

Contraceptus: Continuum

by *Ariadne AWS*

A long time ago, Severus made the right potion for the wrong reasons. Hermione finds it, and is furious - also for the wrong reasons. With the help of some wise counsel, they untangle mistakes, miscommunications, and misinterpretations, all the while committing more. A parable on situational ethics surrounding a crime he never committed. (Winner, Best Drabble Series ~ MPP Round 4; Runner-up, Hurt/Comfort ~ 2008 OWL Awards)

Contraceptus

Chapter 1 of 5

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A/N: Written for Droxy, who issued a prompt at Terminus: "Severus has found Hermione's shoe. What's next?" The original response is posted as a stand-alone single chapter, "Contraceptus," which also stands as Chapter I here. This longer version is for everyone who wanted more to the story. *blows kiss* ~ Ari

Warning: Although rape is not depicted in this story or its backstory, it is a topic of conversation.



Severus opened one eye and glared at the morning, rubbing an angry finger over the lump on his forehead, his eye falling on the parchment on his desk. ~~last~~.

An hour later, bathed, dressed, he sat at the desk and squinted through his headache to read.

You will find your medicinal potions supply missing. I've taken them to my flat.

P.S. