ago. He let the book fall into his lap and cupped his hand over hers.

“In my day, what you did—”

“Swallowed—”

“Yes, that, only whores did that.”

“Good girls don’t do that,” she sneered back in a singsong. He shot a narrowed-eye glance in her direction. “I think that’s dumb. It’s not urine, there’s only a teaspoon or so, and there’s never a tissue when you need it—”

“A gentleman always has a pocket handkerchief—”

“Maybe you do, but boys in my age range usually don’t.” She sniffled, fidgeted. “Anyway, Viktor never said anything. Ron complained in the beginning, but it’s not like Ginny’s the pristine princess he thinks she is—”

“I’d prefer not hearing the sexual exploits of my students.” That was all he needed rolling around in his head. Another Potter, another red-head—

She gasped. “You didn’t think that I was a—”

“Merlin, no, I’d have known by now.” He chuckled softly, as did she, then a weight rested against his shoulder. When she spoke, her voice vibrated into him.

“But…why did that upset you? You’ve done it to me—”

“To conclusion, this time—”
“Yes, but, it’s the same.”

“It’s not.”

“It is,” she said firmly and lifted her head. “How is it different?”

“Because men…. We have urges, Granger.”

“Oh, okay,” she said slowly. “I guess that brings us back to the prostitutes. It’s too late, but do you have, um, a VD—?”

“Highly unlikely.” He stared at the forest. “My father enjoyed describing knob rot and —” He pressed his lips together. “I should’ve said—”

“I got it.”

“Well. I learned young to always wear a Johnny, between him and…."

No need to go into that. No Slytherin or Death Eater would chance having intimate contact with soiled flesh, Muggle or otherwise.

“I’m clean, too,” she offered. “I got tested at my last gyny. Over a year ago, but there’s just been…” She trailed off as she nestled closer. “Ron’s not very experienced, really, but Viktor—”

“I don’t need to hear this.” He turned his head to sniff at her hair just as the Headmaster rounded the curve of the pitch. “Climb into the stands behind me,” Snape said through his teeth.

She pulled from him and scrabbled up into the scaffolding.

Snape started to his feet, but Dumbledore waggled his hand.

“Severus, no, don’t get up, just want a word.”

“Headmaster, I can explain,” Snape began, but Dumbledore shushed him and eased himself onto the ground.

“I’m relieved to find you. Times like these remind me how large the castle is.”

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“In seventeen years of teaching, with all else you do—I can count on one hand how many times you’ve caused a scene.” Dumbledore snickered. “I have to count on one hand now, of course.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” He patted the younger man on the shoulder. “You’ve seemed more relaxed the last few weeks, too. Did you get news…?”

“No news. No new threat letters, either.”

“Almost a month? That’s almost disconcerting,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “The remainder will be collected. Trust the Ministry, Severus. Trust me. Until then, I can’t let you leave Hogwarts in good conscience.”

“It wasn’t an attempt to get you to sack me,” Snape replied, his throat tightening.
“I didn’t think that, Severus. It’s not your style to descend to hysterics.” The Headmaster regarded him, then turned partly around at an explosion of cheering from the pitch. Snape glanced where he thought Granger had hidden herself and hoped she’d have the sense to be still. “Slytherin’s going to have their hands full this year—I’ve never seen the teams as organized.”

“All the older students on the teams....”

“You may be right. They’ve played together longer than usual.” Dumbledore turned back around. “And additional exuberance from the end of the war.”

“For them, at least.”

“For you too, soon. I can make that promise.” Dumbledore gathered his legs beneath him. Snape rose and offered his hand. “We don’t get any younger, do we? It would be a different world if we did. I’ll let Irma know you’re fine.”

“I’ll have a chat with her this evening.”

“At the feast? Excellent.”

Snape remained standing until Dumbledore turned the corner of the pitch, then settled down and patted the grass by his hip. Granger clambered down and sat touching him.

“Threat letters?” she asked.

“Cursed post from my former colleagues and their sympathizers.”

“Ironic. You’re trapped at Hogwarts, and I’d be safer away from here.”

“So it seems.” The wind shifted and carried a familiar scent. “Surprised you haven’t washed off my potions.”

“I was going to, then the boys came in.” She paused. “Do you want to leave Hogwarts?”

“Dumbledore offered me a position with a price. I’ve paid. Overpaid.” He frowned. “Teaching wasn’t my first career choice.” But what else could he do in the world? The shrinking number of potions orders hammered his uselessness home.

She laid her hand on his forearm. “I’m sorry—”

“Why does everyone in your House apologize for things they can’t control?” he replied and flourished the book. “Now, I’d like to enjoy my time alone, if you don’t mind.”

“I know that feeling.” Her voice moved as she stood. “Are we still meeting Friday?”

He looked in her general direction before canceling his Disillusionment charm. Granger’s face lit warmly, and his hand felt unaccountably empty. “Are you interested?”

“Now, since we talked. Not earlier, to be honest.”

“Same.” He relaxed against the piling, and her smile dimmed a little. “I’ll arrange it. Do nothing,” he added when she glowed again. “I’m not fully swayed.”

She smirked, disappeared under her own charm, and nudged his head lightly with her knuckles. “See you at the feast, Professor.”
He turned back to his book then gazed toward the end of the stands where she’d no doubt gone. When he’d come out here, he’d determined to rid himself of her. He rubbed his thumb over his palm. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d held hands with someone outside of a ritual. A long, long time ago, maybe, beside a muddy river.

He snorted and turned the page.
Nov 1-7, 1998

Chapter Summary

What has the Potions Master learned from his last encounter with the irritating know-it-all?

Chapter Notes

MANY THANKS: To Melusin, for her frequent battles with my errant commas: never have I seen such valor. To the cheering squad on LiveJournal and the other-forum-which-shall-not-be-named. To the weekly Panera writing group: yes, still doing fan fic, but the o-fic is ramping up.

POSTING SCHEDULE: Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday, if there are holidays.

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.

Tues, 3 Nov 98, Hogwarts Dungeons

The hallway outside the Potions classroom was crowded Tuesday morning because the room was locked. The students queued along the wall as Slytherins shoved past, hurrying to their own classes. As the exiting crowds thinned, Snape emerged from his office, threw open the classroom door, and waited as the seventh years filed in. He strode into the room, letting the door shut behind him, and stood at his desk as the class finished settling. He was about to speak when he squinted towards the door.

The students mirrored his gaze to where a steady “tap tap tap” echoed from the corridor.

With an irritated snort, Snape crossed to the door, jerked it open, and said, “Miss Pembroken, come here.”

Vivi bobbed into view and stopped, eyes innocently wide. “Professor?”

Snape extended his arm, palm up. Vivi dropped a bright yellow squash ball into his hand and backed away in silence. He slammed the door and returned to his desk where he shoved the ball into a drawer and started the class on their lesson.

Given the comments Seamus had made since Snape’s tantrum in the library, Hermione almost
expected him to try to stir up trouble. His revelation that the Potions master could be really rattled had lit some urge for mischief nearly equal to the Weasley twins’. So she was a bit surprised when the lesson proceeded without many hiccups, but the few that happened were curious.

Twenty minutes into brewing, Neville’s cauldron shattered and spilled boiling liquid across the desk toward Seamus. Snape was there instantly, repaired the vessel, and sent the collected liquid back into it. “Temperature, Longbottom,” he said neutrally, flicking his wand so the flame under the cauldron cooled and turned reddish. Neville and Seamus gaped at Snape’s back before nervously returning to the exercise, and the rest of the class exchanged confused glances.

Beyond that, Snape prowled the aisles as usual. He seemed to be avoiding the front corner where Ginny and Hermione stood until the last ten minutes of class when he checked their work with a frown of concentration. He fired questions about the potion at them until he seemed satisfied, then left them alone. It was a moment or so before Ginny pointed at the yellow squash ball nestled amongst Hermione’s scale weights.

The next Potions class was much the same. After study hall, when they were gathered in the common room, Hermione listened as her fellow Gryffindors commented on the Potions master’s sudden change in character. He was still icily brusque, still returned essays dripping red, still required order in the classroom, but his sharp tongue seemed to have been blunted, and he wasn’t taking nearly as many points. The point-taking actually seemed to be the biggest wonderment, with Seamus and Dean speculating how tight they dared wind him before he would explode.

“You shouldn’t bait him,” Hermione said disapprovingly, watching the pair over the top of her Astronomy text.

“Why not?” Seamus demanded. “You’re getting too soft on the greasy bat, Granger.”

“You take that back,” said Ron heatedly, as though Seamus had called her a bad word.

“That’s I don’t know how many times since term started she’s leapt to Snape’s defense,” Seamus shot back.

“Professor Snape,” Hermione said, automatically. “It’s our last year here; why can’t you just let him be?”

“Because it’s our last year, I’m tired of the big nosed git, I don’t trust him, and I don’t like him.” Seamus grabbed his homework and stormed up the dormitory stairs before whirling back to her. “Maybe hanging out with that Slytherin girl is turning you traitor.”

She hopped to her feet and sent a silent Bat Bogie Hex at him. Seamus raced out of sight, holding his nose.

---

**Wed, 4 Nov 98, Hogwarts Castle**

Snape’s midnight patrol had just started. Wednesday, so the only students who had a legitimate excuse for being about would be either Seventh Years returning from Astronomy class or prefects completing their own rounds. He’d occupied the library since eleven, relishing the silence and the familiar smells and napping in his favorite study corral, wasting time before the tower clock began chiming twelve.

His habit on Wednesdays was to start at the Astronomy Tower and wind his way up and down stairs to the Gryffindor Tower, then the Ravenclaw Tower, then down to the kitchens for a cup of cocoa
and an apple. Refreshed, he’d circle through the Hufflepuff basement and finish in the Slytherin common room to see who was still studying at two a.m. He’d retire around three, usually collapsing on his bed fully clothed. From force of habit, he woke before his alarm at half-six, time enough to bathe and tend the potions he kept running in his antechamber or to work on a research article, before taking his place for breakfast at the High Table. Of course, he’d added stopping by the Come and Go Room to his list of pre-breakfast duties.

But tonight, something different. Rather than heading up the switching stairs, he turned down toward the ground floor and the courtyard for some fresh air.

He’d heard the scuffle on stone twice behind him in the Main Hall. Once could be an elf. Twice, not likely. He stepped sideways into a shadowed alcove and waited. After several minutes, the grating sound repeated itself, very close to where he’d tucked himself, and he sensed the tiny pressure change associated with an expertly cast, but very basic, Disillusionment spell.

“Show yourself,” he growled, his lit wand pointing directly at where the person had to be standing, judging by the patterns of altered light on the floor.

“It’s me, Hermione.”

He extinguished his wand and slipped it into his sleeve. “After hours, Miss Granger.”

“Coming back from class,” she whispered back, her voice drawing nearer. “Can I talk to you?”

There was no good reason for her to be this far from the towers, except that she’d followed him. He moved out of his niche and held his crooked left arm away from his body. “Keep hidden. Take my arm. I won’t speak to thin air, but you’re exposed here.”

Her hand wrapped loosely round his forearm, and her upper arm brushed his. He lowered his hand to a more natural position, should they be interrupted by Filch or Dumbledore or, heaven forfend, a student. Or maybe yes, a student, a Gryffindor—oh, yes. He’d like to take points from her house when she couldn’t protest. He snickered inwardly, imagining her outrage, but was instantly distracted when she missed the fake step and bumbled into him, the soft heat of her body scalding his side.

“Careful,” he chided as she steadied herself.

“I’m not used to having invisible feet,” she replied. “At least I could see myself when I was under Harry’s cloak.”

He shushed her, led them to one of the disused classrooms on the second floor, and closed the door behind them. Granger had canceled her spell before he turned back toward her.

“I saw you leaving the library and hoped I’d catch up with you,” she said in a rush, her head tilting backwards as he moved closer to her.

“Why?” He planted his hands on his hips and stared down at her while he calculated points. Ten for being out after curfew, another ten for interrupting staff on duty—

“I’m confused about Quidditch.”

“What? You’re surrounded by Quidditch players. Why ask me?”

“Okay, not Quidditch itself. Vivi told me if she didn’t keep her grades up, she’d be off the team.” He kept silent, and she continued. “That’s not in the school rules, and I’d know if Professor McGonagall—”
“You’re asking me if I hold my Quidditch players to higher standards than your Head of House does?” he asked, his voice rising in disbelief. “You chased me through half the school after midnight to ask me how I run my House? I suppose you want pointers?”

“No, I….” Her brows puckered as she averted her eyes.

He sighed and let his hands hang. “Quidditch players get perks equivalent to prefects, without the academic requirements. I see no reason to coddle students with the dream of being saved from drudgery by professional sport. It’s an unrealistic expectation.”

She’d met his eyes during his explanation. Her lower lashes caught the light.

“Is that all?” he asked, forcibly gentling his voice.

Granger shook her head and sniffed. “Vivi said she was demoted to reserve Seeker so Draco could be regular. Candace is making them all practice the new plays, and Vivi says there’s a power struggle between Candace and Draco. Ginny’s convinced that Draco will make the whole team use the old strategies.”

“And you’re here to spy for your team?” he asked conversationally. He’d not heard a word about any disarray in the team, and he’d specifically asked Marsland about that. Damn. This first match couldn’t come quickly enough.

“No, I just wondered why Draco was being permitted to run roughshod over the whole team.”

He moved away from her and sat on a nearby desk. “Why are you interested?” he asked, surprised at his own curiosity. Gryffindors always thought in terms of saving the world, but usually that world excluded his House.

She clearly hadn’t expected that question, given how her brows knitted and the corners of her mouth bent down. Granger perched on a chair facing him. “Because I like Vivi and Ginny said the team played so much better last year and Harry and Ron are taking the whole Malfoy thing personally.”

She took an enormous breath and cocked her head, looking up at him. “I don’t want to know the Slytherin team strategy, but I’d feel better knowing that Draco wasn’t getting away with things just because of his connections.”

Connections, little girl? Family connections, or Death Eater connections, or was she asking where his own loyalties lay? He adjusted his sleeve.

“Would it comfort you to know Miss Marsland and I discussed the possibility of apparent rifts in the team some time ago?” That should be vague enough without revealing much. He’d slid into Slytherin phrase patterns without really meaning to. No suggestion she was operating from a position of weakness, no confirmation that what she’d commented on was or was not happening, no designation of time frames.

Granger clasped her hands and rubbed one thumb with the other, an expression of concentration on her face. Surely this couldn’t be that difficult for her to dissect. She nodded curtly and smirked. “Yes, it does. Thank you, sir. I’ll just let Vivi blow off steam without worrying about her. She’s been complaining about this for weeks now.”

Strange. He understood they were just playing squash together. No, they’d been discussing grades, House politics, dissent on the team. He tried to recall his own relationships from school and realized he’d never really had any outside of his House, other than Lily. Maybe a month was long enough.

“How did the subject of my requirements for the team come up?”
“Vivi originally asked for tutoring in Transfiguration and Charms, so she could pull her grades up.” She gestured vaguely at the room. “In fact, we’ve been practicing here on Tuesday evenings, in exchange for her teaching me squash.” She crossed her knees, angled her body from him, and dipped her chin.

Coy thing, to recognize all Slytherins expected some kind of barter for everything and to call attention to her awareness. Something inside him thrummed like a thick, taut wire’d been plucked.

Flirting. She was flirting with him, and the core of him rose to her lure.

He sat frozen as she stood up and took a few paces towards the door.

“Sir, should we go? I really should be in bed, like you pointed out.”

Called him “sir.” She was now in student/teacher role. Or had she always been? Was that her way of transitioning from an intimate state to a professional state, for want of a better term? The room gyred, and he clung to the only solid thought he had left.

“Granger, you owe me points.”

She had the gall to giggle over her shoulder at him. “Ten?”

Her laugh deepened at whatever face he felt himself pulling, and his cheeks burned. All thoughts of docking her twenty or thirty points faded. “Fine, ten,” he grumbled, reaching past her to grasp the doorknob.

“And detention?” she added, twisting into the space between his torso and the door as she smiled.

The absurdity of a student asking for detention collided with the roil of heat that made his clothes feel uncomfortably snug, and his mouth voiced the first words that bubbled up.

“Yours or mine?”

Her lashes fluttered. Her cheeks tinted. Her lips drew him until he’d closed the miles between them. Sweet, should be bottled, and he’d kill to hoard it all. He raked his fingers into her hair in fear her curls would twine round his jacket buttons. They’d be trapped in this abandoned classroom, seized fast by a net of their tangled hair and clothes, and there’d be no way for them to shuck off their robes, until the old man—

He broke away to hold her at arms length. Her eyes shone, her mouth glistened, her chest rose and dropped. He wanted to bend her over a desk and wrench her skirt to her waist, but a glance at her Muggle jeans grounded him. Close, holy Merlin, that was close. No, she was close. Closing. Closer.

“No,” he rasped at her and forcibly straightened his elbows to hold her away. “Go to...to your tower, Miss Granger.”

“Friday night?”

What?

He must have goggled at her because she repeated herself slowly as she circled a button on his chest with one finger. “Friday night detention? At our usual time?”

His head bobbled in agreement, eliciting another titter. She Disillusioned herself and slipped out the door.
He flailed behind him with one hand until he located a chair and plopped into it just as his knees disappeared. Detention, she’d said, as if it were something she anticipated. Like a date. He pushed out of the chair to kneel on the floor, bent over until he rested on his palms with his forehead on the cool flagstones. A date. Oh, he had indeed gawped at her, sensing her meaning. Snape sprawled flat on the drafty floor, and gleeful harpies shredded his dignity.

Thurs, 5 Nov 98, Hogwarts Castle

 When Hermione emerged from the Room the next morning, freshly showered and energized from her efforts, she found Snape leaning against the tapestry opposite the door waiting for her. They eyed one another before he closed the distance between them, his hands buried in his pockets.

 “Cut back on the practicing?” he asked.

 Hermione nodded. “Every other day. It feels more effective, but I miss the work out.” She quirked her lip. “Do you check on me every morning?”

 He hummed vaguely in response and matched her slow stroll toward the stairs.

 “Severus?” she asked quietly, glancing up at him. He lifted a brow, inviting her to continue. “I’m trying to get the boys to leave you alone.”

 He scowled. “I don’t need your protection, Granger.”

 She stopped, and he swung round to face her. “I didn’t mean that,” she replied, tightly controlling her voice. “They’re antsy, I think. Ever since they saw or heard what happened in the library, they—”

 “Want to take me on?” he finished for her, eyes glinting.

 “No more than Fred and George did,” she added quickly then huffed when his frown deepened. “They’re just rattling your cage.” As soon as the words left her, she wanted to snatch them back as his face whitened in fury at the reminder of his captivity. Snape whirled away from her and strode rapidly up and down the hall before returning to loom over her, hands braced on his hips.

 “I deserve respect,” he hissed.

 “I agree,” Hermione said curtly. He straightened slightly in response, and his arms relaxed to his sides. Did that startle him? “Just try to ignore them. Please.”

 Snape watched her for a moment, his gaze moving over her face. “Antsy.”

 “Yeah, I think we all are. School isn’t as exciting as war.”

 He harrumphed and laced his arms over his chest. “If it’s excitement they want—” he started speculatively, the fingers on his wand hand twitching.

 “No, they don’t; none of us do.” She reached out to close her hand over his forearm. “Including you.”

 He focused on her hand, and she jerked from him as though he’d shouted at her. “I didn’t mean for you to do that,” he said.

 “What did you mean, then?” she asked, tipping her head as she looked up at him.

 His lips pursed, and he pushed his head towards her. “I don’t need to explain myself to you,” he said,
“but I meant….” He stopped. “I didn’t mean that,” he repeated, straightened, and steered her towards the stairs with a palm light on her shoulder.

“You don’t know what you meant,” Hermione said with a smirk. “Do you?”

She felt his hand leave her, and she partially turned to protest when she heard voices in the corridor ahead of them. Snape stalked away down the stairs.

###

The students were waiting at their workstations as Snape emerged from the workroom at the front of the classroom, carrying a pair of trays filled with clinking bottles. He set one of the trays on his desk, regarded the class, then approached Hermione and Ginny, tray in one hand and long metal tongs in the other. With the tongs, he offered one of the squatty, square flasks to Hermione. She stared curiously at it, then at him.

“Take it,” he ordered, shoving it closer to her.

She grasped the base of the flask with both hands. Instantly, the blank label filled with her name in his spiky writing, startling her, and she nearly dropped it in surprise. The viscous, smoky liquid in it sloshed thickly from side to side.

“The label will personalize when you touch the container,” he commented, continuing to distribute the flasks as he talked. “These are your samples for the next week’s lessons. You will not drop these bottles or waste the contents. Do not expect a refill if you’re careless.” Snape paused at this to glower at Neville, whose hands shook violently as he took his flask. “At the end of each class, you will return your samples when you turn in your work.”

“Sir,” Hermione asked, turning to watch him moving around the tables, “what’s in these?”

The Slytherins, in the opposite corner where he was, snickered as a group, presumably in response to his expression. Snape went to his desk to pick up the full tray and continue handing out samples before he replied, “This week, you will identify the magical properties of the potion. Your task next week will be to identify and recreate the potion as accurately as possible.”

Once both trays had been emptied, he returned to the front of the room. Hermione had flipped through her book by then and said, “But sir, al-Razi’s process of potion deconstruction isn’t covered until the third term, according to the book and your syllabus.”

Snape pivoted slowly to face her, wrapping his teaching robes tighter around himself as he did. “Remind me, Miss Granger, how many times have I requested your assistance teaching this class, in the seven years of our acquaintance?”

Hermione felt all eyes on her, but she kept her focus on his face. “Never once, Professor.”

“Presumably you’re well-versed in al-Razi’s process?” he continued silkily.

“I-I’ve read the theory and the steps, sir,” she stammered.

“Then you’re familiar with the extensive use of retorts, reduction agents, admixtures, advanced spellwork, and the precise equipment required to successfully deconstruct an unknown potion of unknown origin and history?” he asked, taking a few swaggering steps in her direction.

Hermione felt her eyes sting and blinked rapidly before shaking her head. “Not in practice, sir, but —”
He cut her off. “I’m sure in your extensive reading you noticed that al-Razi’s process was unknown to European potioners until the Third Crusade. This was the same event that brought the knowledge necessary for Nicholas Flamel to later create the only known Philosopher’s Stone. How do you imagine potions were deconstructed prior to that influx of knowledge?”

“I don’t know, sir,” she admitted in a small voice and dropped her gaze to the table in front of her. His robes shifted into view at the edge of her vision.

“Miss Granger,” he called quietly, and she looked up at him. His expression was serious, but he wasn’t narrowing his eyes or actually even scowling. He rested his fingertips on the opposite side of her table. “Not all knowledge can be found in texts. You have only to consider Mr. Weasley or Mr. Potter for examples of those for whom written information remains a pleasant mystery. Yet they thrive. Is it at all inconceivable that you might find yourself without sufficient equipment, time, or knowledge to subject a substance to al-Razi’s comprehensive process? That, thus handicapped, you might yet need to arrive at a general understanding of how a compound was made and what it was intended to do?”

An image flashed into her mind of him in the basement of Grimmauld Place, hunched over a collection of beakers and scrolls, muttering to himself in a collection of languages as he gnawed on a pencil stub. She’d interrupted him by bringing down a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of butterbeer, a ritual that had been at Molly’s request until Hermione did it unasked. He’d snarled at her for quiet —she’d not said a word the entire time—and consumed the meal with one hand while he continued to scrawl with the other.

“Oh. I can see that, sir.”

He responded by tapping his thumb solidly on the table top and said with exaggerated courtesy, “Shall I continue the lesson? With your permission, of course.”

A few choice responses popped to mind, and she struggled to select the one least likely to irritate him. She settled at last on a mute nod.

“Very well. Detention, Friday, seven.” And he carried on with the lesson.

Half-way into the exercise, she became aware of someone watching her. She glanced back to see Seamus glaring at her, and she frowned at him before returning to assault her sample with another round of deductive spells. Either her movement or Seamus’ frequent glowering caught Snape’s eye because on his next prowl he paused near Harry and Ron, who occupied the table behind her, and said, “Mr. Finnegan, is it your hope to succeed in my class by leering at your fellow students?”

“Excuse me, sir?” Seamus replied, nonplussed and at the center of attention. He flushed pink as he looked from Hermione to Snape and back. “I don’t understand.”

“Your eyes, Mr. Finnegan, belong on your work, not on your classmates,” Snape replied coolly as he continued his rounds. “At the very least, keep your attempts to woo outside my classroom.”

Seamus’ face darkened as titters sparked around him. He remained in a foul mood until the end of class, deposed his work and samples at last, and rammed his books into his rucksack. Neville cradled his sample protectively until Seamus lurched from the room. Snape disappeared into the small workroom with the trays and slammed the door shut.

###

Thankfully, Flitwick had Thursday study hall duty. Hermione arrived early in the library, just before
Flitwick, and unpacked her study materials slowly, chatting absently with the professor. Potions class had left her feeling confused anew by Snape’s mercurial temperament. The night before he’d surprised her with an overwhelming kiss that she swore she could still feel on her lips. This morning, he’d been solicitous but restrained. During class, he’d set her firmly in her place, made her the butt of some private Slytherin joke, and then deliberately riled Seamus.

The same batch of Slytherin students arrived. They’d become a bit of a fixture, clustered around one table, all suffering from similar stumbling blocks. She slipped the ball from the week before to Vivi with an apology about forgetting it and a quiet admonition; Vivi giggled in response and agreed to police herself better.

As Hermione left the library, she saw Snape disappearing into the darkness of the arcade. She hesitated for a moment before jogging after him, clasping her bags and clothes against her to minimize sound, and nearly collided with his back at the furthest, dimmest end of the space.

“What the devil are you doing?” he demanded as she stumbled to stand panting beside him.

“Trying to catch up with you,” Hermione replied. “I don’t understand—” He hissed at her, and she dropped her voice to a whisper, “What was that all about today? In class?”

Snape peered down at her. “Are you unwell, Miss Granger? It’s the only reasonable explanation for your excessive familiarity.”

She gaped at him and closed her mouth with a snap. “I didn’t mean, wasn’t—sir!” she squeaked when he caught her forearm in his hand and hauled her deeper into the shadows.

“No one saw,” she protested, wrenching her arm free of his grasp.

“You can’t know that,” Snape retorted. “The only reason I still breathe is because of discretion and subterfuge. You don’t want this life.” He exhaled sharply. “I don’t want this life for you,” he clarified, leaning close to her.

She stared up at where his face must be in the gloom, working out the only possible meaning of his statement. “End it?” she asked. “You want to end—”

“No, you daft girl, I don’t, but I can’t see any alternative, unless we maintain our traditional relations in public.”

Hermione exhaled heavily. “Seamus.”

“Distraction,” Severus replied shortly. “Use your head. If you continue defending me—”

“How’d you know I was doing that?”

“Suspected it, and you just confirmed it. Stop.”

“Then, you still want me to—to come tomorrow?” she asked hesitantly.

His voice warmed, and she wanted to believe his face had softened as well, but they were in near complete darkness. “Of course. Detention. And other things, if you’re interested.”

“Yes,” she replied simply and shifted a little closer to lean against him. He tensed and dipped his
head to peck her brusquely on her forehead.

“Now, go do whatever you’re supposed to be doing,” he grumbled, turning her around and nudging her back towards the light of the castle. “Which isn’t chasing after your Potions master like he’s your personal Snitch. I have work to do.”

---

**Fri, 6 Nov 98, Hogwarts Castle**

A handful of giggling Fifth Year girls scooted past the table where Hermione sat finishing her Ancient Runes translations. Just as Madam Pince stormed after the girls, Hermione’s watch vibrated its alarm.

Hermione dried the ink on her scroll with a spell, tucked her work safely away, and headed out of the library toward the dungeons. She’d decided to change in the Second Floor girls’ toilets, preferably the fourth cubicle on the right, which was larger than the rest to allow for the support columns and plumbing. It was a shame, really, that she couldn’t use Myrtle’s lavatory; she’d not have to worry about any awkward questions from the living, at least. Although, from what Harry had told her, Myrtle could travel the plumbing, so probably none of the toilets were safe, so she should probably think of some other places to change…

Someone snickered to her left, interrupting her thoughts. Teddy Nott was leaning over the fixed bannister of the Grand Stairs, directing a paper dart around the open space with his wand. The dart looped upward, and he caught it in one hand then glanced at her before sending it back into the air. It kept even with her as she descended to the Third Floor landing, two flights below, where Draco was steering a paper bird with some difficulty as it kept twisting in the updrafts.

Hermione changed and Disillusioned herself in the cubicle. She pried the door open and peered out. The corridor was empty and silent, so she slipped out.

###

The slight musk of silk let him know she’d arrived. He’d propped the door open after the last student conference had finished. With a few wand-flicks, he closed the door, sent the scrolls of student records back to their niche on top of his shelves, and opened the passage to his rooms.

Granger snapped into view, standing beside his desk. “How’d you know I was here?”

Snape tapped his nose, then turned away to cover his grin as she giggled and moved into the hallway.

“You assume too much at times, Granger.”

She pivoted and walked backwards ahead of him as she held her lit wand at her side. “Like what?”

“That I meant for us to go to my chambers.”

“Why’d you open the shelf?” She slowed though, and he matched her pace, until she stopped. The door to his office had swung to, sealing them into the tunnel and cutting off any ambient light.

“Put out your wand.”

Her moment’s pause stretched a painful three heartbeats, then she shook her wrist and cancelled her spell. “Why—“
He shushed her. “Listen.” The complete darkness amplified every sound from pulse to breath, but what he liked best was—

“Is that…singing?”

The faint warbling had perplexed him for months in the beginning. “Perhaps.”

She shuffled to one side, presumably to touch the wall, then her voice came from knee-height. “What is it?”

“Shan’t say.” He held his wand behind him and brightened it slowly. She took his offered hand, stood, and continued toward his chambers, not turning round or releasing him until she backed against the inner door.

“Tease.”

He snorted, pushed the door open, and then pointed towards the dinette.

“Not playing?” she asked as she set her bag near the wall. She reached for the pitcher and filled glasses for both of them.

Snape sat. “I had time to think about our activities last week.”

Granger grimaced, but settled in the other chair.

“No, not like that.” Countless rehearsals later, it seemed best to begin with a compliment. “You did something any submissive expects a dominant to do.” She brightened, and he continued. “Tell me about limits.”

“Hard limits are things you won’t do, but soft limits are things you’re uncomfortable with.”

“Limits are boundaries.” He drew a circle with his index finger on the table. “Arithmancy, Ancient Runes—why do you like difficult subjects?”

Her shoulders twitched. “Because I don’t know if I can learn them. I like pushing myself. It’s like stretching, I suppose.”

“The same applies to limits.”

“I should…push your limits?” she asked. “But, what about the safe words?”

“Those let us explore safely. And, because you stopped yourself instead of beating me, because of that, I know I can trust you to push responsibly.” His breath stilled at the top of his throat.

Granger shifted her weight.

“This is the art of domination. It’s not necessary to use an implement. I give you my power. Let’s talk about you.” She blinked at him. “What have we done that you’ve enjoyed?”

“I…I like touching you.” She reached for her glass, but didn’t take it. “I like when I can touch you, and you don’t stop me.”

“Put simply, you like your sub to be sexually accessible. What else?”

Her eyes flicked to his hands. “I liked immobilizing you.”
“More than just my permitting you access?”

“In a way.” She started to speak, then simpered. “It’s stupid.”

“What is?”

“I like…” She sucked in a breath and said in a rush, “I like wrist bands, leather ones with buckles, the same way I like when you’re blindfolded, not just because you’re less threatening, but it makes…” She stopped again, but her gaze caressed his lips.

“Draws attention to my mouth.”

She sighed heavily, perhaps breathed a word, then looked away. “Why are we talking about me?”

“You have as much right to your own pleasure as I do.” He nestled one hand into the warm palm of the other. “Wrist bands?”

“Or leather cuffs, I suppose. I always think of them as being dark. Brown or black.” She met his eyes warily, her body angled from the table, ready to dart from the room.

Time to change subjects.

“How do you feel about flogging me?”

Her shoulders lowered. “It’s less frightening than I’d expected. When we started, I couldn’t understand why you’d would want to be punished like that.”

“It’s not my interest. Not as punishment.”

“For you, it’s more like a test.” Her brows clenched, released, and her head lifted as she caught the scent. “That’s it, isn’t it? The reward after, for—that’s another reason why whipping you in anger would have been wrong. I’m right, aren’t I?”

He lowered his chin. “Ask me later. Does anything about flogging appeal to you?”

She inhaled quickly. “Some. I like—I don’t know why—”

“Why doesn’t matter.”

“Okay. I like how your skin reddens, knowing I caused it, that you like it. It’s the same when I bite you. I like the noises—you like it too—”

“Later.” Her flared nostrils and frown meant Granger the Insatiable was surfacing. “Anything else? Besides having me beg?”

Her cheeks flamed, and she dropped her eyes.

“Incendio,” he said softly.

She smirked at her lap. “How you phrased it, too…”

“I was taught that—later,” he added as she started to speak. He throttled a chuckle when her eyes flashed.

“But—” Her lips slackened into an O. “You want me to ask these once you’ve—you’re setting me up, you perv!” She batted his shin with the outside of her foot.
Kettle.

She crumpled forward into a laugh, and he joined in. “How?” she asked as she dabbed her eyes.

“I need to show you. Mostly words, just words.” His face reflected as a pale smudge in the window to the lake. “We’ll need to change roles. Safe words are always in place.”

“What will you say?”

“Something minor. I thought asking what you were doing out so late—”

“No.” Her arms knotted around her, her shoulders hunched, and the skin over her neck tightened. “Not that.”

What was this? Her alarm washed every thought from him. “Not that.” A week’s worth of pondering, but not a single idea remained. “Suggest something.”

She sniffled. Sipped water from a shaky glass. “Maybe. Maybe practice? That I did well, and all my practice showed?” She tittered. “You don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I suppose not.”

“I played piano before Hogwarts.”

“Do you still?”

“A little.” She shrugged.

“Fine. Recital. Practice. I’d also like to show you how to use this.” He retrieved the crop from the floor where he’d laid it earlier.

“You said you didn’t like that?” Granger asked as she eyed it.

“Yes, then I clarified that it could be used subtly. Hand.”

She gingerly put her right hand in his left, and he swatted her palm lightly with the slapper at the tip of the crop.

“That’s all?”

“Nothing more. I don’t expect you to use it now, nor even with me. If we’re going to exchange roles, let’s make the most of it.”

“You don’t want to swap?”

“No. I don’t switch, not with established partners. Certainly not with you. Are you ready?” He rose and moved to the middle of the room.

She hesitated before standing. “What do I do?”

He gestured her to stand before him and face the sofa. “I’ll talk to you. Pay attention to how and what I say. Try not to focus on your response.” Which was an ironic comment because fear coiled up his spine as though his Mark had burned.

She nodded and wet her lips. “Safe words as usual.”
“Of course.”

“I’m ready.”

Snape dipped his mouth to her ear and said with the same frost he used in class, “You’re quite the clever girl, aren’t you?”

Granger snapped her head around to gawk at him, and he jerked out of the way. Color rose from her collar to her eyes, and her breath seemed scented with vanilla.

“Something wrong?”

“That wasn’t—no.” She faced forward. “Go on.”

He leaned down again, poised to leap back. “All that applause likely went right to your head. After such success, we’ll have to make certain you don’t rest on your honors.”

The buttons on her shirt winked erratically.

He held the slapper even with the swell of her calf and swatted. She hopped sideways from him.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Couldn’t have, the skin wasn’t even reddened.

“Startled me,” she said breathlessly. “I think I-I get it. Now I try?”

“If you wish.”

“And ask the questions I had earlier?”

The familiar heavy tightness grew in his belly. “Those, yes. Only about what we’ve done together.”

“We’re negotiating now, aren’t we? May I touch you?”

“Yes. You may loosen my clothing, but not remove any.”

“Why not?” Her eyes sparkled.

“I find my rooms a bit chilly.”

“May I kiss you?

“Now?”

Flustered. “No. Where may I touch you?”

His swollen cock pressed against his pants. “My body is yours.”

“This is consent, isn’t it?”

“We’ve discussed this—”

“Wait. At first, I thought consent was all about what I couldn’t do. Now, it’s more about possibilities,” her words slowed, “and doing things we’ll both enjoy.”

“But we need limits. You’ll not perform oral sex on me.”

Her throat worked, and her lips thinned.
“Is it that important to you?”

“No, but I feel it’s my right to do or not do.”

“Your right.” His tongue clicked on the final consonant. “Explain how you arrive at that.”

“If your body is truly mine to touch, however I wish—”

“I see your point.” His guts trembled as the simmer warmed. “I’m not comfortable with this intimacy.”

She dropped her gaze, just as she’d done in class when he’d challenged her, as much deference as withdrawal.

The situation was different.

“Please,” he added. “Out of bounds, for both of us tonight.”

She met his eyes. “I didn’t mean to push.”

“But you do.” He cupped his fingers over his mouth. “Safe words permit…” Dare he ask this? Her eyes widened. “Safe words permit us to speak in code.” His lips ached for moisture, but he resisted wetting them. “You continue until I call yellow.”

“Or red.” Her face smoothed as she thought it through. “You mean I could ignore what you say until—”

Clever girl.

“Exactly. If I ordered you to stop…or begged…. A hum started in his knees and deepened at her next words.

“This frightens you.”

The hum blended with the screech of avian talons on stone, the same delicious exposure from Wednesday night, and his senses urged caution. “Yes.”

“Like a fun-park ride. I mean, you can be frightened, but there’s no real danger. Not with me.”

Snape wanted to look away from her, dip his head so his hair obscured his nakedness, make some disparaging gesture. Instead, he stood still as she stepped to him and pulled his mouth to hers. The curves of her waist comforted the hollows of his hands.

Then she left him and transfigured a chair into a tall stool, just as she’d done the first time, and he took his place. She rolled her wand between her fingers, pocketed it, and came back to him.

“You like watching me.”

“I’m a man, Granger.” Snape trailed his gaze over her to her shoes then met her eyes just as her shirt tightened over her inhale.

“Would you close your eyes if I asked?”

He nodded. “Shall we begin?”

She circled round, then leaned against him and whispered into his ear, “You like when I touch you,
“Yes, Mistress,” he said, and the pit of his mind yawned. He forced himself toward it, and her hand slid over his shoulder to his neck.

“You want me to expose you?”

“Yes, Mistress.” His cravat slithered around his shirt collar, and she eased open his jacket. Her next words were a low purr; he agreed without noting more than cadence and touch, the details of her words blurring into an internal cascade of fantasies. Yes, he longed to be forced, longed for the spark wheel, longed to be found good, longed for the caress of her flogger, longed to be rid of the Mark, and his longing sucked him into a whirling center as she ordered him to hang on the edge of climax, until her word released him.

He slumped into her embrace. She shifted around him to wipe him clean with a warm, damp cloth she’d Summoned, but he continued to sag against her.

“Sev-Severus? Are you okay?”

“I need…sit with me.” He bobbed his chin toward the sofa. The world looped around him, and he clutched his undone waistband with one hand. She nudged into his armpit and helped him stand, then staggered as his legs refused to bear weight.

Somehow they crossed the few yards, and he tumbled into the corner of the couch, dragging her with him. She laughed as she shifted and nestled into the curve of his arm. “You’re okay, though?”

“Ruined,” he murmured into her scalp, knowing he’d admitted to far more than he’d intended, but she likely didn’t understand the truth of it. “Savaged.” He rested his cheek on her head and closed his eyes.

Lily stooped over him, water-green eyes in her blanched face, and whispered, “Sev?”

*He caught her waist and clasped her tight.*

###

Hermione wondered when his breathing evened. But when his head lolled onto the back cushion and his hand slipped from his trousers, she smirked. A cramp crept upwards from her hip. If she draped her legs across his, the pain would ease.

“Sev?” she asked softly, as she peered at him. Was he was out enough for her to move?

He inhaled throatily and pinned her to him, torquing her even more. She took advantage of his movement to swing her knees over his and straighten her back. When she checked to see if he’d noticed, he was staring at her.

No, he was staring at her mouth.

“Granger,” he murmured, not changing his focus, “you need to leave.”

“I can stay.” she whispered back and moistened her lips. It felt right, being draped over him, and the thought of going felt wrong.

His throat ticked when he swallowed, and his hand cupped her kneecap before he pushed her legs off him and pressed away from her into the cushions. “I need you to leave.”
She rose, and he arched his hips upward to put his trousers to rights. Severus stood with a groan and watched his feet as he stretched and bent.

“I’ll just dress,” Hermione said. He grunted without looking at her. She took her things into the bathroom and shut the door.

She gripped the edge of the sink and stared at herself. Some curls had escaped her up-do, probably when they’d rubbed their heads together as she’d whispered at him. Toward the end, he’d whimpered his answers into her mouth and neck. She touched the center of her swollen lower lip and realized the root of her tongue ached. This wouldn’t do. She filled the basin with water and cast a chill charm then bathed her face with the icy water. When she studied her reflection again, she noticed the shower behind her. Did cold showers work the way she’d always heard? Would he mind if she tried? Would he help her dry off? She shook her head and started pulling clothes out of the bag.

At least she’d prepared enough to pack a pair of clean, dry knickers.

He was staring out the black windows when she emerged, and he didn’t move until she stood beside him. He’d put a heavy robe on over his jacket; when he unfolded his arms, she saw he wore fingerless mitts as well. Then the cold draft off the glass hit the bare skin at her ankles and wrists. She shivered and shoved her fingers under her arms.

“How do you stand it?”

“The cold? Warming charms, a hotter fire in the stove. Woolens. The rooms have compensations.”

“Such as?”

He gazed at her mildly. “Other things.” He walked to the tunnel entrance, and she followed. The air warmed noticeably as soon as she was a few feet from the windows. Hermione Disillusioned herself in his office. She kept close to him through the castle to the foot of the Grand Stairs, which were conveniently not in place, so they had to wait. Severus blocked her into an alcove, and she cancelled her spell.

A question had just occurred to her when a scrap of conversation drifted from the stairs overhead.

“It’s not for you to know.”

“...whole plan?” The words came from the last landing then both speakers were visible on the stairs.

“I told you,” Draco repeated sharply to Pansy. “Trust me.” They reached the ground floor, and he wrapped his arms around her and his voice warmed. “It’s not like before.”

Hermione hurriedly disguised herself just before Severus asked, “Out spooning?”

The two faces snapped toward him, and Pansy retreated out of Draco’s embrace.

“It’s not past curfew, sir,” Draco said.

“I’m aware of the time, Mr. Malfoy. What were you doing out of the dungeons?”

“Astronomy practice.” Draco pushed both hands into his pockets. “We wanted some time with the school’s reflecting telescope. You can check with Professor Sinestra.”

“Indeed.” Severus moved from the mouth of the niche and blocked Hermione’s view. “I suggest you
both return to the dorms.”

Pansy drifted towards the Hall into sight, but Draco remained hidden on the other side of Severus.

“We have a full hour before eleven,” Draco said, his voice light and reasonable. “Technically, we reserved the equipment for another thirty minutes—”

“Yet you’re nowhere near the Astronomy Tower, Mr. Malfoy.” Severus turned slightly, Draco pivoted into sight just past Severus’ arm, and Pansy edged backward, her face tipped down into shadow.

Something gleamed at Severus’ thigh when he smoothed his robes. He’d armed himself, and he held his wand at his side.

Draco’s eyes widened. He stood still; then his hands were pale against his robes, and he shrugged a little and dipped his head. He made to join Pansy, but stopped when Severus spoke.

“I have time before patrol. I’ll escort you to make sure you arrive safely. You wouldn’t want to explain to Filch—”

“But Filch is—” Pansy said, and Draco glowered at her.

“What of Filch?” Severus asked.

Pansy shook her head. “Nothing, Professor.”

“Let’s go.” The Potions master gestured toward the Hall, the wand gone from his hand.

Pansy shot Draco a glance, but both of them went as they were told. Hermione slipped from the niche, but they had already turned the corner into the Hall toward the dungeon stairs. She climbed the stairs swiftly; for once, the stairs aligned in her favor. She only cancelled her spell when she reached the Gryffindor corridor and hurried through the portal as soon as it opened.
Chapter Summary

What happens in the castle when serpents move amongst the lions?

Chapter Notes

**MANY THANKS:** To Melusin, who has more patience than I deserve.

**POSTING SCHEDULE:** Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday.

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers).* Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.

Sun, 8 Nov 98, Hogwarts Gymnasium

"Stupid Muggle game," Ron muttered under his breath. "Before breakfast on a Sunday, even."

Hermione’s new Slytherin best friend grinned back at him during a break in play.

He punched his fist into the side of his thigh. That wasn’t fair or really true.

After all, she still hung out with Ginny and tagged along with them as a group. But the only time she spent alone with him were the tutoring sessions. He was certain Ginny knew they’d split up for the time, but no one else seemed to know.

The ball careened around the room. The girls collided and bounced apart. He couldn’t remember any of the rules. Not like it mattered, but it did explain why Vivi was a Seeker.

Harry showed up at last. They watched for a bit in silence.

“Want to work out?” Harry asked.

Ron grunted. “That’s got to make more sense than this.”

“I think I recall one of the circuits that Wood tried to make us do. Let’s go.”

It was slow going. Not like they had anywhere to be, really. When they finished, Harry suggested a shower and quick Scourgify of their clothes to freshen up. Ron agreed. He smelled like he’d been hanging out with Dung.
They’d just dressed and were popping each other with damp towels when Malfoy emerged from the
sauna, his cheeks bright red. He wore only a towel wrapped around his waist. As soon as he saw
them, he jerked his left arm behind his back, but not fast enough to hide the faded Dark Mark.

“Well, well, Potty and the Weasel. Wasn’t aware you knew about the health facilities here. Manage
the showers, did you?” he asked, his lips twisting into a sneer.

Ron wound his towel and held it at the ready. “You should talk. Looked like Malfoy Manor was
nearly blown to bits last summer when I was there.”

Draco lost a little of his color. “That so? I suppose that’s why you came back, because you got tired
of taking baths in ditch water?”

Ron cocked his arm back and whipped the towel, but Malfoy dodged the tip easily, and Harry
grabbed at Ron’s robes.

“He’s just baiting you, Ron.”

“Better listen to Potty. You’re only brave because I haven’t got my wand.”

“Not hardly.” Ron tossed his towel aside. “Get it, and we’ll find out.”

Malfoy’s eyes moved from one to the other, and he edged toward where his robes were. He paused
and arched his brows, as though a brilliant idea had just occurred to him. “Maybe we should just try
it your way. Muggle fisticuffs. Isn’t that what you prefer, all physical and no magic? Like that
girlfriend of yours.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, his voice lowering into a growl.

“Muggle-knobbing, of course.” He put his hand to his chin in thought. “What’s that like? I just can’t
see the draw, myself.”

Ron jerked his arm out of Harry’s grasp and pulled out his wand. “I’m warning you—”

“Are you? Attacking an unarmed opponent on school grounds—my wand’s way over there, and I
haven’t a stitch on—that’ll get you kicked off your Quidditch team, Weasley, and where will that get
you?”

“Git.” Ron’s fingers clenched around his wand. Malfoy was right about needing to keep a clean
record. Ginny’s proclamation of wanting her team to keep spotless reputations had apparently made
its rounds. He forced himself a few steps toward the exit.

“You’re going to lose, Weasley.”

Ron glared at him over his shoulder. “Don’t be so sure, Malfoy. We’ll know in a couple of weeks
—”

“You think this is about a game?” He sniggered. “Just as dumb as ever.”

“Ron, forget it,” Harry said.

“What are you talking about, then?” Ron asked, facing Draco.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Malfoy turned his back on them.

Harry towed Ron along by his sleeve until Ron picked up speed and stormed toward the exit of the
“Ron, we can walk now,” Harry puffed as he jogged along.

Ron slowed to a stroll. Yeah, they could slow down. They were nearly at the Main Hall.

“I hate him.”

“We all do.”

Ron spun round and shook his hand toward the gym. “What I don’t get is how can she be friends with them?”

“You mean Vivi?”

“And Candace.” He scuffed his toe on the flagstones. “Any of them. Snakes. And Snape—she defends him all the time, just like Seamus says.”

“She’s always done that, Ron. And she was right, in the end.”

Ron grimaced. “He keeps putting her in detention, too. Four times since the start of term.”

“That many times?”

“Yeah.” Ron counted on his fingers. “The first week. Then after the potions test—”

“—you got her in trouble—”

“I know. Then the day she was late to class, and then last Friday—”

“—because you broke her knife—”

“I know. I said I was sorry.” He huffed. “If Snape didn’t take it out on us—”

“That’s Snape,” Harry said insistently. “He’s always been like that—”

“And she stands up for him.”

“And that’s Hermione.”

Ron stared at Harry. “You really don’t think anything’s changed?”

“Not a lot. I mean, Hermione’s usually pretty good at avoiding detention.” He paused and knitted his brows. “She usually loses points instead.”

“Not so far though. Maybe ten? Twenty? That’s odd.”

“True.” Harry frowned at an uneven stone as he scuffed it with his toe. “Snape’s been odd, too. I can’t ever recall him taking points off Slytherin.” He met Ron’s eyes. “Maybe he’s mellowed a bit. Or it was an act, to play his part.”

Ron scoffed. “Now you sound like Hermione.”

Harry groaned. “Don’t say that until I start quoting Hogwarts: A History.” He punched Ron’s arm. “Look, we’ll beat Slytherin. Ginny will stop riding us for messing around. Hermione will get over whatever has her distracted. After lunch, Seamus wants us to get together to discuss his plans. But right now, if we hurry, I bet we can get some bacon from the kitchen.”
Sun, 8 Nov 98, Gryffindor Boys' Dorm

They’d trooped upstairs after lunch, along with half of Gryffindor House. The sky had blackened during the morning. While the school was eating, the downpour had begun, punctuated with thunder and lightning, and it showed no signs of stopping.

Dean stirred up the fire in the stove. Seamus leaned against the post of his bed while the rest found somewhere to sit.

“So, Seamus,” Harry said. “You have an idea?”

“Actually, both Dean and I do.” Seamus and Dean exchanged a glance. “But I’m worried that our plans will get leaked.”

“Leaked?” Harry laughed. He gestured around. “We’re all on the same side, Seamus.”

“If you recall, Harry, the whole reason we decided to separate into specialized cells was to limit leaks.”

“If one of us were forced to talk,” Hermione said, but Seamus kept his gaze locked on Harry’s face. “No one’s under threat, Seamus.”

He turned toward her when she said his name. “Threats aren’t always necessary.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.


“But we’ve been through——” Hermione sucked in a breath. “You think I’ll let something slip?”

“I think so. You’ve been odd since term started, and you spend a lot of time with those snakes. It’s just not done, Granger. You know they’d carry anything interesting straight to Snape.”

She huffed and glanced around. Ginny’s face had gone hard, Ron’s mouth had loosed into a gape, Neville had lost all color, and Harry leaned toward Seamus intently. “Seamus, Candace lost family in the war——”

“Typical. You’ve defended Snape for years. Hell, you’ve even argued for Draco——”

“Just because I don’t see the world in absolutes——”

“You’re wrong. There are absolutes.”

“Explain Professor Snape, then? How about the Headmaster—he’s certainly not been straightforward.”

Seamus turned red. “Dumbledore plays politics——”

“We all do——”

“I don’t. The point is, I think you’ve gone soft, and you’ve lost focus. Besides, the potion’s brewed and stable. Your part is done. I’m the only one left who’s got formal explosives training—so I get a major say in who stays. I say you’re out.” Seamus’ eyes widened, and he gulped a breath.

“That’s harsh, mate,” Ron said.
"Hang on," Harry said at the same time. "This is a group decision, Seamus."

Ginny and Neville made supportive noises, but Dean crossed his arms and frowned.

"Then convince me." Seamus thumbed his chest then gestured toward Hermione. "Convince me she’s not going to let something slip. You know what the greasy git told us last summer when we started talking about clean-up. Sided right with the Ministry."

"Said he’d use Veritaserum, too," Dean added. "And he would. He let Umbridge have his entire supply."

"He forfeited his life when he announced for Dumbledore," Hermione shot back.

"What better way to establish trust?" Seamus replied. "I bet he did the same thing to Voldemort. Snape’s buried deeper than a tick in both Hogwarts and the Ministry. I’m sure he’s—"

"He’s—I’m sure he's hunted by the rogues! He stands to benefit from this—"

"Good point. Let's just wait until they do him in, then go after them. Or use him as bait, to draw them out. We'd be free of the whole lot."

"That's horrid!"

Dean said, "No worse than what he's done, Hermione. Look at how he's been over the years, to all of us, and you still defend him—"

"Maybe it was an act, to convince the other Death Eaters, did you consider that? He's been different this term, you’ve seen that." Hermione offered her hands toward Seamus. "I can’t say how, but I just know he’s not—"

"You just know?" Seamus huffed a laugh. Harry jerked upright. "Okay then. Why don't you go down and ask him who the true Severus Snape is? Maybe he'll invite you in for a cuppa and cakes."

Hermione surged to her feet. "And what about Ron, Ginny, anyone else? Aren’t you concerned they’ll tell me things?"

"No. Ginny’s staying behind, so she’s not part of it. Ron’s not the kind to let something slip in pillow-talk, as if that happens anymore." He scoffed.

"Dirty Bludger, Seamus!" Harry shouted.

Ron’s ears blazed red, Ginny had worked her wand out of her robes, and Neville clambered off the floor.

"I’m not listening to any more of this," Hermione said. "You want me out? Fine. At least I won’t have to listen to your stupid fantasies."

Harry snagged her arm, and she jerked away from him. "Hermione, don’t—"

"No, Harry. One thing he’s right about. My role is over. Let me know if you need anything stolen or brewed."

She slammed the door behind her, stormed to the girls’ dorm, and locked the curtains round her canopy. Stealing and brewing—that’s all she was good for. Books and cleverness and slinking behind the scenes on errands. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Maybe she wasn’t a brilliant strategist. But she did understand how to apply leverage, to blackmail, how to curry favor—
Pants. She’d been becoming more and more Slytherin over the years. Seamus had probably seen it for ages. She hugged her pillow and pressed her face into it. No wonder she sided with Snape. She’d practically become a female version of him.

Hermione muffled her wail into her pillow and squeezed her eyes shut until she saw stars.

---

**Sun, 8 Nov 98, Gryffindor Common Room**

Hermione didn’t come down to dinner. She didn’t even come to the Common Room afterwards, and the girls sent reproachful glares at all of the boys until everyone went to their dorms to escape the chill. Ron stayed at the corner desk in the alcove by the chimney and extinguished the candles. He’d known Hermione to vacate the girls’ dorm once Lavender and Parvati got too giggly.

Ah, luck. She headed straight for the squashy sofa in front of the fireplace.

“Hermione.”

She jumped and squeaked. “You’re still up?”

“I wanted to talk to you.” He moved to stand beside her. “Seamus was out of line. We’ll get him sorted.”

“It doesn’t matter. He made his decision.” She rubbed her upper arms and turned to face the fireplace. “In some ways, it’s simpler this way.”

“What is?” He trailed his fingers across her back and gently tugged her against him.

“All of it.” She sighed. “I’ve been thinking. It would be easier for all of you if Seamus knew we weren’t dating.”

“What?”

“Hear me out.” Her red-lined eyes met his. “He’s convinced I’ll let something slip. He’s supposed to be working with everyone on a plan. If we’re not together, he’ll keep trusting you—”

“—that’s stupid—”

“But we’re not dating, Ron.” She squirmed. “Not so tight, Ron!”

“Sorry.” He willed his hand to relax. “What if we don’t get back together?”

She shrugged, and her cheeks glowed red in the firelight. “It’s a chance—”

“I don’t want to take that chance.”

“Ron, we agreed—”

“We also agreed not to make it public.” He needed to see her clearly. He lifted his wand, and it burst to light.

Hermione flinched and shielded her face with both hands. “No!” Her eyes popped wide, and she staggered backwards.

He dimmed the light and reached for her. “Sorry, I—”
She stumbled, her skin sharply pale. “Ron, I really can’t—”

“What’s wrong with you?” he demanded and gripped her wrist.

“Muggles,” she said and covered her mouth with her free hand. “Both of them were—”

“Muggles?”

“They caught me in the alley—” She broke off and stared at his wand tip.

“Who were they?” He’d find them. Whatever they’d done to her, to make her like this—

“They grabbed me. They put—but I—I remember a wand.” She wrenched away and edged backwards.

“What Muggles have wands? Were they Death Eaters? Wizards?” A foot stool was right behind her, and he lunged to keep her from tripping over it. She toppled over anyway and scrabbled to her feet with a yelp.

“I can’t breathe, Ron. I need space, I have to go.”

She flung back the portrait and gulped cold air as she rubbed her arm. She’d nearly stifled in the heat of the Common Room, and she needed someone to explain the image that kept coming.

Severus. He could tell her.

The flash of light at the end of a wand.

She couldn’t remember past that blinding whiteness.

Whiteness at the end of a wand.

She knew she’d know the wand, if she could only see it clearly.

She hurried down the corridor towards the Stairs. Just as she reached the landing, voices. She froze.

Severus and McGonagall climbed the stairs. Their conversation stalled.

“Miss Granger, what’s wrong?” McGonagall asked.

“I...had a nightmare.”

He glowered down at her, his hair veiling his face so that Hermione wanted to gather it back.

“You look it,” McGonagall said. “Come to my rooms.” She gestured down the hallway. “Miss Granger?”

“It was so vivid.” Had his eyes narrowed? She concentrated on the vision, the pain of the blinding glare—his head lifted slightly, but she wasn’t sure. Didn’t Legilimency need a wand to work? Telepathy was a Muggle fairy tale—

She was being dragged forward by McGonagall’s arm round her waist.

“You’ll be fine. Tea, maybe a drop or two of something stronger.” Then in a louder voice over their shoulders, “We can chat later, Severus.”
He didn’t wait. He mounted the stairs up to the next landing.

Of course he wouldn’t wait. Leaving, acting as he normally did, it was a cover. Exactly like angling his head so his hair fell over his face.

Hermione was carried along mechanically by her legs until she was deposited into a firm armchair and a full cup was wedged into her hands. McGonagall sat in a matching chair opposite.

“It must have been quite a dream.”

The room was close and too warm. The darkness at the window wasn’t the same darkness as the Black Lake, but was getting there. Then her lungs started working again.

“Do memory charms fade, Professor?”

“Memory charms?” The older woman’s face pinched keen. “It depends on the spell, on who cast it—like any other magic. Do you think someone tampered with your memory?”

She took another deep breath and told what she recalled. “It always ends there, with a flash, a blur of the street, then I’m at the door to Grimmauld Place.”

“But you see a wand now?”

She nodded. “A glimpse, enough that I know it was a spell.” McGonagall’s wand silvered as she Summoned a bottle and tipped a couple of drops into Hermione’s tea. The wand had glinted in the light the same way.

“It’s a mild sleeping draught.” She chuckled. “You’re not the only student whose rest has been disturbed by the war, Miss Granger.”

“I know. Candace—” Hermione shut her mouth.

McGonagall smiled. “You’ve formed a few attachments with Slytherin House. Is that where you were going? To see Miss Marsland?”

“No. I wasn’t certain where I was going.” To the dungeons, but not to the dorms.

“It’s not safe to wander about the castle after hours.” McGonagall scoffed into her cup. “I approve of friendships between Houses, even with Slytherin, against all rumors. Reasonable rivalry is healthy, but it grows excessive at times. In fact, Professor Snape and I were discussing just that when we discovered you.”

The potion had over-sweetened her tea, and Hermione coughed. “How to contain it?”

“Possibly. It’s not really for students to know, you understand.” McGonagall rearranged the tea things on the little round table between them. “You don’t appear quite as peaky. I’ll escort you back to the portrait. You wouldn’t want to be put in detention for breaking curfew.”

She slipped down the corridor as the portrait creaked shut behind her, and stilled an urge to conceal herself. Surely Ron would have gone up to bed.

His head swiveled toward her when she came into the Common Room, and he rose from the couch. “How are you?”

“Better. Professor McGonagall gave me a sleeping potion and brought me back.”
“Snape’s probably prowling.”

“She and he were talking when I went out.”

“Lucky she was there.”

“I suppose. Oh, the potion’s working.” She didn’t quite force a yawn.

Ron had taken a couple of steps toward her. “Say, where did you spend detention Friday night?”

“In the Potions classroom, scrubbing cauldrons.” She squinted at him in the dim light. “Why?”

“Because Colin said he didn’t see you.”

“Colin? He-he got assigned to Filch. Professor Snape said so on Thursday.”

“Oh yeah. I, um...about Seamus. I guess you’re right. So we’ll just…”

“Just for tutoring.” Hermione turned from him and blinked to clear her eyes. This wasn’t how she’d wanted it to go. She wanted a shower to pelt away the reminder of the grit from the bricks on her skin. She wanted to wrap herself in the silk cloak and remember Friday night.

He shuffled behind her to the split in the stairs. “You’d tell me if…” His mouth seemed to have slid lower on his face. “If there’s someone else. I mean, if you...right? But there’s not, right?”

“If there were. But there’s not, Ron. It’s just me.”

Was there?

She didn’t know anymore.

---

**Mon, 9 Nov 98, Great Hall**

“Right. That’s all for today, class.” Professor Sprout shooed them out of the greenhouse, and the students started the trek up to the castle proper. The sky was coated smoothly with a low layer of white clouds, and a few snowflakes floated down.

Hermione ploughed forward to the front of the line of students, and Ginny raced after her, glaring at the few to dared to gawk after them.

“This isn’t going well,” Harry said in an undertone to Ron.

“Fine time for her to pick a fight over her bloody knife;” Ron muttered back. It had happened when Sprout had tried to pair them up during an exercise where they would have had to share utensils. Ron had cringed away to Harry’s side of the table, and Luna had volunteered to work with Hermione. The scene worsened when Malfoy had left his friends where they were clustered together, obviously making rude comments.

The git had passed close behind Ron and whispered, “Not looking good, Weaselby, if even the Mudbloods won’t associate with you.”

Harry and Neville had dragged Ron away before he swung a second fist, and Draco had toppled into a wheelbarrow heaped with dung. Sprout had taken points from both Houses, but they’d serve detention Tuesday, the same time as the Slytherin Quidditch practice.
“Did you notice? Candace didn’t even complain,” Ron said in hushed awe.

Harry nodded, his gaze locked on Hermione’s back far ahead of them. “I realize it’s just to make Seamus think you’ve really split up, but it won’t be convincing if we’re seen together. There’s something I need to tell the two of you as soon as we get to the table.”

“Won’t Seamus notice?”

“Neville asked him and Dean to stay and help tidy up.” Harry scowled. “That’s a ploy to give us some time. I hope it works.”

They bunched up in their usual place in the center of the long table. “Hermione, what you said yesterday about thinking Snape was still having trouble with the rogues—you’re probably right,” Harry said in a low voice. “That’s what Tonks told us.”

“Tonks?”

“Oh.” Harry’s cheeks tinted. “You’re not supposed to know any of this. Seamus and I slipped down to the Shrieking Shack early Saturday morning to meet with Remus—”

“Was that why Seamus had me kicked off the team?” Hermione cut in.

“You didn’t think to bring me?” Ron asked at the same time.

“No. Maybe.” He leaned closer. “Look, Tonks wasn’t supposed to be there, but she got suspicious of Remus and followed him.”

“Did you tell him to be careful, like I said?”

“I did, Hermione! Forget all that—she knew he wanted to help us. She wants to help us, too. And she’s hearing things at the Ministry—can you pass me the pitcher, Hermione?” he asked loudly, as several students passed by on both sides of the table. He waited until they were gone to continue. “Shacklebolt’s been worried about Snape.”

“Why?” asked Hermione.

“She said it’s the rogues, but she couldn’t clarify. Or wouldn’t.” He shrugged. “Apparently, Hogwarts and Snape have become frequent topics for the Auror department, always around loose ends discussions.”

“What he did in the library probably raised some brows,” Ron said.

“Seamus brought that up, but it was news to Tonks. What’s not news is that Snape’s stopped talking to the Ministry completely.” Harry glanced toward the doors. “There’s Neville. We’d better spread out.”

Hermione moved toward the staff table end, took a place near several Sixth Year girls, then started up a loud discussion about Ancient Runes.

“I didn’t bring you because it was just supposed to be Seamus and me,” Harry said quietly once they were alone. “Remember all that business about trying to limit leaks?”

“Why?”
“It was us three for years. Now it’s you and Seamus, or you and Ginny, and I’m left out.” He glanced up-table. He couldn’t hear what the girls were talking about now that the Great Hall was nearly filled up, but Hermione nodded energetically as she sketched in the air.

“It’s all a show, Ron. You know that.”

He wasn’t ready to tell Harry what had happened in the Common Room Sunday night, or anything else that had happened over the weekend. Or what they’d discussed outside the boathouse in October. “I’m not so sure—”

“Look, if she weren’t still interested in you, would she even talk to you? When you’ve had fights in the past she wouldn’t.”

“Maybe it’s because of you. Or Ginny,” he added as he filled his plate with peas and chicken and dumplings. “Who knows what she wants?”

“It’s you, man. She still loves you.” Harry bumped his shoulder into Ron’s. “Come on, Ron.”

Ron pressed his lips together. After a moment, he reached down and felt through the contents of his work bag, found the crispy edge of the folded parchment, and put it on the table before Harry.

“I was looking for—where’d you get that?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowing.

“You left it on your nightstand last Monday.”

“And you just took it.” Harry pushed the Map into his bag.

“Borrowed it.”

“You were spying on her, weren’t you?” Harry asked slowly.

Ron turned to face him. “I had to know, Harry. And…”

“And…?”

He took a slow breath. “I never saw her with anyone else.”

“There you are, then.”

“But I saw some strange things.”

“Like what?”

Well….” He let his gaze drift past Harry up to the High Table. “First, I think she goes to the Room of Requirement in the early mornings. She disappears and reappears where the door usually was.”

“So?”

“Well, why?”

“You’d have to ask her—”

“And she’d know I’d used the Map,” Ron admitted glumly. “That’s not all…”

“What else?” Harry said as he turned back to his meal.

“Last Thursday morning I saw her appear outside the Room…Snape was there.”
“Maybe he didn’t see her.”

“He must have done. They even walked together.”

Harry set his spoon down. “Walked together?”

“Yeah.” Ron leaned toward him. “And she didn’t come straight back from Astronomy class Wednesday, either. She went downstairs to the Main Hall, and Snape caught her.”

“What could she be doing in the Main Hall?”

Ron shrugged. He didn’t want to mention what he’d seen Friday when he’d been avoiding writing his Herbology essay.

“Maybe…” It was almost too awful to suggest. “Maybe she was going to the Slytherin dorms?”

“Why?”

“Dunno. To see Vivi?”

“In the middle of the night? Why?”

“I’ve heard rumors—we both have, Harry, you know—and maybe…” He bobbed his brows. “You know, like what were in those magazines Sirius left under his mattress—”

“Nah. Hermione’s not into girls, Ron.”

“How do we know? She might have decided to, I don’t know, experiment. And snakes—you can’t trust them. Vivi might have—”

“Seduced Hermione?” Harry laughed. “Ron, that’s about the craziest—”

He clapped his mouth shut as Vivi, Candace, and the Slytherin Keeper walked past. The girls gave Ron and Harry odd looks. Once they were gone, Harry started chuckling again. Ron joined in, in spite of himself.

“Tell you what, Ron. When you confront Hermione with this, I want to be there.”

“I knew I could count on you to back me up.”

Harry thumped him on his back. “Oh, no. I want to be there to haul Hermione off you when she starts whacking you with books. I think she’ll forget she’s a witch as soon as you tell her that.”

Ron chuckled along with Harry and took a sip of pumpkin juice. Yeah, she’d probably punch him. Hard.

But it still left one thing nagging that he wasn’t going to mention to Harry.

Friday, he’d been in the boys’ toilet casually watching dots move on the Map when he’d noticed Hermione’s marker. She’d gone down early to Snape’s office for detention, where she’d disappeared as expected. But she should have come back out, to scour cauldrons in the classroom like she’d said. He’d waited forever, staring at the corridor outside Snape’s office and ignoring the lewd comments the other boys had made to him for staying in the cubicle for so long.

But she’d never come back out.
No. Best not to mention that. Not to anyone.

###

The staff left their table in pairs and trios, but Hermione stayed seated until Snape breezed by with Professor Vector at his side.

Unhurriedly, Hermione collected her things and followed at a distance. The straggling line of teachers disappeared into the staffroom. Snape frowned at her as he held the door for Professors Vector and Burbage, before entering and closing the door behind him.

Well. Either she lurked undercover until he emerged from the staff meeting, or she cornered him in his office. No, what she needed to do was work on her Arithmancy independent project, which meant holing up in the Restricted Section of the Library. For the first time in ages, the prospect of burying herself with books made her feel itchy. She sighed, shifted the strap of her satchel, and went upstairs anyway.

She’d just finished rearranging her notecards for the thirty-ninth time when Harry popped his head around the corner of her stubby, dogleg aisle.

“I wondered where you’d got to,” he said and sat down beside her on a stool he’d conjured. A moment later, Ginny slipped into the aisle as well, but stood close to the mouth as though she were examining the shelves. “Gin’s keeping an eye out for us.”

“For Seamus.”

“Pretty much.” He clasped and reclasped his hands. “Remember back in Sixth Year, when I kept telling you that Malfoy was up to something? And when McGonagall questioned us about Katie Bell?”

She nodded and knew where this was going. Seamus’ words had overlaid her memory of Snape’s, although in a higher register and without as much certain menace. “It seemed so far-fetched. I guess this does, too.”

“Some. Less because we all know now that he turned. They both turned,” he clarified and leaned closer to her so he could lower his voice. “I can’t lose Seamus, Hermione, but you have a point.”

“Which is?”

“Snape. I think we can use him—”

She jerked backwards. “Not as bait, Harry, no one deserves that—”

“No, as an ally.” Harry winced. “I don’t think Seamus really meant that.”

“I’m not convinced,” she said. The gleam in Seamus’ eyes had been a little too fanatical for her tastes.

“Well…” He sighed. “Neither am I. After that bit of nasty business with his cousin Fergus, I think he started taking it all personally.”

They both stared down at Harry’s hands as he circled his thumbs around each other.

“As an ally,” she echoed, prompting him.

“If we can approach him. He was clear—we ‘ignorant whelps’ will get ourselves killed without the
Ministry to save us.”

“But the Ministry doesn’t want to be openly involved.”

Harry grunted at his hands.

She squinted at him. “You said he’s stopped talking with the Ministry?”

“Tonks said he’s become more of a black hole than when he was actively a spy. Seamus figures he’s up to something.”

“I suppose he would.” And she had a good idea why he’d gone quiet. “But I doubt he’d welcome us prying, nor do I think he’s supporting the rogues.”

“No, but if he’s planning something against them, he’ll need help.”

“If he’d accept help.” Which she didn’t think he would, not the man she’d become acquainted with.

“No, likely not. Stubborn, proud—”

“That, yes, but I think…” “I don’t want this life for you.” She took a slow breath and hunted for the right words. “I think there’s a lot more than just arrogance. Concern, maybe. Hope, for us, that we won’t…”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Won’t what?”

She turned back to her scrolls and tapped them together. “I don’t know, repeat history?”

“D’you remember the argument before you and the others went off to that reccy?”

Her bundle of scrolls slipped from her fingers, and Harry stopped them from rolling away with his foot. She remembered. Snape’s biting comments had ranged from accusations of futile sacrifice to willful suicide, a pack of idiots who’d been hooked securely on the wild speculations of an aging wizard, then she’d got herself captured—

“He wasn’t pleased.”

“He was as close to ranting as I’d ever seen. Even worse than when I saw his memories in the Pensieve.” Harry chuckled. “But looking back, maybe he was worried we were taking unnecessary risks, instead of just being difficult. Maybe you’re right.”

“What if I am?”

“Then we need to convince him. Get him on our side.” He picked up the scrolls. “Seamus thinks Snape can’t help, but he knew these people for years. He must know something that’s still useful.”

Hermione leaned back in the chair. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know, yet.” Harry tossed the papers onto her desk. “And Ron—can you reassure him that you still care for him?”

“Ron?” Ginny’s head snapped toward them at Hermione’s raised voice, and Hermione bit her lip. “We broke up, Harry.”

“I thought that was just for show.”
Ginny’s gaze was fixed on her, and Hermione swallowed. “No. I asked to break for a few months —”

“When?”

“Middle of October.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “He didn’t say anything.” He looked at the lowest shelves, and his mouth shrank to a tight line. Behind him, Ginny took a step into the aisle, her brows drawn.

“He wanted it kept quiet. I agreed. I don’t want to hurt him, but I couldn’t go on—”

Harry shook his head and cut her off with a waved hand. “No, it’s not that. Don’t worry about it.” He flashed a smile at her. “It’s nothing.”

“Ron aside, you know Seamus won’t work with Professor Snape,” Hermione said. “Even if we can convince the Professor.”

“I’ll work on that, too, if it means roping Tonks in to get both of them to see sense,” Harry said. He stood up and Vanished the stool. “I’m not certain how we’ll do any of this. Ginny agreed to pass messages to you. We wouldn’t have made it without you, and Seamus is stupid to think otherwise.”

Fri, 13 Nov 98, Potions Classroom

They’d just filed into the Potions classroom when Snape ordered them to keep their belongings together. He stood silently at the front of the room with his hands buried in his robe pockets, glowering at the last stragglers as they rushed to their tables. Ron fidgeted in his seat. The tension was just like when Umbridge had skulked in the classrooms, evaluating the teachers.

“It’s been my practice to ensure all Seventh Years get exposure to working collaboratively. Those of you who have approached me regarding Potions as a career will find this excellent preparation for apprenticeship. For the next three weeks, you’ll receive a team mark. Whatever your team receives will count as your individual score. Is that clear?”

The students muttered their responses, and Ron gave Harry a nod. This wouldn’t be so bad.

Then Snape ruined it.

“Longbottom, take the brewing position by Miss Marsland. Finnegan, you’ll prep for Miss Parkinson. Miss Granger, prep for Chamberlain at the back.” He rearranged the entire class, his voice growing louder over the scraping of chairs on the floor, until he’d come down to the last four.

“Potter, brew for Cox. Weasley, prep for Malfoy.”

Draco thunked his bag onto the table. “Sir, you’re joking.”

“I can’t—Professor, our match is in nine days,” Ron said. “We can’t possibly work together.”

Snape lifted his hands in a shrug. “I suppose you’ll have to learn to overlook the arbitrary divisions of Houses.” He carried on addressing the class, “For an initial exercise, you’ll use the standard Third Year Deflating Draught—”

“Sir,” Draco interrupted. “Will we have to stay like this after the exercise?”

“Perhaps. Consider it a taste of life after Hogwarts. You won’t always have your pick of working
associates. While the preparer processes the ingredients, the brewer sets up the workstation…” He moved around the tables as students scurried to follow instructions.

Malfy leaned close to Ron’s shoulder when he returned from the stores. “If you screw up my grades, Weasley—”

“Watch you don’t mess up mine,” Ron grumbled back and started cutting up the willow roots. Beside him, Draco set out his equipment in right angles and ordered each pinch bowl of whatever Ron finished dicing or grinding, then sat on his stool to watch as Ron tackled the next item.

“Malfy, are you waiting for an invitation?” Snape asked coolly from behind them.

“I wanted to give Weasley time to finish—”

“If you don’t complete the brewing by the end of class, both of you receive a zero.”

The boys exchanged a look over the table, and Draco picked up the bottle of leech juice while Ron ground his chunk of alum even finer.

Ron held his breath as Draco cast the final spell onto the cauldron. He lifted the glass stirring rod, and goose-shit green potion dripped off it.

“Good enough,” Ron said. “It’s not yellow, so it’s not poisonous.”

“Good enough?” That’s barely passing!” Draco frowned. “Something’s wrong.” He bent over the cauldron and sniffed. “What’s the date on the roots?”

“I didn’t check.”

Malfy stared at him. “You didn’t check?” He turned to peer at Pansy, who was holding a vial of similarly colored liquid to the light, her mouth puckered in disgust. Around the room, most of the students grimaced at their samples.

“By next class, three feet on why the expected results weren’t obtained,” Snape said with a smirk.

Draco gawked at the professor. “You set us up?”

“Three feet,” Snape repeated. “Samples in the basket.”

“Does this affect our grade, Professor?” Draco asked as Snape brushed past their table.

The Potions master glanced down into the cauldron and raised the stirring rod. The potion had begun to set, and clumps slid sickly off the end. “The draught is half the team grade. The essay makes the remainder.”

Ron viciously scrubbed at the mortar while Draco bottled a sample and dropped it in the basket. This was bad. He had no idea what had gone wrong. Chamberlain, the squatty Ravenclaw Hermione had been paired with, waddled past, carrying a vial of forest green liquid.

“How’d you do that?” Seamus demanded.

Chamberlain shrugged. “I’m not certain.” He stopped in his tracks and looked up at Snape. “Hermione and I have to write on why it did work for us, don’t we, sir?” His shoulders drooped slightly at Snape’s nod, and then squared. “Righto.”

“The same for the rest of you whose results were more successful,” Snape said. “Three feet
explaining your success.”

The classroom emptied out, with the bulk of the students heading upstairs to the Great Hall for dinner. Ron dawdled along until Harry caught up with him. Harry’s grin faded when he saw Ron’s expression.

“Working with Malfoy was as bad as expected?”

“At least he didn’t egg me on the whole time. Your draught came out well?”

“Close to perfect, according to Cox.” Harry jerked his head towards the other boy, a Ravenclaw, who’d linked arms with a red-headed Hufflepuff. “It’s like working with Hermione.”

Almost as soon as they’d sat at the Gryffindor table, Freddy joined them.

“Freddy,” Ginny said, beaming at him. “Did Madam Pomfrey clear you for Quidditch?”

“She did,” he said gloomily and shoved a crumpled letter at Ginny. “But my parents don’t agree.”

She smoothed the paper on the table. “They’ve forbidden you from playing?”

“They think it’s too dangerous. It’s the third letter they’ve sent. I kept telling them it was a freak accident, but they don’t care.” He waved toward the staff table. “They wrote to Madam Hooch, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Dumbledore.”

Ginny traced the edges of the letter. “That’s that, then. I’m sorry, Freddy.”

“Not nearly as sorry as I am,” he replied. “But like Madam Hooch pointed out, there’s next year. Maybe they’ll let me play then.” He took the letter from Ginny and made his way down to his friends at the far end of the table.

“You know what this means?” Ginny fixed a glare on Ron. “No backup Keeper.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do.” She planted one knee on her bench and leaned over the table at him. “No more goofing off, Ron. Madam Hooch said the scouts want to see good teamwork—”

“—I heard you—”

“And as Captain, I’m responsible for keeping a tight ship. I need everyone on their game.”

“Scouts?” Hermione asked. “Which games would they come to?”

“They don’t give any warning,” Ginny said as she sat down. “They show up and tell Madam Hooch after the game’s over. Each club sends its own scouts.” She frowned at Ron again, and his ears felt like they’d burst into flame.

“I’m keeping my nose clean, see?” he said. “I didn’t argue with Malfoy or Snape today in class.”

“But you started to,” Ginny said. She stowed her bag under the bench. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Snape rearranged the class just to entice you to fight with Malfoy ahead of the match. Keep it together, Ron. This year is my last chance to get picked up by a professional club.”
Sun, 15 Nov 98, Hogwarts Castle

She’d tried to corner Severus all week, but every attempt failed. Either he’d been too quick to leave, or Ginny’d pulled her into a discussion on the finer points of wand gestures for Charms, or she’d had to make a show of shunning Ron for Seamus’ benefit.

Then she’d had to forgo her practice Saturday morning because Ginny had been in the Common Room. The red head was fidgety and sleepless over the upcoming Quidditch match, and Hermione had felt obligated to do what she could to reassure her. By the time Ginny had calmed down, the stampede for Hogsmeade had begun. She tagged along with the rest.

In the queue in the courtyard, she learned that Snape had chaperone duty in the village. It was enough to kill any hope she might slip down to his office, without the addition of his scowls and sharp gestures when directing students. She spent the morning finishing her Christmas shopping, had lunch in the Great Hall, and returned to the Common Room to bury herself in homework.

She’d just sat down for dinner when Vivi stopped by to cancel their squash game.

Determined not to have wasted the entire weekend, Hermione set her alarm early and headed down to the Room. When she emerged later, she hoped to see the dark shape of the Potions master in any of the corridor’s niches, but he wasn’t there.

Hermione steeled herself with a deep breath and headed down to the dungeons.
His office door was half-open, and she peered through the gap just as he stepped into sight to rearrange items on the shelves near the door. His hair shone damp, doubtless from bathing, and swung heavily as he moved. She cleared her throat, and he jerked toward the sound.

“Professor?” she asked as his expression turned wary. The caution deepened, and he beckoned her in and locked the door shut behind her.

“My office hours are this afternoon, Miss Granger,” he said as she cancelled her spell. She backed out of his way as he went back to his desk and flattened a composition book open for marking. “I haven’t much time this morning.”

That limited her to just one line of enquiry. Right. Best pursue the most urgent one.

“I have a question,” she replied as she took her place in the armchair. His quill bled across the paper. He ignored her, apparently, as she reassured herself she’d picked the problem he’d help her with. When he paused to turn the page of the essay, she asked, “Do you know anything about memory charms?”

He kept working, and she was tempted to repeat herself until he dipped the quill into his bottle and shot a glance at her. “A bit.”

Typical Snape. He wasn’t making this easy. “Do they break down?”

“They can.” The nib continued to scrape.

She tapped the flats of her fingers on the arm of the chair. “I looked in the Library this week and couldn’t find much. There’s a whole shelf on how to do them and warnings on what can go wrong, but nothing on how long they last or how to recover from them.” Her eyes swiveled to meet his. “Professor McGonagall said it depended on whoever cast the spell.”

“It does.” He scowled down at the essay on his desk.

“Is it possible to regain memories? I mean, if you think they were altered or if you see bits of them?”

The quill’s tip snapped and sprayed ink across the book. He tsked, whipped his wand from his sleeve, and cleaned up the mess. “It’s been known, Granger—”

“I’ll go,” she said quickly and bent to collect her satchel.

“Stay.” He dropped the ruined quill in his waste-paper basket and pawed through his desk drawer. His hair fell over his face. “That’s what drove you from your dorm Sunday?”

He had detected something from her.

“Yes.” She let her eyes unfocus as she thought back. “I see the beginnings of whatever happened, then a flash, and nothing more. Except Sunday, when I finally glimpsed the person’s wand.”

“A flash?” He fixed a keen stare on her and stopped rummaging in his desk. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “It’s bright. Blinding.”

He leaned back into his chair and clasped his hands at his waist, regarding her. After a moment, he shoved the drawer shut and stood. “I need to fetch another quill. Come with me.”

Hermione followed him to his chambers and paused when he went through the door that was always closed. She trailed after him into a room lined with shelves stuffed with books. The lowest shelves
held wooden boxes reinforced with metal on their corners. A work table filled the center of the room, and the gentle glow from the cauldrons on the table suggested that he had several long-brew potions simmering. The sweetish fumes from one of the cauldrons mixed with the dry scent of old paper.

He talked as he shuffled books on a shelf at the far end of the room. “I have a book that may help. I’ll lend it to you, as long as you keep it secret.” His voice subsided into a rumble of incoherent mutterings. Whatever he was looking for wasn’t where he’d thought it was.

She wasn’t sure where to stand and didn’t want to appear too eager to inspect the volumes near her. Would he notice if she sidled over? He’d gone from shifting things from side to side to stacking handfuls of books onto an open space of the table, revealing a second row behind the first. How big was his collection? She studied the shelf that was beside her until she sensed the faint shiver of enchantment. She forced herself to relax and imagined her power enveloping her and spreading out, just like she’d learnt in Theory of Magic, until she tasted multiple faint metallic tangs.

Whatever he had in this room he’d protected with layers of spells.

Her gaze slid over the books, some with titles in letters she didn’t recognize. The longer she looked, the more she wanted to touch. Touching couldn’t hurt, right?

“You’d best be courted in a bookshop.”

She jumped at his voice and stared at him while her fingers continued to stroke the battered spines. He was an arms-length from her with a small book in one hand, and the mess had been tidied away. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy.” He extended the book to her. “Keep this private.”

Grateful for a distraction, Hermione heaved her bag onto his worktable and unpacked its contents so she could get to the false bottom.

He sighed impatiently. “Granger, I haven’t time for your housekeeping.”

“I’m just hiding it; give me a moment.” In went his book, then seal the bottom, then pile in the rest—Snape had picked up one of her paperbacks and was examining the cover.

“Is this a Muggle marriage manual?”

She giggled. “No, Little Women is just a novel. I read it sometimes when I’m upset. You can borrow it, if you want.”

He flipped the book over, then shrugged and stuffed it into his coat pocket. “Out.”

“When do you want yours back?”

“In a few weeks. December. That should be ample time.” He steered her by her shoulder into his living room.

“Ample time for what?” she asked when they were in the tunnel.

“To read it. I’ll arrange a time for us to make the exchange.”

That suggested another fictitious detention and reminded her of something else. “Would Draco have attacked you last week?” she asked as he continued to herd her forward.

“No. He likely wanted to, but he knows better than to actually attempt it.”
“You had your wand out.” She stopped beside his desk and faced him.

“Did you think I was afraid?” He folded his arms and watched her with a faint smile. “Are you afraid of adders? Not Slytherins, but the reptiles.”

“Respect, not fear.”

“That. Malfoy’s a potent imbecile, but even he knows he has too much to lose if he’s expelled.” His eyes flicked to something on the wall behind her.

“Then why did he threaten me?” she asked, following him as he moved across the office.

“There’s no evidence to tie anyone to what Miss Marsland overheard. But it brings up a point. Don’t come into the dungeons for any reason unless I’m expecting you.” The office door unlocked when he touched the door’s handle. “I need you to go. Please.”

Hermione disguised herself and headed back upstairs. She’d just ducked into an alcove off the Entry Hall to cast off her charm when the Headmaster walked past toward the Dungeon stairs.

###

Snape pressed the door to and sprawled into his armchair.

Ever since she’d exploded out of her tower and tried to telepathically plant an image into his mind—and succeeded, thanks largely to his own skills at Legilimency—he’d suspected the hasty memory charms he’d used on her in Malfoy’s dungeons were beginning to fail. He’d evaded her the whole week, delaying the inevitable discussion as long as she’d allow.

He’d regretted having done it to her, more so now that things had changed between them, but it couldn’t have been helped. He couldn’t have let her leave the dungeon knowing that she’d seen his doe Patronus.

But a flash?

Thank Merlin he’d had an excuse to have his face averted when she’d said that. She didn’t see the relief pool over his face. He’d spent years learning to minimize the energy output of all his spells; even when he was hurried, his Obliviate’s glow was definitely not a flash.

Not him, then.

Not his secrets, someone else’s.

Whose, then? A Death Eater would have simply killed her. Someone she knew? He closed his eyes and thought back to that awful afternoon.

He’d had to be quick with the charm. He’d just released her when he’d heard the scuffle of footsteps down the stairs. Finnegan had stumbled over Bellatrix’s body into the dungeon.

Seamus Finnegan? It wasn’t the first time he’d felt uneasy about the boy. Was he capable of that kind of duplicity, let alone that advanced a spell?

His clock’s seventh strike died just as the expected rap came on the door.

“Coming, Headmaster,” he called and rose from his chair.
Hermione cast a minor swelling charm on the door to make it difficult to open, in case anyone came back early from Hogsmeade. Odds were no one would bother her, since lunch had just ended, and the day was sunny. She sat cross-legged at the head of her bed with the borrowed book and a notebook.

The compact volume really had seen better days. The pages were rough-cut, making a casual flip-through difficult, and some had been dog-eared. Snape had given her no guidance, so she decided to start with the table of contents.

His scrawls covered every centimeter of unprinted paper, beginning with the front leaves. Expected, considering what his Potions book had looked like, but the notes had numbers beside them. On a hunch, she followed a note that linked page 192 and 241 to “prevent. herb” and found a list of plants for potions to combat memory alteration and a section on collecting them.

She turned to the end pages. It had had no index, so he’d made one and had included hosts of other references. Titles, some call numbers, cryptic comments, a few names that might be people or locations, and a continuation of the index he’d started at the front.

After a few minutes of jumping around the book, she found something promising by accident. The section head half-way down the left page read, “Connecting segments,” and was framed by a ring of annotations. It was possible to rejoin fragments, given time, dedication, and attention to dreams. The dreams didn’t even need to be of the fragments; the chapter ended with a comment that unrelated recurring dreams might be keys. She slouched back against the headboard.

The only recurring dream she could recall was where she was floating on a black ocean. When had those started? She drummed her fingers on the open book. The first one had woken her maybe a month after that night outside of Diagon Alley, and what she’d thought was the sound of surf was sleet gusting against the windows at Grimmauld Place.

She paged to the beginning of the section to reread it, but was distracted by Snape’s marginalia. In her peripheral vision, his spiky hand became almost floral at times, like jabs of leaves. Here and there he’d used pencil, almost as if to break up the black ink. No, there was a pattern. The pencil was questions. The ink was answers, and by tilting the book she could see where pencil had been rubbed out and overwritten in ink.

At the end of one paragraph on the importance of acknowledging the memory fragments were real, there was a number, 168, in pencil. She flipped to that page. “From 74” was printed in pencil along a passage, the sole note on the whole two-page spread, and it referenced the page she’d come from. Interestingly, the rest of the six-page passage on reasons Obliviate spells failed was heavily marked. The absence of any commentary nagged at her. It was unSnapish. She held the book to the light and examined the pages at different angles until a faint glimmer appeared.

There had been notes, but he’d hidden them. Her skin prickled. She snapped the book closed and hopped off the bed to pace.

When and why had he hidden the notes? That he couldn’t find the book suggested he’d forgotten where he’d shelved it. What if he’d referred to it after she’d tried to shove the thoughts into his head and simply mislaid the book afterwards? What if he’d obscured the notes then, suggesting not only that he intended to lend the book to her but that he didn’t want her to see the notes.

Could he have cast the charm while she’d been distracted by his library? She scoffed. She lost herself around books, so he could have done anything.
“I don’t even know how long I was there,” she said aloud. “Either way, he didn’t want me specifically to see.”

She rubbed her upper arms. Just when she’d decided she completely trusted him, this kind of thing happened and reminded her who he had been.

The book lay face up on her bed. If she broke whatever spell he’d used, he’d know. Unless…could she figure out how to replicate it?

A thrill squirmed up from her belly. It’d be like breaking into his private stores. Her wits against his. Exhilarated, she crawled onto the bed, pulled her wand from her bag, and opened the book to the curiously clean pages.

“Aparecium,” she said and tapped her wand on the book. Nothing happened, but she’d expected that.

A half-hour before dinnertime, after hours of work, the writing appeared, but her triumphant squeal faded into a confused whine.

The comments were similar to every other comment. A few marked passages about interference from counter spells, the importance of adequate time and concentration, and a note at the very bottom of the right page in pencil: *Occlumency helps focus thought. I’ll teach you.*

---

**Wed, 18 Nov 98, Hogwarts Castle**

McGonagall had kept Hermione behind after class, but Ron didn’t see any reason to wait for her, and told Harry so.

Didn’t matter to wait now that they weren’t together, right?

Harry shrugged and kept going. “Gin, what are we drilling on tonight?”

“We’re not,” she said over her shoulder. “Just a pick-up game. Margot was the next best at Keeper trials, so she’s taking the reserve slot.”

“Margot?” Ron grunted and rolled his eyes. The Fourth Year had been the logical choice, but she was a long way down from Freddy. He shifted his rucksack and hopped the gap of the stairs as they began to shift.

“She’s ok,” Harry said in an undertone. “It’s just reserve.”

Hermione finally joined them at table right when the platters of food appeared. She shoved her bag under the bench and huffed when she sat.

“What’d McGonagall want?” Ginny asked.

“Some of her colleagues wrote back, and one of them wants to talk to me in a couple of weeks.”

“What about?”

“Options after I leave school.” She glanced at Ron. “She’s in Heidelberg, so we’ll speak over Floo network.”

“Germany?” Harry asked with a grin. “What does she do?”
“She’s a Healer, but her speciality is underserved areas, like chronic diseases of house-elves.”

“Your spew group should impress her,” Ron said.

Hermione hesitated as she scooped peas and onions onto her plate. “That’s right, Ronald.” She pushed the food around her plate, then said lightly without looking at him. “It’s S.P.E.W., by the way.”

“I was just—”

“I know you were just being funny.” She met his eyes. “But it’s getting old.”

Ginny, who sat beside her, looked at Ron as well, but she kept her face blank.

Ron nodded. “I won’t do it any more.”

“Thank you.” She concentrated on her meal, and Harry changed the topic back to Quidditch practice. Eventually even this line of discussion failed.

“Harry,” Hermione said, “do you recall much about Professor Snape teaching you Occlumency?”

Harry set his goblet down. “It was awful. He kept forcing his way into my mind. He’d order me to calm my thoughts, then insult me when I couldn’t.” He scowled at his plate for a moment. “That’s about it, really.”

“How did you practice?”

“Well, I…tried to clear my mind. And control my emotions.” He shook his head and lowered his voice. “He said I wasn’t trying because I wanted to feel special.”

“Git,” Ron said. “Of course he’d say that, and see it was helpful later, having some idea where Voldemort was.”

“I think he was more right than I’d like to admit, looking back,” Harry said. The desserts arrived then, but Harry pushed his plate away. “If I eat any more, I’ll be lardy on the broom. Come on, Ron. Let’s get down to the pitch and light the lanterns.”

---

**Sat, 21 Nov 98, Quidditch Pitch**

Candace Marsland had done as planned and replaced Malfoy exactly ninety seconds after the game started. Vivi Pembroken took to the air encouraged by a wild whoop from the Slytherin stands and proceeded to steal Potter’s thunder. He’d always been fearless and fast, but he outweighed her by thirty pounds. She blazed recklessly around the pitch, feinting and dodging. Fifty minutes in the teams were even at twenty points each, and Captain Weasley asked for a time out. The Gryffindor team huddled around their water cooler, mopping their brows and casting glances at the Slytherin team.

No one could have anticipated what happened once the game resumed.

After another breakneck chase, the two Seekers plummeted through the sky and barreled through a melee of Beaters and Bludgers. Somewhere in the middle of robes and brooms, both Seekers got tangled together and tumbled groundward, before they each landed together, apparently holding hands. They only separated once Hooch and both captains converged on them.
They’d caught the Snitch at the same exact moment and ended up clasping hands around it.

Hooch blew her whistle and called the match a draw.

The teams pressed palms cordially and peaceably before they all left the pitch.

Back in the Slytherin Common Room, their heroine Seeker sat in the midst of a rapt audience and explained how it had happened over and over. Snape kept a careful eye on her as she was overcome by high-pitched giggles. In the end, he slipped a mild sedative into her pumpkin juice and suggested to Marsland that she encourage the girl to take a shower and get some rest.

He left the dorms to prepare for midnight patrol around half ten, having stayed longer in the Common Room than intended. He wanted cold air and wind. Without a second thought, he climbed to the Astronomy Tower and sat sideways in a crenel. Fireworks were still blasting out from the windows of the Gryffindor tower. Weasley products, based on quality. A Catherine wheel roared into the sky before tumbling downward toward the lake.

“Evening, Professor.”

He turned towards her. “Why aren’t you celebrating?”

Granger shrugged. “Too loud.” She leaned on the wall beside him, peering down the side of the castle. “It took me years before I could deal with the heights here.”

“It’s no worse than flying.”

She shuddered. “I’m terrified of that. Brooms, Hippogriffs, Thestrals—I can’t stand flying.”

Heights, sudden physical contact, loud crowds, accusations of being out late. He ticked off the list of fears she’d revealed and mulled them over as she sat with her back to the wall and turned her face upwards to the sky.

“Granger, you do realize it’s close to midnight?”

“I know.” She wrapped the corner of her robe more securely around her. “I read your note about Occlumency.”

“How long did that take you?”

“A few hours. I’ve wanted to talk to you for a week about that, other things.”

“It can help, but I’d prefer to have both Dumbledore and McGonagall’s awareness.”

“Private tutoring with Professor Snape. No one will understand when I’m excited to go.” She fell silent and toyed with the buttons on his trouser cuff.

“Granger.” He waited for a few beats. “I’ll have to take points,” he said, nudging her hip with his toe.

She looked down to see what was touching her and rubbed the top of his boot with her palm. “And detention?” she asked lightly, her face still downcast and shadowed.

“Minx,” Snape replied softly.

She snickered.
“I have no desire to punish you,” he said. “Be a good girl tonight and behave.”

Granger rolled to sit on her heels at his feet and lifted her head up to study him. He’d knelt to her in the same posture, and their exchanged positions made him uneasy. She stroked his boot-sheathed shin with the tips of her fingers and leaned toward him. “But I’m not a good girl, Professor.”

His balls tightened. “Granger, I won’t play with you like that.”

She lowered her face again. “Because you’re not interested?”

“What we do is inappropriate enough,” Snape replied, “without adding the specter of cliche.”

She laughed after a moment. “I suppose fantasies of naughty school girls would be pretty trite.”

“Not to mention damning.” He bundled his cloak closer around himself, as much from modesty as from chill, and stood up. “Get up and go home,” he said and offered her a hand.

She hauled herself up and drifted after him as he walked to the stairs within the superstructure of the tower where the massive telescope and fixed astronomical equipment were housed. The space was barely lit by starlight; long acquaintance made him sure of his path, but he worried for her as her shoes scuffled on the uneven stones and he considered lighting his wand. She stumbled a little, caught at him, and halted just behind him, her hand in his.

He felt pinned and wasn’t sure why. What made holding hands in the darkness of the tower different than helping her to her feet? He loosened his grip, determined now to cast *Lumos* and get her downstairs and out of range of temptation.

In response, she moved forward, wrapped her right hand around his right wrist, felt for and closed her left hand around his left wrist, then moved both his hands to the small of his back.

Snape didn’t resist. Something in him sang, cooperative desires to submit to her handling and to luxuriate in her attentions.

He wasn’t prepared when she began lightly kissing the backs of his fingers, but his prick stiffened.
He felt her moving, knew from her height that she’d knelt behind him to lave attention on his hands. She pushed her face against his curled fingers to nuzzle his palms. He felt lightheaded and schooled his shallow, quick breaths. Snape opened his hands to her, and she nibbled the fleshy parts of his hands and the webbing between his fingers, sending shocks through him.

What was she doing to him, turning their game on its head? Kneeling to him, adoring his body, yet inducing him to yield to her. He yearned to turn to her, order her to attend to him, and at the same time he longed to strip and beg her to caress him.

“Granger,” he whispered in partial protest. She pushed his cuffs back, her mouth exploring up to his wrists. She remained silent, her lips busy on his skin. Severus moaned softly and called, “My Mistress, please.”

She stood then, pressed herself against his back and embraced him, trapping his hands between their bodies as her own hands roamed slowly down his front. His breath hitched as she found his hardness and fondled him through the layers of cloth. Severus turned his head towards her, repeated his plea. Hermione parted his cloak and robe and firmly grasped his cock in his trousers.

“Good boy,” she whispered, “not like me at all.”

Severus whimpered, his hips twitching forward, as her words sent a jolt of heat into his groin. This
he understood, although her actions had him spiraling. Her fingers were busy at the placket of his trousers, then she dived one hand into his pants to free him and began tugging and stroking.

He was making noises, vague complaints of impropriety and desire. She cooed back at him, soothing him, encouraging him to come, as she duck-walked him closer to the wall and released his arms. He braced one hand against the stone and drew back his robes with his other. Could be caught, though he knew few ever ventured to the tower at night. Didn’t matter. His Mistress chose to expose him, chose to touch him, and his lot was to submit.

“Good Severus,” she purred into his ear. “Come for me.”

He obeyed, grunting with effort as his cum spattered the floor. She curled around him and licked him clean. Severus panted as he watched her head bob. Accosted him, ignored him, teased him, and ordered him to orgasm. And he submitted. She was tucking him away now, gently reseating him and fastening his trousers.

Hermione cast a free-floating magelight and Scourgified the spunk from the floor, then smiled up at him and stroked his jawline.

Severus dropped to his knees to press his lips to her ankles and shins. Belonged here, at her feet. Whatever she wanted. He’d lost all objectivity.

Then she was at his level, and her tongue darted into his mouth.

“Okay, Se…?” Her words and the magelight were blown away in a gust of wind.

He hummed affirmative into her shoulder. He’d done scenes like this, given his body to his paid mistress—and performed services, but never felt this intensity before. Couldn’t make sense of it. She’d aroused him, made him come—usually his dommes didn’t permit his release, but she was his Mistress, all his own—and he was elementally drained.

“Are you sure? It must be past twelve now, I should go.”

He chuckled, knotted his fingers in her hair and kissed her, tried to express what he felt with his lips. Gratitude. Desire. Surrender. Rapture. Broke from her, pushed his face into the curve of her neck. “Come, my own, I’ll escort you down.”
Nov 22-28, 1998

Chapter Summary

People who spend a lot of time around books often seem to be myopic...and it's not only a visual problem.

Chapter Notes

THANKS and SUCH Many thanks to Melusin, again and again and again.

POSTING SCHEDULE: Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday.

NOTES: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.

Sun, 22 Nov 98, Gryffindor Girls' Dorm

He'd been silent the whole way to the Gryffindor Tower landing of the Grand Stairs where he made her leave him. The portrait closed behind her before she realized she'd spoiled a chance to talk about the other miseries in her life.

The Common Room wasn't as crowded as it had been, but the boys were still launching rockets out the windows. She slipped past them unnoticed and went to her dorm room.

“Then he did what?” squealed Parvati.

Lavender flopped backward on Parvati’s bed, where they were both sitting, but Lavender was too overcome by giggles to continue with her exploits. Both girls were dressed for bed, but it looked like that would be some time coming. Ginny was sprawled over her bed with a clutter of scrolls; she looked at Hermione and rolled her eyes.

“I guess you have better stories, Gin?” asked Lavender, propping herself up on one elbow.

“A few,” said Ginny. “Nothing I care to talk about.”

Lavender giggled. “Or can’t!” She hopped onto her knees and wagged her fingers at Ginny. “Cho told me a few things about Harry—does he even know how to kiss?”

Ginny glared back at her, then smirked and relented, her cheeks tinting. “He’s a great kisser. And he’s fit, not like your Tommy.”
The other girls feigned offense, but the banter continued, and Hermione tuned them out as she concentrated on getting ready for bed.

“Granger won’t say.”

Hermione looked up to see three pair of eyes staring at her. “Won’t say what?”

“Professional Quidditch players—more beefy?”


Lavender’s eyes narrowed, but she laughed anyway. “I think more. I know what Granger’s problem is,” she said with a wink, and nudged Parvati. “I think she’s attracted to the quiet ones. I bet when she’s bonking someone you can still hear a watch ticking.”

“Like Ron’s quiet,” grumbled Ginny. “He never shuts up. I remember that night last Christmas when you and he—” She stopped at Hermione’s glare amid encouraging hoots from the other girls.

Hermione stacked her things together on her bed and folded her arms. “Well, go on, Ginny,” she said coolly. “We’re not together now, so it’s all fair game. What did you hear?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Not like it was the most discrete thing you ever did. Everyone was in the parlor—I mean, everyone, including Mum and Remus and half the Order—and the two of you were just down the hall, and Ron started moaning—”

“Merlin’s pants,” Hermione replied. “You want to know what happened? Ron was trying to snog me in the library, and he knocked a pile of books onto his foot, then he fell onto me with my knee in his crotch.”

“You’re kidding? Because then you started giggling.”

“Well, yeah, because it was ridiculous. He went from full-on erection to nothing—” The girls howled when she said “erection,” drowning her out, and she glowered at them. “I don’t get it—what’s so humorous now?”

“You, Hermione,” Lavender said from behind her hand. “For anyone else, it’d be a boner or a hard-on or a stiffy, but for you it’s ‘an erection’.” She mimed flipping through a book and pretended to read in a passable imitation of Hermione, “It says here the erect penis is inserted into the lubricated vagina—”

“Ooh, you missed a bit,” chided Parvati, mirroring Lavender’s pose. “But Professor, it says here—”

“Ew, which professor?” asked Lavender, bumping her friend’s shoulder with hers. “Can you imagine Flitwick or Snape?”


“Why not Professor Snape?” asked Hermione speculatively. “We’ve all commented on his hands, and he’s fit—I mean, I suppose he is. Look at how he races around all the time. And he proved he’s a good guy, deep down.”

“Check her forehead, Ginny,” Parvati said. “She’s feverish. Granger—it’ll take way more than hair care products and a rescue from a dungeon to make Snape even close to acceptable, let alone attractive.”
“Vivi likes him,” Hermione protested.

Lavender Summoned her brush and started putting her hair up for the night. “Vivi’s a Slytherin, in case you’ve forgotten, and they all lurve Snape by default.” She scoffed. “Ok, for the sake of argument, let’s say someone found him interesting enough to bed. What would that even be like? I bet he’d never say a word the whole time. There’s your problem again, Hermione—he’s quiet and smart, so you think there’s a possibility.”

Parvati shivered. “Can you imagine being face to face with him staring into your eyes? And he’d probably lurk behind every dark corner, waiting to pounce.” She shook her hands out, casting off the image, and hopped off the bed. “On that creepy thought, I’m going to brush my teeth again. Anyone with me?”

Ginny and Hermione tagged along, both with their grooming kits and nightwear in their arms. Parvati finished quickly and left, after suggesting they discuss more pleasant things than the sex habits of their teachers. Ginny propped her bottom on the sink counter while Hermione plaited back her hair.

“Sorry I brought that up—it was funny at the time. Mum got flustered, Remus didn’t know who to look at…” She trailed off, remembering.

Hermione hummed and shrugged.

“Snape was there, too,” Ginny mused, and Hermione flicked her gaze at the red head. “He’d just breezed in; you know how he does. He smirked the whole time. I couldn’t decide if he was really amused or just entertained that the rest of us were so uncomfortable.” She studied Hermione in the mirror. “I don’t think he’s an impossible choice. Unlikely, yes. I wonder if he’s ever had sex, sometimes.”

“I don’t think that at all,” Hermione murmured, concentrating on her toiletry bag. “He’s, what, nearly forty? He had to have.”

“True,” Ginny conceded.

A thought occurred to her. “Did McGonagall give you the sex talk in Third Year?”

“We got that in Third Year, but not from McGonagall. All the Third Year girls went down to Greenhouse Number Three, and Sprout gave it.”

“Sprout?”

“Yeah—and she was really good. Mum was impressed when I told her. Colin Creavey told me Flitwick talked to all the boys.” Ginny picked at a cuticle. “But you know, in our talk, none of the Slytherins seemed the least bit embarrassed. They all sat in a huddle, really serious, no smirking or snarking at all.”

They looked at each other.

“Think Professor Snape talked to them?” Hermione asked.

“Can you imagine?” Ginny replied, then laughed. “I bet he’d call everything by their proper names; you know how he is, precise and scientific.” Ginny started to add something, but bit her lip instead and became interested in repacking her toiletries.

Like me, Hermione thought, studying the groutwork. “I think I’ll take a bath,” she said at last. “See
you later.”

She selected an alcove, cast her wards and charms, and settled in the tub as it filled. The healing oil diluted and tinted the water pale lilac. The waterline tickled as it rose, and she remembered Severus’ slow hands on her when he’d massaged her weeks before. She whispered his name and cupped her hands over her breasts, imagining what it would be like to lean against his chest as he stroked her, his hands grazing down over her body to explore—the water lapped at her chin, and she nudged the taps off with her toes.

She’d needed another name for the man she’d come to know who was gentle and teasing. Shortening his name seemed reasonable, and she thought of him as “Sev” when she fantasized. When he’d been limp in her arms, it had slipped out and felt right both times.

An image from one of her older fantasies emerged into her awareness, a different version of Snape altogether. He stood over her as she lay supine and bound to the massage table, her legs spread apart, and his hands moved over her freely, tweaking her nipples with one hand while the other rubbed small circles on her mons. Hermione pressed her head against the slope of the tub, lifted her hips to increase the delicious pressure on her clitoris, then slipped her fingers between the folds. Her left hand stroked up from her breast, over her neck, and she pushed one, then two fingers into her mouth, remembering the thickness of his cock. Two? she wondered. No, more like three. She clenched her fingers tight together into a bundle, filling her mouth, and moaned. Hermione pulled her hand from her lips and prodded the mouth of her vagina—cunt, she thought, feeling a thrill run through her, claiming the word as absolutely right for this rutting desire—and pushed the fingers in while her right hand drummed directly on her pleasure nub. “Oh, yes, Sev,” she sighed, tipping her pelvis upward to increase the depth.

In her mind’s eye, she saw him loom over her nakedness, his black robes draping over her, as his legs nudged hers further apart, and he sank himself home. He bared his teeth in a groan and locked his mouth on her neck. He’d leave marks on her, just as she’d left bruises on him. Then he was naked and snarling under her, his hips straining to meet hers with his arms bound against the floor, and she plunged down onto him, filling herself up, his liquid eyes locked on hers, as he made himself wait for her. She came, clenching onto her fingers and the water sloshed around her, just as it had when she’d bathed in the Room with him listening, the day he’d begged and made her come, and she bunched up as another climax wrenched her.

She sank back against the tub and panted. Amazing. She’d heard of multiple orgasms before, knew they were possible, but never experienced it. Her calves ached, and her belly felt exhausted. Done. Sated—that was the word, the word Sev used. Sated, for the first time since she couldn’t remember when. She rinsed off again and clambered out of the tub, concentrating so she wouldn’t slip.

Her dorm mates eyed her as she made her way to her bed. Hermione ignored the catty comments about the length of her bath and how relaxed she must be, tumbled artlessly into bed, and surrendered to sleep.

Wed, 25 Nov 98, Astronomy Tower

Hermione moved further onto the landing just below the Astronomy Tower and pretended to dig through her satchel as her classmates descended. She fussed and clucked to herself to make the facade more believable. Once the footsteps quieted, she Disillusioned herself and carefully stepped down the stairs.

The thrill of the Quidditch game—and what they’d done on the Astronomy Tower—had dulled the pain from being cut out of the boys’ banter. It was easy to understand why Ginny was stealing every
free moment to strategize for the next match; Hermione didn’t feel she could complain. But she still wanted to talk to Severus about her insight, or what she thought was an insight. It was a calculated guess that he’d be on patrol on Wednesday night.

Students were several flights below on the Grand Stairs when she reached it. No-one from her House remained, and it looked like all the Ravenclaws had disappeared as well. She leaned on the bannister and scanned the shadows, watching for a darker shadow amongst the shadows, until she faintly detected something, a rippling of the light two landings down from her, as though the moonlight were bouncing off stilled water.

A moment later, a shape appeared where the distortion had been, a slender figure in a hooded, black robe. A second shimmered into view beside the first. They put their heads together then started up the stairs toward her level.

Her fingers knotted on the railing. They’d surely look for any traces of her or concealment spells. She glanced around. Up? No, they’d hear. There was an alcove behind her, deep in a shadowed corner, with a stone bench flanked by a sphinx statue. She stood on the bench, wedged her bag between the sphinx’s wings, and cast wards on herself she hadn’t used for months, just as the pair made it to her floor.

They paced slowly forward, scanning both sides with detective spells. With luck, they were using the spells she’d learnt countermeasures for. As they neared, she could hear an occasional sibilance. Yes, the standard linear-contact Death Eater charms; the shimmer of the spells spread over the floor beneath the bench she stood on. Thankfully, revealing spells just couldn’t be trusted with the background magic at Hogwarts.

Her palm tingled from her grip on her wand, but they were nearly past.

But they stopped, concealing themselves in the same shadowed space she was in.

“I could have sworn she was behind us,” said the taller of the two. A boy, she guessed from the height, but the voice was high-pitched and warbling.

“Maybe she slipped down?” said the shorter in a similarly-distorted voice. “They always seem to know the back ways.”

“Filthy Mudblood,” said the first.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She’d know that cadence of speech anywhere. That had to be Draco. And the shorter…Pansy?

“I still don’t know why you came, instead of Nott,” Draco said.

“Because they never suspect girls,” Pansy replied and laughed. “I have my own interests, remember. Besides, since Teddy’s uncle—”

“I know,” Draco cut her off. “Most of Father’s friends are in the same fix.”

“Oh, just think of Granger begging for your mercy,” Pansy said and chuckled, the distortion spell warping it into a sinister, leering sound that parched Hermione’s mouth. “Personal jollies aside, Draco, exactly how would this help them?”

Malfoy stopped scanning around to stare down at his companion. “It’ll remind them we’re not gone, Pansy. That we still have power.”
The stairs creaked and shifted, and both Slytherins jerked. A pool of warm light crept up the walls.

“Filch,” Draco said dismissively. “Snape wouldn’t bother with a Muggle lantern.” He snorted. “Not even if the rumors I’ve always heard are true.”

“What rumors?”

“What Snape used Muggle women for—I’ll tell you later. Let’s try the back way.”

When they were far enough away, Hermione sank onto the bench. They were after her, just like Severus had said. She pressed into the corner of wall and sphinx rump and shivered.

All the things she wanted ask him, about the Occlumency lessons, about how she was becoming a Slytherin, about being completely alone—gone. It had been Draco and Pansy and Teddy.

She needed to tell Severus. McGonagall would ask too many questions. Filch wouldn’t believe her.

She retrieved her bag and headed downstairs, keeping a firm grip on the banisters because her knees didn’t seem trustworthy.

Snape was on the next landing, intently eying the side of the stairs she was on.

“It’s me, Professor,” she husked before he could challenge her. His shoulders dropped, and he rolled his eyes.

“Miss Gra—”

She shushed him and whispered, “It’s them. Draco and Pansy. They went down the back stairs. They’re after me.”

His brows lifted, lowered, bunched, then he held his left arm to her. “Take hold. When?”

“Just a few—I waited until they were gone, before—what?”

The ribbon shot from his wand-tip around her head, and she clung to his forearm with both hands. He swayed, then said in a low voice, “Back stairs near Seventh Floor. Take them.”

After a moment, the ribbon disappeared. She stared up at him, torn between indignation and interest, but he didn’t give her time to pick. He clamped his hand over hers, hauled her across the floor into a disused storage room, and canceled her protective spells with a slashing wave of his wand.

“I warned you against wandering around the castle at night, didn’t I? Did you think I was just amusing myself?”

“No, but—”

“Points, Miss Granger. Thirty might slow you down, and detention with Filch.”

“Please, I—”

“More? Fifty?”

“She wanted to make me beg!” she blurted and jerked her hand from under his. She hugged herself and edged backward. “It’s like…” She flipped her hands uselessly.

He folded his arms. “What do you want to hear? ‘Mind my vipers, they’re little sadists’? How is that news?”
“No. I don’t know.” She blotted at her eyes with her sleeve. “I needed to tell someone, and you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve what?” he exclaimed. “Granger, when we started this, I told you it wasn’t emotional—”

“But that’s not true! Maybe it was, but it isn’t now!”

“You have friends, Granger. Talk to them.”

“They’re all still obsessed with the match. It’s all they go on about. And I can’t tell them about this.”

“Even Ronald Weasley? Isn’t he your—”

“We broke up. In October, thank you. And I can’t talk to him because then—” She stopped herself.

“Because then?” At her silence, he sighed impatiently.

“Because of what I took from you. You know I can’t say any more.”

“I know what you took from my stores; I know what it’s used for. Your lot’s made or making explosives, against my advice and all common sense; I’m surprised it hasn’t killed all of you—”

“Why haven’t you turned us in?”

“Perhaps I’d like to see Gryffindor Tower blown up.”

She glared at the floor, ignoring both the tear that tickled down her nose and the handkerchief he held out to her until she finally snatched it from him and scrubbed at her face.

“I’m here now,” he said. “What was so important for you to risk yourself?”

“It’s what I wanted to say when I went down to your office, but you made me pick, and then I got distracted by the book. I’ve become just like you!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” she insisted. “All they needed me for was to steal and sneak around, and now…” She took a shuddering breath. “They don’t trust me now because I’m friendly with Vivi and Candace.”

“They?”

She wanted to stamp her foot. How could he be so frustrating? “Fine, him. I’m not telling you who; it doesn’t matter because they’re doing what he said. How can you stand it, not being trusted? Just being used for things, then cut out?”

He snorted. “No one trusts you?”

“I guess Harry still does. And—it doesn’t matter. You don’t want to understand.” She stalked toward the door, but he braced his arm against it.

“Make me understand.” He looked at her with an odd expression, a mix of caution, curiosity, and concern.

“It’s stupid.”

“Very likely, coming from a Gryffindor.”
Heat flashed through her. “I’m finishing school, and I don’t know if I’ll make a difference. I want my work to mean something. Ginny is putting everything into professional sport, Ron’s certain he’ll just work in the joke shop forever, and I think Harry’s going into the Ministry. But I don’t know what I want to do.”

“‘You asked me about apprenticeship.’”

“‘More school.’ She growled irritably. ‘I’m beginning to think coming back to Hogwarts was a way to keep from facing the world.’”

“‘Then work.’”

“McGonagall owled some people, and one of them wants to talk to me Sunday before dinner over the Floo Network. But after this business with Malfoy, I think I’ll always be watching my back, waiting for some would-be Voldemort junior to come after me.”

“‘That’s a risk of notoriety,’ he conceded.

“‘It makes me just like you, don’t you see?’”

He tipped his head in a sideways nod. “Some slight similarity.”

“Whatever I choose now will shape my whole future. I could be stuck in a castle, doing a job I hate —”

“I don’t hate teaching.”

“It’s not what you wanted to do.”

“True, but we’re talking about you.” His head tipped slightly. “Why did you separate from Weasley?”

“It was coming,” she said. “He wants something very different than what I want, and the more I talked with you about consent—”

“—I didn’t encourage you to—”

“No, you didn’t, but it made me think. I’ve done his homework for years, to be nice and to cover up for—” She inhaled sharply and stared at him.

“I guessed at the reason.”

“Well, I decided I’d had enough.” She huffed. “It’s done now. It doesn’t matter, and I’ve no one to talk to,” she said and reached for the doorknob. He moved to let her pass, then extended his hand.

“Come here, Hermione.”

She stepped into his arms, and he wrapped his robes around her.

“I’m so stupid,” she said to his chest. “This isn’t as bad as the war, but it feels worse because it’s my whole life. I knew the war would end.”

He shook his head against hers. “When are you speaking with McGonagall?”

“Four o’clock Sunday afternoon.”
He hummed appraisingly. “I’m sure I’ll hear about it at table. Minerva loves gloating over her star student,” he added into her ear. His breath tickled, and Hermione giggled.

“Do I still lose points?”

“Yes. Twenty, to make my point.”

“Detention?”

He chuckled, pushed her hair from her temple, and grazed his nose over her hairline. “Perhaps. We’ll do detention the way Filch wants it.”

“How’s that?”

“With the lash.”

She giggled again, then looked away as a gnawing sick feeling churned her stomach.

“What’s wrong?”

“Pansy. She wanted me to-to beg. And I like it when—”

“It’s not the same.” He lifted her chin so she met his eyes. “We discussed that.”

“Maybe not this time, then.”

“Perhaps not.” His knuckles traced her jaw to her neck, and his thumb worked little circles into the muscle. “Massage, perhaps.”

“I’d like that, Sev,” she said and rested her forehead on his chest.

His hand stilled, and his body stiffened. “What did you call me?”

“You didn’t complain before so I—” she said quickly.

“Before?”

“On the Astronomy Tower after the match. You seemed okay, so… And the last time we played, although you might have been asleep.”

His fingers started denting her, but she didn’t dare move. He suddenly pulled her against him. He’d gone rigid, nearly to the point of trembling, and she squeezed him fiercely. Why was he so upset? After a time his grip on her lessened, and she mirrored his gentling.

“I won’t,” she started, but he shook his head and pushed her away a little to face her. His lashes glistened.

“That’s a very private name.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Quiet.” His hand shook on her shoulder, and his mouth puckered as though he couldn’t quite pick what he wanted to say. At last he said, “Again. Not the groveling. The name.”

“Sev?” she asked.

He twisted his eyes shut and inhaled as if trying to catch an elusive scent. Then he grimaced and
looked at her.

“Not yet, Hermione. I can’t.”

“It’s not me?”

He chuckled gently and tugged her back against him. He took a deep breath and said into her hair, “No.”

And said nothing else for some time until he released her and reached for the door.

“I need to cast—”

“Don’t bother. It’s after-hours, I’m taking points, and this will serve as a reason for meeting later.”

Feeling oddly naked, she walked openly beside him to the Gryffindor Tower landing where they found Filch beside two black-robed figures slouching against the wall. Pansy stared blankly at Hermione, but Draco straightened and spoke directly to Snape.

“Professor, we were on our way back from Astronomy—”

“Silence,” Snape hissed. “Twenty points from each of you for breaking curfew.”

“They were lurking on the back stairs,” Filch said.

“Not ‘lurking’, Professor,” Draco said. “Pansy had dropped her quill, and we were—”

“Take two weeks’ detention with Filch to reconsider that pretty story.”

“What about her?” Draco pointed at Hermione.

“No that it’s your business, but this little adventure cost Gryffindor forty points. I’ll discuss a suitable detention with your Head of House,” he said to Hermione. “Now get to your dorm.”

Forty points? She quailed from him. His scowl deepened, and she quickstepped down the corridor toward the portrait.

---

**Thur, 26 Nov 98, Great Hall**

“Astronomy was rough last night,” Seamus said and yawned.

Ron nodded into his coffee cup. The class had run long, for starters, then the professor had kept adding to their homework. Hermione hadn’t helped. Each question she asked resulted in another tedious lecture until the class began to moan when she raised her hand. To top it off, he hadn’t had a chance to ask her if she’d help him study.

From a quick glance around the room, he could pinpoint every one of his classmates. They were all hunched over, vacantly staring at their breakfasts.

“Thanks for dragging that out last night,” Ginny said after Hermione arrived.

“I thought we needed the clarification,” Hermione replied evenly. She’d just reached for the porridge when McGonagall swept up.

“Miss Granger, you’ll be serving detention tonight and tomorrow with Hagrid.”
Hermione’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“For being out past curfew last night. Professor Snape has just discussed the situation with me.”

“Professor, I lead the study hall—”

“I realize that. Professor Snape suggested that taking away something you obviously enjoy might make more of an impact, and I agree. The study hall won’t fall apart in one night, surely.” While she spoke, Snape walked past with a self-satisfied smirk. “If you break curfew again, we may ban you from leading study hall for a longer term.”

Hermione stared at Snape before turning back to McGonagall. “That’s ridiculous—”

“Miss Granger, the castle is dangerous at night, and rules are meant to protect you. If you argue, I’ll add to the twenty points Professor Snape has already taken. Hagrid will collect you after dinner. Just be thankful Mr. Filch has his hands full with the Slytherin students who were also out after hours.”

“Twenty!” Ron said in surprise after the professor had gone.

“It’s no worse than what anyone else has done,” Hermione replied with a sniff. “Anyway, the others lost points as well, and we’re still ahead—”

“What Slytherin students?” Seamus asked with a keen expression. “Marsland?”

“No, Pansy and Draco.” Hermione stopped stirring her porridge. “Candace left as soon as the clock tower rang, remember?”

They stared at each other until Dean said something that caught Seamus’ attention.

“Why were Malfoy and Parkinson out so late?” Harry whispered.

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t know. I wasn’t with them. Snape found me, and Filch found them.” She hesitated as though she’d said too much. “Filch had them at the Seventh Floor landing.”

“No good for me,” Ron grumbled, and Hermione beetled her brows. “I was going to ask if you could clear up a few—really, I just need some pointers,” he added quickly when her mouth pursed.

“Tutoring I’ll do,” she said in the same low pitch they were using. Seamus and Dean were still talking intently. “Saturday at four in the Library?”

“Perfect. We have practice right after lunch, and I’ll look for you once I’m done.”

---

Fri, 27 Nov 98, Potions Classroom

“The N.E.W.T.s will test every bit of your abilities,” Snape said as he moved around the classroom that Friday, returning their homework. “I’ve marked your essays accordingly.”

Chamberlain slumped over the table beside Hermione and groaned softly as he flattened his scroll to reveal an A scrawled over the top. Hermione started to open hers, but a slender porcupine quill had been jabbed through the layers from the inside right edge. She glanced at the professor, but he’d turned his back to her, so she carefully slipped the quill clear and rolled the paper back.

A thumb-sized scrap was pinned to the paper with “8:45 AM Sat, O” in block letters in blue ink. O? Had to mean office. Snape was heading towards his desk, so Hermione balled up the scrap and dropped it in her bag.
When he came around to check their work, he squinted intently at her. She bobbed her brows in response while forcing her face to remain impassive, and he smiled tightly before leaning over her arm to peer into her cauldron. He hummed vaguely, fiddled with his cuffs, and went on his way.

---

**Sat, 28 Nov 98, Great Hall**

The next morning at breakfast, she kept watch on him from the Gryffindor table. He seemed more animated than usual, swaying between the teachers on either side of him as he chatted with them. At half-eight, he left the Hall by the door near the High Table.

Hermione gulped down the rest of her tea, scurried off to the girls’ toilets, changed and Disillusioned herself, and headed downstairs against the trickle of students going up to eat.

Just when she reached the dungeons, Snape emerged from the Potions classroom. She hurried after him, her cloak brushing the wall as she evaded people in the corridor, and followed on his heels into his office.

She spun around when Snape’s arm blocked her, and he shut the door behind them.

“You’re not that undetectable, Granger.”

“How’d you know it’s me?” she asked as she caught her balance against his bookshelves.

He bent towards her and sniffed. “Raw silk. Grooming products.” He chuckled as he crossed to his desk, and she cancelled her spell.

“Why detention with Hagrid?”

Snape turned to look at her and straightened slowly. “Would you have preferred serving with Filch? With Malfoy and Miss Parkinson?”

“What else will happen to Pansy and Draco?”

He studied her. “What do you mean?”

“Detention and points? That’s all?” She swallowed hard. “But we know they’re the ones—”

“You know that.” He sighed. “Granger, if I tell Dumbledore what you overheard, it’ll raise questions that neither of us want to answer, beginning with why you know about it to begin with.”

“Because the Headmaster didn’t want the students to know.”

“Exactly. And my telling you went against his direct orders to me.” When she scoffed, he said, “I shouldn’t tell you this either, but they’ve broken curfew more than a few times. If the lot of them weren’t already intending to head home for the holidays, they would be now.”

“To avoid detention,” Hermione finished for him as she hugged her satchel. “I’d hoped something more would come of it.”

He clasped his hands at his waist. “That’s all, Granger. My hands are tied.”

A vision with his hands bound swam into her mind, and she smirked. He rolled his eyes in response and tipped his head toward the shelf.

“I suppose that indicates some interest in our usual activities?”
“It does.” She swaggered toward him and stopped when her toes met his. The tips of his shirt collar flashed as he swallowed, and he narrowed his eyes. His breath seemed spiced with something. Hermione swayed closer to take a better smell, teetered until she seized his wrist; he lowered his head to hers and stalled, inches shy of contact.

The silliness of the stand-off threatened to overwhelm her just when he pressed his closed lips to hers in a chaste kiss, then he took a step backwards, out of reach, and grinned.

“You’re a tease,” she chided, trying and failing to restrain a giggle.

Snape gestured at the tunnel. “Care to debate that in comfort?”

She darted toward him, took his hand in hers, and pulled him along with her toward his chambers. He followed behind her sluggishly, scuffing his soles on the stones. She huffed irritably when he broke from her and stood with his arms folded in the middle of the tunnel, resisting her efforts to move him until she bumped past him and shoved him down the corridor. They stumbled through the door at the other end, laughing, and he guided her to the dinette and held her chair.

The water beakers and carafe were present, as were a salver of fruit and a bowl filled with cubes of various cheeses.

“Expecting a party?” she asked as he poured water for them.

“I often eat something after our sessions,” he replied. “I thought perhaps you’d join me.” He moved his glass closer to the center of the table. “You handled me well last Saturday, although your choice of location was risky.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “I planted alarming wards on the stairs.”

“You expected to find me?”

“I saw you pass and followed.”

“That loss of points meant nothing to you, did it?” he replied drily.

She leaned toward him. “Gryffindor’s leading and is over sixty points ahead of Slytherin. Not that I’m personally keeping track—”

“Of course not.” He lowered his eyes. “You’re adept at taking control. I’d like you to trust your instincts.”

“Could you explain?”

He sighed shortly, and his eyes moved under his lids as though he were searching for a phrase.

“I could blindfold you,” she offered, and he chuckled.

“Cheek. I’ll refuse the crutch. You said you claimed access to my body as your right. I accept that, within the confines of our privacy.”

His words lit something in her. “Within limits?”

“You may press those limits,” he said quietly. The softening of his expression fed whatever sprang to life in her, and he wet his lips. “My body and mouth are yours.”

Her pulse throbbed. “Will you strip for me?”
“I will, to pants and socks. Tell me why that’s important to you,” he countered.

“It’s power,” she whispered. “And I want to know if…I want to see if you’re aroused.”

He smiled and glanced away. “There are other ways. You could ask, for instance—”

“Are you?”

His eyes seemed bottomless. “I am. And…” he paused. “You could simply touch me.” He uncrossed his knees and rested his hand palm up on his thigh.

Hermione wanted to race past this discussion and satisfy her curiosity to explore him, but she made herself concentrate. “You suggested a massage.”

“I did, as an alternative to what I’d prefer.”

“Can we do both?”

He hummed. “I’d rather you were dressed to flog me, and I don’t think it’s appropriate that I watch you undress.”

No, it was right that he not see that. “I’ll blindfold you.”

“Any other requests?”

“If I order you to lick me?”

“I will.”

Everything she wanted. Everything. Except… “I still wish I—it’s not a big deal—”

“You want to bind me.” He smiled. “I have a suggestion.” He brought a couple of dark objects from his coat pocket and laid them on the table. A pair of buckled bands, both with d-rings, in supple, thick leather. “It’s not the same, I realize.”

“May I put them on you?” she asked, and he nodded. It wasn’t the same, but the thought of his pale wrists circled with the straps, of actually buckling them onto him—

She hopped up and walked to the desk.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, leaning forward alertly.

“I…I’m so…so,” she ended lamely. He flashed his brows, challenging her.

If you can’t say it, he’d said. It was a good rule. “I’m really turned on.”

“Perhaps you’ll climax again,” he suggested in a light tone, his brows raised innocently.

It really was an impossible combination, his arch goading mixed with the tension between them. She went to him, combed her fingers into his hair, and made a fist at the back of his skull, pulling his head back, then kissed him. Her free hand pressed down his body, and he tipped his hips forward so she easily grasped his stiffness.

She straddled his legs and rested both forearms on his shoulders. The last time she’d done this, she’d been mortified later to realize he’d known she was wet.

When his nostrils widened this time, she wanted him to know, and the lazy sweep of his gaze over
her confirmed his awareness. His fingertips brushed the outline of her skirt.

“How isn’t this emotion?” she asked suddenly.

“It’s pleasure,” he responded distractedly, before he looked at her face. “Affection is different.”

“You meant affection, then, not emotion.”

His pupils constricted, and his relaxed face became alert. “You’re trying to trap me, little Gryffindor, but it won’t work.”

She shook her head and plucked at his collar. “I’m not. I just want to understand you.”

His brows bunched. He shifted his legs to distribute her weight, but held her in place by her hips. “We’re losing the moment, Granger.”

He was right, damn him.

She traced his lower lip with her thumbs. “I want to use both whips.”

“Agreed.” He closed his eyes. “Shall I Transfigure the bench and table?”

“Please.” She held his chin and stroked her nose over his. “Then I want you to strip and hand me your wristbands.”

Lust scented his sigh. “When?”

“Now.” She rose off him. He stood, a little shakily, and did as she’d said.

###

It took a bloody act of will to rise without staggering. Couldn’t direct his wand, couldn’t do more than slash at the air. After two tries at the kneeling bench, in the end he got himself under control and both spells worked.

Before he admitted he was done for, he cast the unfastening charm he used every night to pop his buttons loose, set his wand on the dinette table, and struggled out of his clothes. He sneaked a look at her to see if she’d noticed and hastily returned to watching his fingers to make sure they functioned.

Firsties at the Welcome Feast were never so ravenous, and he was the plum pudding.

He dropped his clothes in a neatish heap and offered her the straps. She buckled them on, then just stood with her hands around his wrists and stroked her thumbs over the black leather. He’d done something similar when he’d Transfigured them from a worn belt the previous Sunday.

“Kneel.”

He folded at her feet gracefully enough, opened his palms to her, and lowered his eyes. The sheen of her stockings flexed as she moved to his side and made him rest his head against her thigh, her hand cupped over his skull. Musk from her and the silk enveloped him, and his mouth watered.

“Are you ready to take the whip, Severus?”

“Yes, my Mistress,” he said, and the delicious ache bloomed.

“Present yourself.”
Her hand trailed over his back as he rose. Once he’d taken his place at the bench, she caressed his jaw and chest, then snaked her hand into his pants to circle his genitals in a firm grip.

“Keep this hard,” she murmured. “I like when you’re aroused.”

He whispered acceptance.

“But don’t come,” she added, and he snickered.

Hermione cuffed him lightly on the crown of his head and brushed his hair off his shoulders. The bantering exchange made him grin until she shook out the floggers’ tails.

The first several strikes just fanned his back before she stepped closer, and the blade tips connected. Nice, even rhythm, the intensity growing, then easing. She breathed in time to her strokes: four paired strokes to a breath cycle. He realized he’d synced his breath to hers, just when she shifted to a punishing downstroke followed by two lighter stripes, a pattern that seemed as natural as walking. All her practicing had brought him this wonder.

Then he let the burn blur his thoughts until she draped one of the floggers over his neck and purred into his right ear, “You did so well, Severus. There’s a reward for you, but you’ll have to beg.”

She cradled him as he lolled into her arms, the shell buttons of her shirt freezing points on his skin. He’d lost his stiffy some time ago, but it raged back as she dandled his balls.

“But perhaps…” she said slowly, and her wand was in her hand, “perhaps I’ll just amuse myself.” She gave the wand a little flick, and the tip began to spark.

Severus cowered against her as she lowered the wheel to him. He tried to keep his hands at his sides, but he couldn’t help wriggling and gasping as the sparks snapped over him. She worked her way downwards and stopped.

“I’m afraid these need to go,” she said playfully and Vanished his pants.

“Mistress!” he protested, but she rolled the spark wheel over and around until she tired of making him squeak. He lay limp on the floor, his cock jutting over his belly. Hermione gathered her knees under her and trailed her hand over him, glancing at his face from time to time as she played with his bits.

“You are as I wanted you, Severus.”

“Hard, my Mistress?”

“That, and naked. Available.” To emphasize it, she pumped his shaft with her fist.

He sighed and dared to touch her knee. “Please. Let me…”

“Are you close?”

“I will be.” His eyes watered. “Please, let your Severus serve his Mistress.”

She waited until he moaned and then blindfolded him and led him by voice. She’d turned the table into a low, cushioned pallet. He crawled onto it and kissed his way up her legs until he propped himself on his elbows between her thighs. The fragrance of her filled him. He nuzzled inward, fingers posed to pull aside the thin cloth of her knickers, but his greedy Mistress had stripped them off already.
He nestled the full, flat blade of his tongue between her swollen outer lips, the better to taste her. She sighed as he lapped at her with long, slow strokes, and he kept coming closer to the forbidden entry of her. Not for him, he reminded himself, and opened his mouth over her vulva and worried the apex of her slit. She worked her fingers into his hair and ground against him.

He took that as a sign and started spelling the names of the ingredients in his emergency potions cabinet over her clitoris. He’d just reached theobroma when she started bucking. Her panting gasps turned into the first syllable of his name and washed waves of pain over him.

He tried to lift his head from her, but she clung to him and tangled her legs over his back. He couldn’t squirm away, couldn’t retreat, couldn’t protest. Enough of him wanted to keep going and push her further, because she owned his body, owned his pleasure, owned the name she’d stumbled on and used in intimate delight, and then his agony sweetened and “Sev” was hers alone.

He waited until her breathing slowed before he shifted to ease his aching neck. She unwound from him and guided him by his hair up to lie beside her. She pushed him to his back, cancelled the blindfold charm, and sucked him into her mouth.

He knew he shouldn’t peek. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips as swollen as those he’d just left, her eyes closed, locks of hair slipping from the charm. He clawed into the cushion to keep from grasping her head, squeezed his eyes shut, and came amid delectable shame.

###

When his cock stopped twitching, she snuggled back against his side and released him. After a moment, he rolled over and spooned around her, buried his face into her hair, then pinched her neck with his lips.

It tickled.

Hermione giggled and squirmed, but his heavy arm held her in place. He whispered slurred thanks into her ear between kisses until he ended on a sighed, “My own.”

Her eyes snapped wide. What had he said?

He breathed regularly into her hair.

He’d said that on the tower after the Quidditch match, too. She’d thought she’d misheard in the wind, but apparently not.

She lay still and alert until he rolled to his back with a groan.

Hermione sat up to look at him. “Hurting?”

“Neck. Muscles, not skin.” His eyes slivered open. “I’m not complaining, Granger.”

“You called me something just now,” she prompted.

He cupped both hands over his face and made a dismissive noise.

When it was clear there would be no additional comment, she went to the table and brought back the tray of food. If he was going to try to ignore her, then she’d make him pay attention. Severus struggled to his elbow. She sat beside him, set the salver out of his reach, and picked up a morsel of cheese.
“You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” she said and held the cheese to his mouth, ignoring his hawkish glare. “Eat.”

He inhaled, and she expected him to carp at her, but he leaned forward and closed his lips around her fingertips. He chewed slowly as he watched her, swallowed, and said, “I suppose you plan to continue?”

She ate a grape, then picked out a smallish chunk of melon and offered it to him. “Perhaps.” He didn’t protest this time, just accepted the fruit and curled his tongue between her fingers as he took it from her. When the plate was half-empty, he refused any more.

“It’s time you were going.” He glanced around the room. “If you’d tell me where you sent my pants….”

“There,” she said, flicking her gaze towards his piled clothes. “That seemed best.”

He looked where she’d gestured, then regarded his body before meeting her eyes again. “We could become too comfortable like this. You dressed, me not.”

“It seems right.”

“It seems right,” he echoed amusedly as he rolled to his feet and picked out his smalls. “Why is that?”

“Because of the game.” Hermione sat at the dinette and sipped at the water. His back was ruddy and striped, the muscles moving under the skin. “You’ve gained weight.”

Severus jerked his shirt on and shot a look at her. “And?”

“And nothing. I just realized I couldn’t see your ribs as clearly as I could the first day of class. It’s like you’d been ill…”

“I lost over a stone last year.” He continued to dress as he studied her over his shoulder. “You suffered as well.”

“As if you noticed.”

“I did. Shadowed eyes. That pinched stare.” He straightened his sleeves before coming to her with his arms extended. “Care to remove these?” While she fiddled with the closures of the straps, he continued. “Then in early winter, you stopped laughing.”

The metal tongue from the second band slipped from her fingers. “That’s when…” The strap dropped to the floor, but she kept both hands on his left wrist.

“November.”

It had been November, just a year ago, and she’d been sent to Diagon Alley to collect potions ingredients. She’d been wondering when she could get home—could she risk it, could she be stealthy enough—and the jars in her satchel had clinked (pants, she couldn’t chance another broken bottle, couldn’t bear Snape’s smirk over her expected failure), then they’d been there—

“Why’s a pretty wandering the streets so early?”

She pressed her cheek into his chest. All she’d wanted was someone to hold her, keep her close, keep her safe, and she’d followed him to bed every night, enticed him to bed every spare moment, as
much for her own vague reasons as to distract him from Fred’s death, until even Tonks had—her
breath hitched. Ron. She’d fucked him every day for months in a tangle of nameless feelings up until
she’d been captured, used him to avoid whatever horror lay on the other side of that flashing wand.

She whimpered.

Severus rocked her and hummed into her scalp. “It’s over for you.”

She exhaled hard; he nuzzled her hair, cooed something under his breath, and brushed errant strands
from her face.

“You’re not Snape,” she said.

“Am I not?” he replied, voice light.

Hermione leaned away from him. “Not now. It doesn’t suit you.” She shook her hands on his waist.
“Not how you are now. I had to call you, this you, something else.”

His face darkened for an instant, then softened. “Call me that, then.”

“Sev?”

He held her close, and his jaw rubbed against her temple. “Sev. But—”

“Only here,” she interrupted.

“And you must go, which is what I meant to say. The other doesn’t need saying.” He swayed
backwards, fidgeted in his pocket, and dabbed the corner of his handkerchief under her eyes until she
took the cloth from him. “Keep it.”

She changed in his bathroom and came back out. “I forgot your book.”

“Next week. I’ll arrange a time.”

“I could owl it,” she said as she walked before him through the tunnel. He scoffed and nudged gently
at the small of her back. “I’ve learnt some things that help, I think, even without Occlumency.”

“I’m pleased,” he replied, close to her ear.

Once in his office, she turned to face him, expecting his usual expression, but finding something
new. When she lay her hand on his chest, he covered hers with his own and bent toward her. The
kiss was also different: open-mouthed, but slow and flavored with cantaloupe. She sucked his lower
lip when they parted, and his lashes gleamed in the light.

---

Sat, 28 Nov 98, Main Hall

Hermione ducked behind the heavy door at the top of the Dungeon stairs and cancelled her charm.
She stood for a moment, listening for footsteps, before slipping out into the Entrance Hall.

He’d called her…an endearment. Twice. Not one she’d ever heard before, but that was probably to
be expected with Snape. He’d hidden his face, but hadn’t actually denied it. Her knees felt wobbly,
and she looked for someplace to sit. He’d known and meant it. Both times?

What about her? He’d given her permission to call him “Sev.” She stared blankly at the bodies
moving past. Affection. He broke everything down into strange categories. After the knife—no—
after their row in the Library, he’d stopped speaking of exchanges. It had changed then, and she hadn’t noticed.

Had he noticed? Had it crept up on him, too?

And all the times Ron had asked her if there was someone else, she’d said no, unwilling to confront the itchy hunch that she was wrong. Even now, she didn’t know what to think. Severus Snape in love with her seemed as far-fetched as being in love with him. She scoffed aloud. But she couldn’t deny the rush of warmth when his robes brushed against hers in class, or when he gave her that private smile, or when he kissed her forehead.

A knot of students passed by, arguing about the difference between levitation charms. Her skin prickled.

Maybe it was simple lust, not affection at all. But if it were just lust, would she want to get his opinion, spend time with him, find his embrace so comforting? Would they resort to pet names?

She’d been sitting on the bench in the Hall for she didn’t know how long when she realized she had company.

“When did you get here?” she asked Ginny, who leaned against the wall with a book propped on her knee and her sack of Quidditch gear at her feet.

“A bit ago. Long enough to read Friday’s Potions homework.” Her mouth twisted in amusement. “What have you been wool-gathering over?”

Hermione shook her head. “Things.” She cradled her bag on her lap. “Gin, I have a problem, and I don’t know what to do. I really messed up.”

“Mum always said talking about it helps.”

“It’s Ron.” Hermione studied the zip on her bag. “I wanted to let him down gently. After Fred, and all that. I care for him, Gin, and I didn’t want to hurt him, but I’m going to kill him.”

“Kill him?” Ginny smirked. “Not until after we play Ravenclaw in May.”

“I pushed him away so gently he doesn’t believe it happened!”

The red head hummed in agreement. “But you did, and you want different things. You’re serious, and he wants to fool around.”

“I wouldn’t say that. He wants to enjoy life.”

“And you don’t?”

Hermione sighed and stared upward. “I enjoy life a little differently.” Shoes scuffled at the top of the stairs, and Snape strode past, looking straight ahead.

Ginny giggled under her hand. “Did you see that? Snape was blushing.”

“That’s not likely,” she replied, but his cheeks had been tinted.

“He was.” Ginny scooted closer to her. “And so are you, for that matter.” She gasped. “You’re seeing someone. That’s why you were sitting here smiling into space.”

“I certainly was not.” Her heart pounded.
“I’d believe you if you weren’t glowing.” Her eyes narrowed. “And Ron doesn’t believe you broke up.”

“I’m not—” she huffed. “Okay, maybe.”

“When did it start?”

“I don’t know. This month, I think.”

Ginny eyed her. “You think?”

“It’s confusing.” She stared down at her hands. “I don’t think he realizes, either, but I think he’s fallen for me.”

“That’s a start. He. Give us a name. And how do you not know? Don’t you snog?”

She hesitated. “Gin, I really don’t want to talk about this. We’ve been working together, and it just feels like...Ginny?”

“Is it Neville?”

“If I say yes, will you stop asking?”

“Fine. Keep your secret.” She leaned back against the wall. “Ron won’t take this well.”

“I know. What’s worse is he kept asking me if I was seeing someone.”

“And you said no?”

“Because I didn’t think I was. Am.” She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“If it weren’t for Viktor, I wouldn’t believe you. When did you realize Viktor was interested?”

He’d hung around for weeks before he’d asked her to help find a book. As soon as she’d handed it to him, he’d blurted out an invitation to the ball. She accepted from surprise, but before she knew it, they were necking in a secluded corner of the Library. It wasn’t until she’d floated back to the dorm that evening that she’d realized what had happened.

“I didn’t, Gin, not until he asked me out.”

“Knows everything but her own heart. Ron won’t get it. Regardless, you’ve got to tell him, Hermione.”

“I know,” she whispered and pressed her chin into the top of her bag. “It just crept up. First it was just les—” She bit her lips together, and Ginny craned to stare at her.

“‘Lessons’? That’s what you were going to say?”

“Yes, lessons. Tutoring, you know,” she replied quickly, but Ginny’s mouth quirked.

“Anatomy lessons in a disused classroom?” She laughed. “Must be, Hermione, I’ve never seen you so red!” She put her head near Hermione’s shoulder and continued in a low voice. “If it is Neville, maybe you ought to just let Ron figure it out on his own. He won’t believe it until he sees it, and he’s less likely to try to take the Mickey.”

“Neville’s not so bad,” Hermione muttered back. “Clumsy, yes, but he’s kind and he—”
Neville chose that moment to appear and ask if Hermione had time to work with him in Greenhouse Number 3. Ginny excused herself and scurried away, but Hermione was certain her friend had doubled over with giggles as she turned the corner.

###

“Ron, come on, you have to see this!”

“Soap!” Ron shouted back at Harry and scrubbed at his hair one last time before twisting the spigot shut. He toweled himself off, slithered damply into his clothes, and clambered out of the changing room’s shower stall.

“What’s the—what’s that?” An enormous box sealed with broad straps sat in the middle of the room with eight bedraggled owls perched on it.

“It’s for all of us, the Gryffindor Quidditch team,” Ginny said as she shooed the owls out the door. “Look like George’s writing.”

“Should we open it here?”

The rest of the team returned blank looks, and Harry flicked his wand. The bands popped open, then the top of the box hovered off, and the team edged closer, craning their necks to see.

At first, it looked like a box of magazines, but as Ron started shifting things aside they realized it was much more. Broom repair kits, leather care supplies, Quidditch magazines, sweets and chocolates—

“We should take this up to the Common Room,” Ginny said. She opened an envelope that had been wedged into the top of the box. “It is from George. He says congratulations on tying with Slytherin. He says that if we’d’ve won, he would have bought the team new brooms.”

Ron and Harry stuffed the lid back on, and they levitated the box between them back to the Tower.

Once inside, the box was gutted. The very bottom had a layer of Impermeable Chill Charm that protected a colony of pint cartons of Fortescue’s best ice cream, not the Never-Melt kind, but the really good stuff. The team passed the treats around, reasoning that the ice cream would melt before long and should be eaten immediately.

Ron was slumped contentedly into the couch with the remains of Dragon’s Hoard Caramel clinging to his fingers when the tower clock chimed five.

“How for dinner,” one of the Chasers said, and lazy chuckles answered him.

“I feel like I’ve forgotten something,” Ron said as he studied the cracks in the ceiling’s plaster.

“Remember it later,” Harry replied and elbowed him in the ribs. “Let’s at least make an appearance downstairs.”

Ron remembered as soon as he stepped into the Great Hall. Hermione sat alone at the middle of the Gryffindor table, bent over a scroll. He slipped onto the bench beside her.

“Guess you didn’t need help?” she asked without looking up.

“I do, it’s just—”

“Hermione, you should have seen what their brother sent!” Freddy interrupted. “Eight owls had to carry it, a huge box of sweets and Quidditch stuff!”
Hermione dragged her gaze off Freddy. “What for?”

“Congratulations on the match.”

“But it wasn’t a win.”

“It wasn’t a loss, either.” He leaned forward and dropped his voice. “I’m sorry, Hermione, but it was for the whole team. Before anyone else comes—try again tomorrow? Right after lunch?”

“Okay. But be there.”

“You got it. Straight from lunch to the books.”

She studied him for a moment. “Ron, I need to talk to you. About—”

Whatever she was going to say was drowned out when Quidditch players from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff clustered around them, eager to hear more about what George had sent.
Nov 29 - Dec 5 1998, Part 1

Chapter Summary

A heated discussion in the snow, and Dumbledore ponders discrepancies.

Chapter Notes

READ FIRST—author's comment: I don't believe in author's comments, so I'll be quick. First, if you bother to look at the tags, you'll notice the HG/RW tag is gone. I don't agree with removing it as the relationship is important to the story, but fanfic convention for a ship tag means there will be a HEA for the pair as a couple. My misunderstanding. Sorry if that bursts anyone's bubble. Second, the work will be going on hiatus for a number of reasons in a few chapters. Before you panic, I will break it at the end of what I consider Part 1; if you're following along in my plot notebook, that's just after the Midpoint. Wait, y'all don't have access to my notebook. Well, shuckies. You'll survive. Part 2 picks up soon afterwards (plotwise), and is much faster. There will be no loose ends. Third, if you're here because Ashwinder's still on sick leave, welcome, welcome. I miss it loads, too, but I know Celis and the rest are working hard on it (although I have nothing to do with the site, I offered my ability to research, which is the least I could to).

Gratitude: Endless, endless, endless...Melusin, you make it all better.

Posting Schedule: Cantata is updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday.

Disclaimer: Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. The rest is mine. I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon (more details would lead to spoilers). Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sun, 29 Nov 98, Great Hall

“Library?” Ron asked as he swung his bag over his shoulder.

Hermione nodded distractedly and swept away towards the doors. Ron caught up with her after a few loping strides and tried to read her expression.
“Is this a bad time?”

She snapped her head toward him. “No, it’s fine.” She skirted around a group of younger students. “What do you need help with?”

“Just the last couple of weeks’ Astronomy lessons. I had some problems on the last test.”

“The one right before the match?” she asked as her brows lifted. “I bet that didn’t have anything to do with the material.”

“That’s what I told Seamus,” Ron replied. She glanced back at him. “He got up my nose with it. I passed, just.”

She stopped suddenly, just before the Grand Stairway. “You know, I’d like some fresh air. Can we go down to the lake?” He stepped clear when she reversed direction and barreled down the corridor toward the courtyard. “I feel like I’ve been trapped inside for weeks.”

“You should have come down to the pitch yesterday.” He struggled into his coat and wound his muffler around his neck as they neared the snowy outdoors.

Hermione pulled on a hat and mitts. “Was it this cold? How do you stand flying in this?”

Ron hummed back and jammed his hands into his pockets as they crunched their way through the snow down to the lake. “Hermione, there was lots of fresh air in the courtyard.”

She swung towards him, her cheeks blotchy. “Ron, I’m really sorry. I’ve done all the wrong things, and I’m sorry.”

“What are you on about?”

“Remember last year when I wanted to shag all the time?”

He grinned, and warmth swelled up in his chest. “Course. That was fun.”

“But I shouldn’t have. Ron, that was right after those men attacked me outside Diagon Alley, and someone altered my memory.”

“You said they were Muggles, though. They couldn’t have—”

“They were Muggles; I’m positive. I don’t know who Obliviated me. But afterwards, all I wanted to do was be close to someone, to not feel alone.” She sniffled. “I used you, Ron. I see it now.”

“Well…you can use me like that anytime, Hermione.”

“No, not just you, me too. I wasn’t…. Didn’t it seem odd that I suddenly wanted to…you know…all the time?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ron, if you’d been under the effect of a love potion, would it have been right for me to take advantage of you?”

“I wouldn’t mind. But neither of us were.”

“I was under the effect of something,” Hermione said slowly. He chuckled and winked at her encouragingly to continue, and she folded her arms. “No, I was wrong, and I didn’t know it
until...until I knew what I know now.”

“Which is?” he asked, running what she’d said over in his head.

“I’m...Ron, I really care for you a lot. Ugh, this is hard. I did all the wrong things because I didn’t want to hurt you.” She looked out at the lake. “And...I might be in love with someone else.”

His mouth ran dry. “Back up. You said there wasn’t anyone else.”

“I didn’t think so at the time.”

“What? Is it...is it a bloke? Or a girl, which is fine—”

Hermione turned her head slowly and squinted at him. “A—what? Ron!”

“Who is it, then?”

“That’s between him and-and me.” She looked away, and he stepped forward so he could see her expression.

“I don’t understand. You kept saying there wasn’t anyone else, now there is—”

“There wasn’t. Even now I’m not sure if—”

“If!” Ron screwed up his face. “Hang on. If? Is there or not?”

“It’s not simple!”

“I’ll say. When did it start, or do you even know?” he asked with a sneer. “Or are you just playing me like a damn snake—”

She spun to face him. “I’m not playing you! It was different, then it changed, and now it’s whatever it became.”

“In love. And he loves you?”

“I think so. He hasn’t come right out and said it.”

He folded his arms. “I suppose he gives you things?”

Hermione’s eyes softened as she gazed past him. “Things aren’t important. He talks to me.”

“That’s it?” he spluttered. “I can talk to you.”

“Maybe I’m misreading all of it. We’ve just been so...close. I wish I knew, but he’d never give me a straight answer...”

Ron walked around in a little circle, kicking up clumps of snow while she muttered on. What did she mean, close? “This was temporary, this break. What happened?”

“He was helping me sort myself out. How I felt. What I want.”

“Do you know now? How you feel? What you want?”

“Mostly. I want us to stay friends, Ron, but this unexpected—”

“Friends.” He glared up at her, and his nails bit into his palms. “D’ya want him?”
“I don’t—”

“D’ya want him to want you?” A red mist glowed around her.

Her hair bounced as she shook her head. Her eyes widened, and she backed away from him.

“You lied to me. You knew this was going on, and you deliberately—”

“Ron, you haven’t been listening!”

“I heard.” He curled around the block of ice in his chest and lurched past her. “I heard everything.”

**Mon, 30 Nov 98, Staff Room**

Snape squinted down at the Gryffindor table directly ahead of him, trying to put his finger on what was amiss. He’d noticed a few weeks before that the trio didn’t seem to be as close, but he’d dismissed it as resulting from schoolwork pressures. The news that Granger and Weasley had parted was partial explanation. The atmospheric charms in the area over the table were certainly affected; a lumpy strip of clouds loomed the length of the Gryffindor table, complete with shocks of lightning.

Where was Granger, anyway? She’d been absent from dinner the night before, had flitted through at lunch today—there she was, at the far end, focused on her plate while the students beside her eyed the ceiling.

Flitwick peered upwards and twiddled his wand surreptitiously. The clouds faded, then regrouped. “There’s just no overcoming it,” he muttered. “I can’t imagine what’s upsetting the charms.”

By the time afters arrived, nearly every face peered upwards at the line of menacing clouds, and the Great Hall vacated more quickly than if dung-bombs had been dropped.

“I’ve never seen the like,” Minerva was saying to Poppy when Snape jerked the door to the staff room shut. “Never. Incidental snowflakes, perhaps, if there was a quarrel, or overly enthusiastic realism, but not this.”

“All over your House’s table,” Poppy replied. The rest of the witches clucked their tongues and cooed consolations.

“I noticed that,” Thomas said. He’d worn his yolk-colored robes with the embroidered gold suns again. Snape edged past the Defense teacher’s garishness to the window side of the room and eased into a low, leather armchair. “My Seventh Year class today suffered badly. Defensive charms failing, hexes firing erratically—I very nearly ended the lesson short.”

“Is that so?” Minerva wondered. Her gaze flickered to Pomona, who nodded slowly. “Whatever’s the matter?”

“I believe some of your students may have had a falling out,” Snape said calmly. Heads swiveled towards him. “Probably centered around Potter.”

“Harry Potter is not the only student in the school,” Minerva replied, but her expression grew thoughtful. “I’ve worried about Ronald Weasley since his brother died, though.”

“Perhaps you should owl the Weasleys,” Pomona offered.

“Grief can certainly affect the ceiling,” Flitwick said. “Not to mention an individual’s magical
“It may go well beyond that,” Dumbledore said, shifting in his chair. “It’s possible the magics of the castle itself are failing.”

“Failing? What do you mean, Albus?” Minerva asked.

“Perhaps ‘failing’ might be too strong a word,” Dumbledore said. “As you know, one of my duties as Headmaster is to compare House point totals reported by staff and prefects against the totals shown in the hourglasses.”

“It seems redundant,” Irma said. “I’ve never heard of an inconsistency.”

“Hence it’s typically performed more perfunctorily, and somewhat less frequently, than tradition recommends. You can imagine my surprise when, after my first review of the year, just yesterday, the numbers didn’t match. I mentioned the discrepancy to Minister Shacklebolt, and he’s sending a senior Arithmanticist from the Department of Zoning and Bewitched Structures. I spoke with her via Floo this afternoon.”

Septima leaned forward. “Really? Will we have the chance to work with her?”

“Her role will be to review the written accounts and learn what she can from the castle itself, particularly if repairs are needed. If she needs assistance, I trust we’ll all accommodate her.”

“There’s a precedent,” Professor Binns said from the corner where he sat on a ghostly bench. “It was the basis for this monthly review.”

The Headmaster chuckled. “Traditions can be expected to slip over the years. Whatever the outcome, her visit should conclude by the weekend.” Then Dumbledore began the usual overview of weekly goings on. He finally let the regular staff go and the heads of the Houses clustered their chairs closer.

“Each of you should expect changes to your House’s points,” he said simply. “Additions or subtractions—take either result in good grace.”

“The students will notice,” Flitwick said. “The team players, especially.”

“At least only one Quidditch match has been played, and it ended in a draw,” Minerva said. “The Gobstones tournaments don’t take place until March.”

“When will she be able to tally the points?” Pomona asked.

“By the time she leaves,” Dumbledore said. “She seemed quite certain of her abilities. Her plan is to begin with a review of records first thing tomorrow, then Mr. Filch will take her down to the sub-dungeons.”

“The sub-dungeons?” Snape asked.

“She assured me she won’t intrude on any classes, and she’ll only survey during the day.”

“Won’t she stay in the castle’s guest quarters?” Minerva asked.

“I did offer. She’s concerned about maintaining her neutrality.”

Snape hesitated in the Entrance Hall while most of the others went their respective ways.

“That still leaves the matter of my students,” Minerva said from Snape's side.
"Could it be related?"

She puckered her lips. "I can’t imagine how."

"Something your students may have done? An experiment, perhaps?"

"I’m sure none of them could be powerful or meddlesome enough." She angled a little towards him. "Why not your students, Severus, whomever of them made the threats against my House?"

"Unlikely," he responded.

"That’s just as plausible," she said blandly.

Snape glanced askance at her, but her eyes were fixed on the entrance door. He murmured a word of parting and left for the dungeon.

---

**Fri, 4 Dec 98, Potions Master’s Office**

Snape threw down his quill, sending droplets of red ink across the scroll he was marking.

Was he a Third Year, resorting to notes for secret meetings? Worse, he had no way to cancel, and he needed to.

Dumbledore had told them just before dinner that he’d received the Arithmanticist’s report, but that he wanted to speak to the heads of House privately before the following week’s staff meeting. At the end of dinner, as Snape passed behind the Headmaster’s chair, Dumbledore gestured at him and asked if he might have a few moments sometime the next morning. Snape conceded he was entirely at the Headmaster’s disposal and left for the dungeons. Once he began descending the stairs, he allowed himself a frown of unease. Dumbledore’s timing could be uncanny, and he appeared at awkward moments.

He rubbed his temples with his thumbs while his middle fingers pressed hard against the pressure points between the brows. If he’d been this sloppy during the war, he would have provided sport for Bella for a whole evening.

He shivered.

He’d watched Granger through dinner, wishing that he had some way to tell her to stay away from him. He’d pinned the note to the essay he’d returned in class earlier, just as before. She’d nodded, her gesture a mere twitch, but she hadn’t been able to keep her cheeks from growing pink under his gaze. He’d turned away and adjusted his collar.

As much as he enjoyed his time with her, he regretted it at the moment. If it had remained what he’d intended, a lark, a chance to take the insufferable girl down a few notches before he—his mind swerved away from the words even as his fingers remembered the shape of the philter hidden in his rooms. He’d designed the potion himself to numb the pain of Crucius and preserve his secrets if needed: a papaver base with a drop of globefish extract and a pearl of concentrated May bell poison that would break open the moment he cast the non-verbal spell.

If she’d done the right thing and turned him in, he could have accelerated his personal Leaving Feast plans to avoid any unnecessary drama. Break the pearl sooner or later, it made little difference.

Except.
He sipped at his tea, held the cup at his lip and relished the heat from the porcelain. Warm, like the skin over her shins. “My own.” The tea sloshed as his mouth formed the words around the cup’s curve.

He clattered the cup into its saucer and blotted tea from the parchment with his handkerchief, smearing the ink.

The student whose homework this was wouldn’t notice the smudges. Right into the bin once received, no doubt. It boggled the mind why he bothered making comments at all. She noticed though. She read every ruddy word, challenged every dismissive answer, and craved more.

Not just intellectual hunger, either. His cock twitched; he gulped back an excess of saliva at the remembered mixed scents of leather, silk, and her odor, and wondered what clever thing he could say or do to make her laugh.

Sainted Salazar, he couldn’t focus.

He jerked at the sharp rap on the door.

“Severus, are you there?”

Quick adjustment of his clothes. No need to raise any suspicions that he suffered any fleshly cravings. “Come in, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore closed the door behind him, settled into the guest armchair, and conjured his own cup of tea. Bad sign. He planned to linger. The Headmaster’s chats tended to drag, especially given a battered, stuffed chair and a cuppa. And she’d be here in less than ten minutes.

“We haven’t had a chance to catch up lately, Severus.”

“The school year is in full swing, after all.”

“True.” Dumbledore picked up a scroll and scanned it, huffing from time to time, before letting it roll up and dropping it back into the pile. “You seem more relaxed of late.”

His skin prickled. “I suppose I’m adjusting to the realities of our new world, Headmaster.”

“Albus,’ Severus. We’ve known each other long enough that we can drop some formalities, at least in private.”

“As you wish, Albus.”

Dumbledore smiled, took a few swallows of tea. “I’d like to believe you think of me as a friend, Severus. I certainly think of you as such.”

He inclined his head. “I do, Albus. A friend and a mentor.”

“You understand you can come to me with problems, should you need to talk.”

“Certainly, Albus. And I have, in the past, but I’ve no need lately.”

“No?”

That blasted twinkling eye routine. How he could do that even in the restricted light of the office—focus, Snape. “Not at all.”
“I see.” A few more sips. “Very well, but my door is always open.”

The clock ticked. Snape glanced up at it and squinted at the door. Late? She was never—

The door handle jiggled and unlatched—Merlin’s pants, let her have had the sense to be under charm, wretched girl—to reveal no one.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I was under the impression neither the ghosts nor Peeves would play tricks like that on you.”

Snape shrugged and scooped scrolls into battered cauldrons. “I’m expecting a student to sit detention, Headmaster, so if we’re done—”

“Really? At quarter past seven? Who?”

“Miss Granger.”

“Hermione Granger?” Dumbledore asked, his brows rising. He craned to look at the clock.

“Yes,” he said with a sniff. “Arrogant girl.”

“Why does she have detention?”

“Impudence and assisting Longbottom when I specifically forbade it.”

Dumbledore’s brows lowered into a line. “I don’t recall seeing her name on the detention list.”

“It might have slipped my mind.”

“Indeed.” The Headmaster’s lips pressed together. “Miss Granger,” he called.

She bobbed into view, holding her robe tight around her.

“Come in, none of us bite,” Dumbledore said, gesturing. He rose from the chair. “Severus, I hope you’ll consider leniency, considering I delayed you.”

Hermione simpered and edged out of the way. “That’s kind, sir, but I was late.”

“Were you?” Dumbledore asked, folding his arm over his chest and canting his head to one side. “Is it your usual practice to use disillusionment charms when moving through the castle?”

The girl paled, but her voice was firm. “No, I just thought I might practice.”

“I see. That’s never a Hogwarts robe, is it, Miss Granger?”

“Ah, no.” Her hands moved in the robe’s pockets and stirred the folds of cloth. “It was a bit of a splurge. I didn’t think anyone would notice at night.”

“And,” Dumbledore said as he brightened the lighting with a twiddle of his fingers, “a bit overdressed for Potions detention, aren’t you? Cauldron cleaning, if I recall Professor Snape’s preferred chore.”

Her shoulders twitched minutely. “Well, sir, I have a date later, and I hoped I might finish in time to make it.” Her right hand snaked up to pat at her hair.

“Pretty cufflinks.”
She jabbed her hand back in her pocket to hide the glittering studs.

Dumbledore paused for a beat before shutting the door with a wave of his hand. “I think we three need to chat.”

“Headmaster, there’s a simple explanation,” Snape replied, voice pitched into a soothing coo while he monitored her posture from the corner of his eye. Thankfully, she was composing herself, her hands buried in her robes.

“I’m sure. Let’s sit and discuss it.” He gestured Granger into the chair he’d vacated and charmed one for himself. “Make yourself comfortable, Severus. I’d hoped to ask you why the number of Miss Granger’s detentions for one term had exceeded her worst year.”

“I can explain that,” she offered, but Dumbledore waggled a finger at her.

“I’m sure you can, but I’d like to hear Professor Snape’s version.”

“Headmaster, my notes clearly identify the reasons. Recurring insolence in class, disrupting class discipline, overriding the instructor’s directions—”

Her cheeks tinted, and she leaned forward in the chair, chest swelling as she sucked in a breath.

*Hold your tongue*, he thought savagely.

“But relatively few points taken. Not really in keeping with your habits,” Dumbledore said as he rested against the chair’s back. “Perhaps you’d care to enlighten me on how the cufflinks Lucius Malfoy presented to you as a groomsman gift came to be in Miss Granger’s possession?”

Dumbledore regarded Hermione. “Given Miss Granger’s wide-eyed expression, perhaps you should explain to her as well.”

Not wide-eyed now. Her face hardened, lips losing their curves as her nose crinkled. There had been no need to tell her where the studs came from. They were foppish things, kept mainly as a hedge against negative cash flow. Not to her, perhaps. Even now she was twisting the disc on her right wrist between her fingers.

“Sir, no, these were Granny Sally’s. I inherited them along with the earrings.” Hermione pointed at her earlobe. “She passed away last summer.”

Dumbledore’s head jerked backward, and Snape felt as though he’d been toppled off the Astronomy Tower. Holy Merlin. Minerva’s cub had learned to lie.

“Miss Granger, are you quite certain?” the Headmaster asked gently. “Bespoke goblin-made jewelry of that quality is rarely matched in the Muggle world.”

She didn’t move, bodily. Her eyes pendulumed between them. The air gained weight and mass.

“Headmaster,” Snape started, shifting to a cooler portion of his seat cushion. “Clearly those items belong to Miss Granger. I neglected to take points as an oversight—”

Dumbledore clicked his tongue loudly. “Severus, you’ve taught all these years without a hint of impropriety. I’ve overlooked blatant favoritism, yes, but this....” He shook his head. “I can’t shield you from this.”

“Sir!” Granger squeaked.
“Quiet,” Snape snapped. “I—”


Snape squinted at her as his palms dampened. Not a single person alive or dead would believe that, and he’d told her not to defend him. At least the blasted sparkle had frozen from the Headmaster’s blue eyes.

“When, Miss Granger?”

“Beginning of term, Headmaster.” She knotted her fingers together in her lap. “I wanted to control him, sir.”

Snape groaned inwardly at the violation of the second basic law of deception: keep the apparent motive singular.

“So the jewelry was payment?” Dumbledore asked. She hesitated, and his lips flattened again. “The troll defense worked your First Year, Miss Granger, but it won’t work now.”

She twitched again, disturbed by the news that her ploy had been transparent at the time. The arrogant hope of Gryffindors.

“Part of it’s true, Headmaster,” Snape said softly, steeling himself to maintain eye contact with the Headmaster. “There was an encounter—”

“Seduction,” he interrupted.

“No, not quite. Miss Granger interrupted me when I was self-pleasuring.” Could there be a more archaic term? Wanking off? Would Dumbledore know any of the other slang—

“In your quarters? How?”

“No, in the Potions classroom.” Might as well drop all hopes of maintaining dignity. “I thought I was alone, but she was in the store room. I believe she’d fallen asleep, and I must have overlooked her.”

“In the store room,” he said flatly. “And when she interrupted you, what happened?”

“I tried to get her to leave—”

“And I refused to go, sir,” she concluded. “I saw an opportunity—”

“Yes, for better grades, or to manipulate him, or for monetary gain, or would you care to add another reason?”

“I-I was curious.” She lowered her eyes to stare at her hands.

“That is a motive I will accept from you, Hermione,” Dumbledore said, his voice soft. She looked up at him. “What did you find so fascinating? You’ve dated boys. Surely male sexual response is no mystery.”

Granger shook her head and blinked rapidly. “It wasn’t that. Sir, I’d rather we just discussed my punishment.”

“Young punishment?” He crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair. “I’m not certain I follow. What exactly should you be punished for?”
“For...” Her eyes flicked toward Snape. “I don’t know, sir. I should have left.”

“Have you continued these extracurricular activities since then? Yes? You took the initiative and corrupted Professor Snape?”

“Sir, cor—I wouldn’t say, sir, corrupted,” she stammered, and her face drained of color.

Spiders skittered up Snape’s spine. What could this mean?

“The Board would need to consider, but I believe that’s grounds for expulsion, Miss Granger. If there’s suspicion you used magical means, perhaps with an Unforgivable—”

“No!” Her hand jerked to her sleeve. “My wand—”

“Could be snapped.”

Unthinkable. Snape leaned forward. “She’s confused; I enticed her. I accept any strictures you feel appropriate, Headmaster, but spare Miss Granger.”

Dumbledore turned towards him. “You should have stopped these activities. As it is, you did not, nor did you confide in me regarding any attempts to coerce a relationship.” The Headmaster tapped his lips with a finger. “Miss Granger, return to your dormitory so I can speak to Professor Snape.”

“I’d like to stay, please.” She lifted her chin as they both stared at her, but kept her eyes fixed on Dumbledore. “I’ve reached my majority, Professor Dumbledore. I’m not a child—”

“But you are a student under our care, Miss Granger, and the expectation is that guardians will not take advantage of their charges.”

She inhaled audibly. “You can’t send Severus from here; he needs your protection. We owe that to him.” Her gaze slid sideways until she faced Snape directly, her whole body pivoting in the chair towards him. “I won’t leave.”

That brought the twinkle back, that blasted Gryffindor bravado and self-sacrifice. For a heartbeat, the old man looked about to relent, cave to his urge for forgiveness—then he shook his head. “No, Miss Granger, you’ll return to the tower. If you continue to refuse, I will summon your head of House. Tomorrow, you’ll present yourself at my office at eight, and we’ll discuss appropriate next steps. Professor McGonagall will attend as well, to help plead your case. I suggest you adhere to Hogwarts’ dress code.”

Hermione dropped her chin, stood, and laid a book on the edge of the desk. Then she edged toward the door and paused, half-turning back. “I’ve been Disillusioning myself since Professor Snape warned me of the plot against me.” When neither teacher replied, she cast the charm over herself and slipped out the door, closing it without a sound.

Dumbledore continued to regard the door for a moment before he cast a reveal spell. Then he slumped into his chair as though he’d been deboned. “Tell me I dreamt all this.”

“Unfortunately not, Headmaster.”

“Merlin’s baggies, Severus, call me Albus!” He scrubbed at his hair, knocking his hat askew. “When did this start?”

“As Hermione said, the start of term.”
“After term had started?”

“Yes, that first day, in fact. After class, before dinner.”

He peered between his fingers. “And what captivated her so?”

Deep breath. “You understand I have somewhat specific tastes,” Snape said slowly.

Dumbledore dropped his hand to the armrest and clenched his fingers into the padding. “No. Not—”

“No that,” Snape countered quickly. The Headmaster was clearly remembering whispers of things Death Eaters got up to, not to mention the rumors about himself from before he’d learned which end of the lash he preferred. “She whips me. She wanted to learn more. I’ve taught her all term.”

“Pry all you want. Various implements.”

His mouth moved under the beard. “No...coitus?”

In moments of greatest discomfort, retreat to Latin. “No,” he said, and clipped the word as much as a vowel can be clipped.

“How old is she, do you know?”

“Nineteen, as of September nineteenth.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened. “You know the date?” He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his index finger. “You know Hermione’s birthday.” He flapped his arm towards the door. “She called you by your first name.” He pointed a gnarled digit at Snape. “Why did you let this continue?”

Why indeed. Not so simple to answer. Very simple to answer. Snape’s eyes stung, and he suppressed the desire to kick the desk and hurl hexes around the room. “I was curious.”

Dumbledore wheezed out a laugh. “I’ll accept that from you as well, Severus. For now.” He leaned forward, propping himself on his arm. “I’ve told you time and again, human beings aren’t meant to live solitary lives, Severus. Eventually the longing for contact will win out.” His voice trailed off. “Lily’s been dead how long?”

“Eighteen—no—seventeen years. Halloween 1981.” The old man caught the stumble, and his expression sharpened. “Don’t read into that, Albus. It’s been a difficult evening.”

“It’s been an odd evening, I’ll grant that, to cap off a trying week.” He produced a scrap of paper from his robe and referred to it. “The Gryffindor House hourglass is forty-five points off what it should be. Your records for Miss Granger state six detentions this term; thirty points taken, ten added. By your averages, you’re at least sixty points shy; you’ve never gone easy on Gryffindor. And Filch got all your Friday night cauldron-cleaners. Someone was bound to notice.” He paused. “Were there more than six recorded detentions?”

“No,” he said quietly.

“Were the punishments just a ruse?”

Snape didn’t bother to hide his wince. “She needed a reason to be in the dungeons. My students needed to know she was expected and watched for.”
“Was she aware of the reasons? When you listed them, she seemed inclined to protest.”

“Hermione Granger would protest the downward motion of a raindrop, Headmaster. I assigned detention during class, in plain hearing of her classmates, and she even suggested—” He bit his tongue. “Maybe she didn’t outright suggest, but she was amenable after I told her what Miss Marsland had overheard.”

“But against Gryffindors generally, not against a—I thought we’d agreed to not tell any of the students?”

“I objected at the time, if you recall. She insisted on chasing after me—”

“Chasing? She chased you?”

Snape groaned. “On at least three occasions, she followed me on my rounds. I couldn’t leave her unprotected, knowing what I knew.”

“I suppose she came to share your sexual interests on her own?”

The snarky voice in the back of his head chose now to chime in. Let’s get that tally of broken school staff rules going, shall we? “I can’t say. But...she may have...I believe she stumbled upon some reading materials I’d discarded in the Come and Go Room.”

“Pornography, Severus? We don’t permit that on school grounds.”

“It’s clear why, too. Yes, pornography. I was reenacting a scene from one of the stories when she, well, she must have watched me before she interrupted. She knew the plot, the reason why I had the crop.” Babbling, stop it. The Dark Lord would have skewered him by now.

“Pornography on campus, falsified records, fictitious detentions, salacious dalliance with a student, insubordination, willful disregard of a superior’s orders, endangering a student, failure to report a situation unbecoming to the school—am I missing anything?”

“You must allow her to finish her schooling. Our world needs people of her calibre, Headmaster—”

“’Albus,’ please, Severus.” He sat up suddenly. “That incident in the library—”

“Followed a row, yes.” Severus closed his eyes. “A miscommunication; we resolved it—”

“She was in the stands with you.”

Snape sighed heavily, guessing at the hole he’d dug, when he caught the old man’s bemused smirk. “What?” he carped, dropping all attempt to be politic.

“From all appearances, I’d say this was, as they say, rather serious.”

He’d stalked to the end of his office before he realized he’d left his chair, and the Headmaster swiveled to gawp at him. “Yes, fine. It’s something more.” He racked his knuckles against a shelf and grounded himself in the smart. He couldn’t talk about the cozy warmth when she gave him a sidelong smile, the thrill when he caught the scent of his potions when he came near her, the hot rush when she whispered into his hair, the glow of knowing this sharp witch wanted to spend time with him, the fuzzy dreams of keeping this thing going as long as she had interest.

He dropped into the armchair and leaned on his knees toward the older man, willing him to understand, “I can’t explain, Albus.”
“Love?”

Absurd. Impossible. Snape retracted into the armchair away from the word, shaking his head. Lust, affection, fondness, but not more, surely. No.

“Have you finally let Lily go, Severus?”

Snape curled into a ball, his limbs awkward as he hugged himself and tried to choke down a bezoar-sized lump. His belly roiled and threatened to erupt in a Patronus. “It wasn’t planned.”

“Severus, censure is simple. Love… I can’t punish anyone for falling in love.”

“Timing.”

“True.”

“The wrong person.”

“Some would agree.” He closed his hand over Snape’s wrist. “Get some sleep. We’ll discuss this tomorrow.” Dumbledore stood and smoothed his robes. “I’ll let myself out.”

Snape sat hunched in the chair long after the door closed.

Chapter End Notes

If you're here from Ashwinder and want an invite, I have a few. Contact me through one of the places in my profile. I'll need a valid email address.
Chapter Summary

You should never make major life decisions on an empty stomach.

Chapter Notes

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Yet again I have to break the wall. *Cantata is now on hiatus* until further notice. So sorry. To cap off upheavals in my job (3 changes since July), my doggie getting sick and having to be put down, and a wretched illness…my hubby was diagnosed with stage IV adrenal cancer last Thursday. I need time to regroup. I'm contemplating a couple months, but I won't make promises right now.

I'd strongly suggest subscribing so you get an alert when I start posting again.

**THANKS:** Eternally to Melusin, who knows more about this chapter than she ought to, as well as being the Queen of Punctuation. To the bunch on the string forum, LiveJournal, and the Panera Writing Bunch: y'all are lights in the darkness. To everyone who has ever left a review here: thanks so much, I do reread them.

**POSTING SCHEDULE:** CURRENTLY ON HIATUS. Cantata is normally updated on a monthly schedule, the first week of the month or around the first Tuesday.

**NOTES:** Any recognizable people, places, or things in this world belongs to JK Rowling. Anything unrecognizable is a product of my pea-brain on coffee. *I have included potential non-canon theories from other sources, such as essays on HP Lexicon* (more details would lead to spoilers). *Hallows have been removed as a plot device. AU for parts of HBP and all of DH. EWE. Adult themes and content: BDSM, kink, power exchange, femdom. Caution! Non-canon content, in other words.*

---

**Sat, 5 Dec 98, Great Hall**

“Are you ill?” Ginny asked. “You barely ate at breakfast or lunch. Now you’re just nudging those peas around the plate.”

Hermione stared down at her fork and smushed the tines across the layer of peas.

“You should go to the hospital wing.”

“I’m fine.”

Ginny slathered butter on half of a ripped-apart roll. “If I go too long without eating, I end up getting sicker.”

Hermione sighed and nibbled at the last piece of bread from the basket.
She’d botched it all for both of them. She’d have to leave school at least, maybe have her wand snapped if it went that way; Severus would be tossed out of the safety of Hogwarts and be killed.

Her stomach coiled onto itself. She discarded the roll and concentrated on reciting runes to herself through the end of dinner.

Amidst the chaos of the Hall’s clearing, she met his eyes. He tipped his head so his hair fell clear of his face and half-smiled, then he turned away as McGonagall stepped close to speak to him.

At quarter to eight, she put her books away and left her dorm. She weaved her way through the crowded Common Room without attracting attention and started the long trek to the Headmaster’s office.

Then she was in front of the gargoyle statue and realized she had no idea what the password was.

“Miss Granger, do you need to see Professor Dumbledore?” asked Madam Pomfrey from behind her.

Hermione jumped sideways. “I have an appointment, but I don’t know the password.”

Madam Pomfrey’s face flushed slightly. “It’s ‘licorice sharps’, Miss Granger. Are you well, dear?” She pressed the back of her hand against Hermione’s forehead. “Come see me afterward.”

Hermione stepped closer to the statue, husked out the password, and rode the spiral stairs upwards.

Snape and McGonagall were already seated around the coffee table in the small alcove off the main space. Dumbledore poured her tea and tucked a digestive on the saucer before he handed it to her. McGonagall maternally patted the cushion of the chair between her and Dumbledore, across from the Potions master, who occupied a double settee. Snape rested his cup on his crossed knee, fingers curled lightly around the translucent china; he returned Hermione’s glance with an expression of mild curiosity, as though he were uncertain why they were meeting at all.

She repressed an urge to giggle and cleared her throat instead.

“All that we discuss here will remain private, you understand?” Dumbledore said. “Apparently the castle itself has made some decisions concerning a few students.”

“Nothing to worry about,” McGonagall said as she put her hand on Hermione’s arm. “It’s to do with House points.”

“Perhaps, Minerva,” Dumbledore said. “Miss Granger, none of the points you’ve won or lost in Potions class this term have been recorded by the House hourglass.”

Severus sipped his tea and glanced meaningfully at her cup. She mirrored him, and wet her lips.

“In addition, Miss Granger has sat six detentions for Professor Snape this term.”

“Heavens, six detentions in only three months?” McGonagall said.

“As I understand it, Minerva, these weren’t exactly punishments.”

The older witch frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Headmaster, Minerva, if you’d allow me to address this matter?” Snape asked. Taking their silence as acceptance, he continued, “The detentions were ploys—”
“No,” Hermione interrupted. “I went willingly, you know that.”

“Quiet,” Snape shot back. “As I was saying, these were deceptive—”

Hermione jerked forward in her chair, slopping her tea into the saucer, and Snape narrowed his eyes. “That’s not what happened, and you know it.”

McGonagall’s hand tightened on her arm. “What’s going on?”

“I—please, Headmaster, I’ve decided to leave,” Hermione said and shook her arm free of McGonagall’s clenching fingers.


“I’ll go,” Snape said at the same time. “I’ve handed in my resignation.”

“And I’ve refused it,” the Headmaster said and pointed at Hermione, “and I urge you to remain.”

“The castle doesn’t want me here; people want to hurt me—”

“Hermione!” Snape said.

“Just a moment,” said Professor McGonagall. “Am I to believe you’ve had an improper relationship?” No one responded. “At least twenty years—you could be her father! Not to mention the disregard of professional ethics—”

“He didn’t start it,” Hermione cut in.

“What? You did? What possible attraction could you find in him—with all respect, Severus—what is this?” She gestured at both of them.

Hermione shook her head. “It didn’t start this way. In the beginning it was—”

“Innocent?”

“We’ll not discuss this,” Snape said firmly.

“Because it wasn’t innocent,” McGonagall shot back. “You took advantage, just as I suspected—”

“Minerva,” Dumbledore snapped. “Minerva, take my word for it that Hermione is stating facts.”

McGonagall stared at them. “I don’t—Albus, the scandal! They’ll be forced out.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Dumbledore said.

“You can’t, in my case,” Snape said. “There’s no one to replace me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Severus is right,” Dumbledore said, a weariness in his voice. “We looked for a replacement Potions teacher last August.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of that,” McGonagall said.

Snape raised his voice. “The only acceptable candidate I could find, one with no interest in the Dark Arts, isn’t available until April.”
“So we come to the real reason for our meeting,” the Headmaster said, his brows knitted into a thicket. “We need to address what we can before the Board or the Ministry get involved.”

“He’ll be ruled unfit for teaching,” McGonagall said, and Hermione inhaled sharply.

“Miss Granger, it’s easier to believe that an older man seduced a younger girl.” The Headmaster picked lint off his sleeve. “But if there were some bond between you, some obvious connection, something to legitimize—”

“Like marriage?” Hermione asked, hating the squeak she ended on.

McGonagall scoffed. “Who’d believe that?”

“Not marriage,” Snape said curtly, then he frowned at his cup and added in an undertone, “A handfast contract, perhaps.”

“It’s a old wizarding tradition, even older than Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said in response to Hermione’s confused expression. “It’s how witches could retain their individual rights to property while in a recognized relationship, and separate amicably if needed. There was a time, Miss Granger, when marriage stripped a woman of all rights to property.”

“But suffrage is the law now,” Hermione said.

“Mostly. Some wizarding families still consider suffrage a Muggle fashion, like trousers instead of robes.” The Headmaster’s lenses caught the light as he spoke and hid his eyes.

“It’s absurd,” McGonagall said. “Hand-fasting is a pairing based on love, not convenience. This dalliance—it’s lust, surely, not love.”

“Nevertheless, this may be the only solution that allows them both to remain at Hogwarts.”

The older witch sniffed. “Very well. I’ll play along for now. I assume you have a list of offenses and proposed disciplinary actions.”

Dumbledore summoned a scroll.

“Miss Granger, return to the Tower,” McGonagall said.

“Stay,” the Headmaster replied. “She’s admitted complicity.”

“Albus! She couldn’t have!”

Hermione faced McGonagall. “Why won’t you believe me?”

Dumbledore pressed on, referring to the document before him. “Severus has offered—”

“Offered?” McGonagall interjected. “Why does he have a choice?”

“Minerva, please. Severus has offered to step down as head of Slytherin House permanently. I recommend only for the next three months, with the loss of stipend.” He paused. “Septima was in Slytherin; she can step in. Note the additional broken rules of conduct. Severus, sign there; Minerva, witness there.” He handed the scroll to Severus and tilted his head to look at Hermione. “Your punishment. Expulsion would be the logical step—”

Her fingers pressed against her wand in her sleeve.
“Instead, you’ll drop Potions. Your records associated with that subject this term will be expunged, as if you’d never taken the class.”

“But I need Potions; everything I want to do requires a Potions N.E.W.T.”

His brows flicked. “Miss Granger, the alternative would leave you with no N.E.W.T.s at all. I’ve assigned you to assist Madam Pomfrey.”

“Finished,” McGonagall said and dropped the scroll on the table. “Come along, Miss Granger.”

Hermione stood obediently. Snape’s eyes seemed to darken, and the tendons in his wrists tautened.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” Hermione said, edged around the little table that separated her from Severus, and sat beside him. She pushed her hand between his and meshed their fingers together. “I belong here.”

McGonagall gaped at them before twitching her robes. “I shan’t stay longer. Hermione, if you want a woman’s counsel, my door is open.” She stormed from the room.

Severus sighed heavily. “At least my censure has been witnessed and accepted.”

She peered at the scroll. “‘Insubordination?’”

“I’d been ordered not to speak about the threats,” Severus replied.

“I’m glad you told me.”

“You should never had needed to know, Hermione,” Dumbledore said, “You usually avoid detention.”

“That’s how you knew, isn’t it? I shouldn’t have had detention.”

“That, too many on Fridays, and not enough points lost. And the mystery of who was Disillusioned at the Quidditch pitch.” His eyes twinkled. “It was the first inkling I had that my Potions master had perhaps fallen under someone’s spell.”

Severus scoffed. “Would it have hurt to have mentioned your suspicions?”

“Severus, you tried to deny your feelings last night, despite your incoherence.”

“Professor,” Hermione asked softly. “What if we just separated and waited until the end of the year?”

Dumbledore looked carefully at her. “You both knew better, but you continued this illicit relationship for months. Why should I trust you to behave?”

“So either I leave, or we have to do this hand-fasting?”

He nodded and produced a scrap of parchment. “Hermione, I’d meant to suggest that you move out of Gryffindor Tower into the guest chambers. This is the password. Take some time to sort things out between you.”

---

**Sat, 5 Dec 98, Hogwarts Castle**

Granger followed him out of the Headmaster’s office and down the corridor to a discrete door. She whispered the password; the door swung open. The short hallway led to a living space with furniture
covered by white sheets. Sconces and candlesticks glowed with life; Snape lit the stove and threw open the curtains over the windows.

“Nice view.”

“Presumably,” he replied. She’d come to stand beside him and leaned against the window. Her breath fogged the glass. He brushed a few tendrils of hair off her sleeve.

Her stomach grumbled, and she apologized.

“Happens when you don’t eat,” he commented dryly and silently summoned a house-elf.

“You watched me?”

The elf Apparated with a soft crack.

“Bring us my usual late night meal.”

The elf eyed Hermione and edged away, her ears drooping.

“Don’t waste time. Go.” The elf disappeared with a soft pop. Snape pointed at the shrouded chairs. “Sit there until she returns.” He prowled the rooms scanning for spying spells, but found none. When he returned, Granger was serving out food.

“She brought beer,” she said, gesturing at the opened dark bottles. “You never answered. You watched me?”

He took the chair opposite her. She looked pale and twitchy. “You ate very little breakfast. You swished your soup around at lunch. You mutilated a roll at dinner.”

She glowed. “I had some peas. I tried to see if you were eating, too.”

“Granger, you eat when food’s available, regardless of emotional state.”

“So this is just for me?”

“Not unless you possess a bottomless gut.”

She laughed and unwrapped one of the roast beef sandwiches, loosing the fragrance of hot meat and pungent horseradish. He took the other sandwich. They ate in silence for several minutes, but he slowed to observe her.

Her eyes were darkened from lack of sleep, but color returned to her cheeks now that the anticipation was over and food was available. She stopped from time to time to guzzle water. Dehydrated as well. Was avoiding the beer, though. Didn’t like it? Didn’t drink it? He’d hoped she’d have some, to calm her edginess. Her giggles had bordered on hysterical.

Snape sipped at his bottle and hid his pleasure when she mirrored him.

“This is good. I’ve never liked beer much.” Granger sniffled suddenly and pawed at her robe until she unearthed a hankie. “I really screwed up, didn’t I?”

“Gryffindors aren’t known for worrying about consequences,” he replied coolly.

She glared at him. “I’m more than just the characteristics of my House, you know.” Her eyes flashed. “And what about you, former Head of Slytherin, what’s your excuse?”
Fiery Granger never moped. How best to egg her on? “Perhaps you’ll enlighten me?” he asked, raising a brow, and took another draw off the bottle.

She huffed in response and scowled down at her plate. “I think you didn’t consider all the possible consequences.”

He laughed. “No, this was a possibility.” He pointed the neck of the bottle towards her. “You didn’t act as predicted.”

“Meaning what?”

“I figured you’d report me.”

She went pale again and poked at her plate. “Almost did, when you went on about me being a smart witch.”

He set the bottle down and pivoted it slowly. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I’d have had to reveal—” She cut herself off, her eyes wide. “You knew I stole. I’d have had to explain that, and it wasn’t just my neck. And because I started it. You weren’t fully to blame.”

“And that, little girl, is why I am a Slytherin, and you are not.”

She blushed and averted her eyes. Whatever for?

When she met his gaze again she asked, “So if our roles had been reversed, you would have turned me in?”

He shrugged, still puzzling over her response. “Possibly. Our roles were reversed, and I did not.”

“You wanted me to turn you in?”

He hummed. “It would have been interesting. Has been interesting.”

“I guess it happened anyway,” she commented. She sipped the beer. “I cost you money.”

“Inconsequential.”

“I thought Slytherins valued money and status?”

“We do. But I am also more than my House.” A hunch. “Little girl.”

She colored again, and a thrill raced through him. He’d found a new toy now and wanted to play with it, but she jerked it from his hands.

“Guess I was naughty, making you lose your headship, sir.” She lowered her chin as she spoke, her eyes big.

He resisted the urge to cling to the table as his head spun and his prick surged. “You don’t know what you’re suggesting, Granger,” he growled at her, knowing he was wrong.

“I do, sir,” she replied. “I want to offer to you what you’ve given me.”

“What’s that?”

She didn’t hesitate. “My submission.”
If this was how she reacted to alcohol, he’d rethink being near her when she drank. “I told you, I don’t switch with existing partners.”

“But you want to try it.”

Had him there. Ever since she’d stroked his shins and adored his hands, his fantasies had grown to include the very things that Minerva had nearly accused him of earlier. It’d been simple, since he’d compared each female with Lily, but this little witchling upset every balance.

“And you as much as told me you love me, calling me ‘my own’,” she said, her voice lowering. “And I love you.”

Snape’s tongue flapped around his mouth for a moment, trying to work up some moisture. She said it so easily. “And that somehow equates to giving yourself to me.” As soon as the words came out, he knew how stupidly obvious it was. “Not this way, Granger.”

“Doesn’t have to be, no. But I cost you; this is an exchange. And it feels right, doesn’t it?”

Yes it does yes it does yes it does—when did she become so crafty?

“And I want to,” she added.

If that didn’t make it all right and square, nothing did, but his instincts screamed retreat. He leaned forward. “Let’s put aside the language and discuss this rationally.”

She took another sip of beer. “Shall I tell you what I want first?” At his nod, she set the bottle down. “I want you to touch me. I want you to fuck me, Severus.”

Snape shoved his hands into his pockets and collected his thoughts. “Hermione, if I put you under me, I won’t share you that way with another, especially not a student.”

Her eyes shone. “Are you proposing?”

“I won’t marry you—”

“If you’re going to be that territorial—”

“I will not have a rival in my class!”

She looked away. “You’re the only person I want to touch me.”

The words fell out before he could catch them. “You’d wear my token?”

Her face knotted. “Do you mean a ring? Yes, I would. Would you?”

Severus pressed his lips together and nodded. A token, not a ring.

Hermione smiled slightly. “So we seal this contract with sex?”

“Merlin, no! It’s an actual contract with a very public ceremony!” He counted on his fingers. “First we’d need to discuss length and terms of contract. You’ve reached majority, but you should talk with your parents and someone neutral in our world who can explain hand-fasting. Dumbledore will have to weigh in, and the rest of the staff.” He grimaced and gestured vaguely. “Then there’s everyone outside the castle walls—it’s a dreadful idea. I’m sorry I suggested it.”

“Why?”
“It can end very badly if the contract is broken. Both partners’ reputations are tainted, but the witch always suffers the worse stigma. The Muggle world is far more forgiving now than the wizarding world is. Used to be the other way.” He grunted. “I’ll likely be viewed as a mawkish figure, lusting after a young, bright—”

She cut him off. “Anyone who calls you that doesn’t know you and doesn’t deserve your attention. It has to be official, then? Not just an engagement?”

“To keep us both in the castle, yes.” He shook his head. “It’s the only option, as much as I hate it.”

“I’ll leave,” she said quickly. “I’ll get a job, we can meet at Hogsmeade—”

“You came back for your N.E.W.T.s.”

“I’ll study on my own and sit them later.”

“I told you months ago that the Ministry was changing the rules.” He sighed. “You must be enrolled at an approved school to be tested, and you’ll need a record of attendance to prove consistent performance to get a job at the Ministry.”

“I’ll work somewhere else, or go to Muggle university.”

Snape studied her skeptically. “Exactly what can you do in the non-magic world with a background in Arithmancy and Charms? You’d risk imprisonment for violating the Statute of Secrecy daily.”

She slumped in her chair. “We’ve no choice.”

“Surprising how often that happens when the old man’s involved.” He flicked his wand at the couch and sent the shrouding off it. “Come here.”

She took his hand, followed him to the couch, and let him pull her onto his lap. Her weight grounded him, and her familiar scent did contradictory things to his pulse rate. Snape cuddled her against him and nuzzled into her hair. She turned her face to his and met his lips, then put his hand on her breast.

He drew away and sighed. “Granger…”

“We both want to,” she whispered, replacing his hand.

“I won’t switch with you.”

“I’m not your student anymore.”

He closed his eyes. “You’re still a student to my peers, Granger.”

Through his lids, he could tell she was studying him; when he opened his eyes, she had that predictable stubborn set to her jaw and an expression of triumph.

“Fondle me, Severus.”

Snape squinted at her. “I won’t accept your submission.”

“I’m not submitting,” she replied. “I order you as your Mistress. I want you to feel me up and undress me.”

The same looping whirl he’d felt when she’d pinned him on the Astronomy Tower caused his stomach to drop. His fingers flexed on her as though testing a peach, and his mouth watered as the
peak of her nipple rose under his palm. She held his gaze, and he let his hand wander slowly over her to rest on her hip. She glanced down pointedly; he reversed course and ended by cupping the swell in his hand and pressing his mouth to her neck.

“Keep going.” She loosened her school tie and guided his hand to her neck. “It’s just buttons.”

His fingers worked on their own, freeing each button until there were none left, and he slipped his hand inside her shirt. “I’m not meant to see you, my Mistress,” he whispered.

“Push my shirt back and look at me,” she commanded. He did as he was told, noting each curve his hand had found, each freckle and speck, before tracing a finger along the edge of her brassiere cup to the plastic catch over her sternum, and rested the tip of his finger on the little latch.

Her stare burned into him. At her nod, he fiddled with the clasp until she popped it for him, and the fabric sprang back. He’d no excuse now, so he did what she’d said, wondering at how soft and smooth, until she was exposed from shoulder to waist.

Pert. He never really used the word, but it fitted. Perky, too. A host of words that made his mouth pucker swam up from somewhere. He wet his lips; she pressed his head downward, and his mouth closed around her coral nipple.

He didn’t want to miss touching or tasting a bit of her; after a few minutes, she stood to shuck her shirt and bra, let her skirt puddle at her shoes, and peel her knickers off. He caught her tie to pull her onto him, but she slipped sideways to sit on the couch, contrary as always; then his chest was bare, and she’d undone the closure of his trousers.

“Wait, yellow, my own, please.” He stilled her fingers with his.

Her brows arched in query.

“I’ve no sheath.”

“I do,” she replied with a giggle; she spread her hand over her womb, and her belly glowed a little from the contraceptive spell.

He shook his head. “I’ve never…not without…”

She smiled and reached inside his pants to grasp his todger firmly. “Time that changed?”

Severus tried to avert his gaze, but couldn’t seem to find a place that wasn’t her. “Hermione….”

Her grip on him tightened, and she gave a little tug. “Sev,” she said in a low, slightly disapproving voice. “I’ll order you.”

He smiled in spite of himself. She shoved his clothes back, and he braced himself over her on the armrest at her head, bating his breath as she guided his cock against her wet slit. Hot, silken, slick—she held him still, poised at her entry, then lifted her hips and parted around him. He pushed in and eased out, her warmth clinging to him. She crooked a leg around his back in warning, but he’d no intention of withdrawing further. He sunk into her again, slowly, watching her face for any sign of discomfort; she moaned and fisted his jacket in both hands at the waist, limiting his movement, and looked lazily at him.

“You can go harder.”

“Is that a demand?”
“A suggestion.”

Severus hummed in response as he stroked patiently. Any faster and he’d lose it. Besides, she looked so tasty with her mouth relaxed and eyes half-lidded. He plunged in sharply, and her tits jiggled.

Hermione shifted under him so he slid deeper into her, wedged the fingers of one hand under his palm, and caressed his chest. She thrust up, impaling herself, and he shook his head.

“No, careful.”

“If I do this?” she asked and did it again.

“Granger, behave.”

She grinned, pumped against him, and pinched his nipples.

He huffed, gathered her wrists in one hand, and scowled down at her as he pounded into her. She brought her knees nearly to his shoulder blades, and he was certain he’d found the depths of her, buried balls-deep.

Her wrists jerked in his grasp, and she mewled in time to his thrusts.

Spurred on, he drove into her, just a bit more and he’d find, end, done— He released her hands and slowed to inching strokes, but she ground her pelvis against his, and crisis trumpeted advance.

“Don’t!”

“This?” She wriggled, and he trapped her wrists to the armrest again. “Why not?” Her lips curled upwards. The burn from his groin lit a line to his skull. “Gonna come?”

Twenty-seven healing grasses in Wales, in order of potency—

“Sev?” Her brow wrinkled, concern for him, but at least she was still.

“Not yet. Don’t move.”

Siren’s smile deepened. “Kiss me.”

When he drew back, her lips glistened. His throbbed. More kissing would ease that. Sod it—his cock won the battle with his brain, drove him forward, and he worked an arm beneath her to lock her tight.

She swore, fussed with something that slithered between their chests.

The tie.

She jerked the knot over her face and wrestled it from her hair. A spring tightened inside him.

“You?” He cupped the back of her neck in one hand.

“On me.”

Her eyes widened. “You?” He cupped the back of her neck in one hand.

“Please.” Mouth dry. All the gold in Gringott’s couldn’t lure like this. “My Mistress.”

Her eyes glowed. She slid the loop over his head and snugged the knot against his throat. “Mine.”
“Damn it, Crooks, let me sleep.” She swatted at the cat’s tail tickling her nose and connected with a hand.

Severus was propped on one elbow, a tuft of her hair between his thumb and forefinger. Smirking. The man slept in a smirk. “Who’s Crooks?”

“My cat. Was my cat.”

“That orange butterball is yours?”

She rolled to her back to see him better in the dim light from the stove. He’d Transfigured the couch wider for them to lie together. “Was. He took a liking to George after Fred died.”

Although he’d undressed, he still wore her tie. She traced the edge of the fabric with her finger. Small muscles around his eyes and mouth twitched as though he couldn’t decide on an expression.

She whispered, “Mine.”

His cheeks tinted. But the ticks stopped, and wrinkles darkened the corners of his eyes.

“That’s settled,” she said. “When do we tell the Headmaster?”

He flopped back beside her, profile stark against the dark room. “Soon.”

“Then?”

“Then it happens.”

She pondered before straddling his waist and leaning over him. “Before Christmas?”

He kept his eyes closed. “Sunday lunch after the Express leaves. Have the Order come.” His lids slivered open. “Gives us time to prepare.”

“Right.” Prepare. Tell her parents. Make peace with what friends she could. A calendar of scheduled activities in colored ink bloomed in her mind’s eye, and she giggled. “Shall I make you a revision table for hand-fasting?”

Severus tapped her nose. “Some things can be over-planned. Get dressed.”

They climbed up the shifting stairs side by side towards the Gryffindor tower as the Hogwarts clock chimed one A.M.

“Professor McGonagall would kill me if she knew I were still out,” Hermione muttered.

Severus snorted. “Your breaking curfew should be the least of our concerns.”

As they stepped onto the landing a dark shape fled before them.

“Minerva,” Snape said softly as the witch transformed beside the mute portrait of the Fat Lady. McGonagall took station by the portal, her glower deepening as they approached.

“Severus,” she replied. Her wand, held loosely at her side, glowed red; her pursed lips drew into a frown.
Hermione peered around Severus’ shoulder at his somber expression. He laid the palm of his left hand on her belly and nudged her backward a step.

“I warned Albus when we brought you on,” McGonagall said. “Too young, impatient, impetuous, imprudent—”

“That was nearly twenty years ago,” he interrupted.

“And you have the nerve to accuse my students of flagrant rule-breaking.”

“Are you more angry because Hermione’s a student, because she’s your student, or because I wasn’t?” he asked.

The tip of McGonagall’s wand shot sparks.

“That has nothing—”

“It wouldn’t be the first time this school’s true House prejudices were placed on display.”

Hermione stared up at him. His hair had fallen forward again; from where she was, just behind his left shoulder, all she could see was the tip of his nose. He sounded tired.

McGonagall shifted her weight and looked at Hermione. “You should go in,” the older witch said softly. “It’s late.”

His fingers twitched on her abdomen. She put her hand on his and pressed her thumb into his palm. “I should,” Hermione echoed. He held her hand and guided her in the direction of the Gryffindor dorms.

McGonagall’s gaze seemed riveted on their hands before she jerked her head and turned her attention back to Severus.

Hermione edged toward the portrait and held his hand until his fingers slipped from hers. He didn’t move, nor did McGonagall. The portrait swung open without waiting for her to give the password.

“Go on,” he said. “We’ll speak tomorrow.”

She stepped through the portal and watched the back of the portrait close over the doorway.

He’d pushed her behind him. He’d anticipated a fight.

Would she hear the sound of them dueling? She crept forward and pushed at the portrait, but it didn’t budge.

Hermione slid down the wall to the floor. It wasn’t enough that she’d shattered her world. She’d wrecked his as well and completely upset staff relations at the school. McGonagall—she’d never seen the witch so angry. Angry at Snape, at Dumbledore, at her. Pomfrey’s expression when they’d spoken—she was upset as well, probably at the Headmaster. At Snape, too? Hermione shook her head. The mediwitch probably didn’t know about her and Severus. Not yet, but she would.

She clambered to her feet and went to her dorm. The lights were out, and most of the girls had drawn the curtains around their beds. Ginny hadn’t, and the redhead stirred when Hermione closed the door.

“Hermione?” Ginny peered towards her. “What time is it?”
“Past one,” she whispered back. She hesitated at the corner of her bed, bypassed it, and sat beside Ginny. “How awake are you?”

Her friend grinned up at her from where she lay, her eyes puffy. “Awake enough. Where were you tonight? Out with your mystery man?”

Too close. “You can’t talk about anything I tell you, okay? The Headmaster took me out of Potions class. I’ll be studying with Madam Pomfrey instead.”

“No Snape. Wow.” She grinned into space then looked back at Hermione. “Why?”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s not a good reason.”

Ginny struggled upright. “Did Snape do this? After you’ve been making excuses for him all this time?”

Hermione knotted her fingers together. “I didn’t tell you what Professor Snape told me back in October, did I?”

“I don’t recall anything particular.”

“He told me….” After a final request for secrecy, she told Ginny most of it, skirting around the details.

“I can’t believe—he went against the Headmaster’s direct orders and told you?” Ginny hugged herself. “I really thought with Riddle gone… No idea who?”

Hermione shrugged, shook her head, and wished she could tell her friend everything. But once Ginny knew about her and Severus—once they all knew—there’d be no one to share secrets with ever again, and Seamus would gloat, and Ron, and Harry—

“Did McGonagall know?”

“Don’t know.” Too bad she didn’t ask during the stand off; it might have lightened the mood. What would happen with the threats after they hand-fasted? And the letter bombs—would the people trying to kill Severus turn their attentions to her and her parents? Would anyone care? She shivered and slid off the bed. “I’m freezing and exhausted. Good night, Gin.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!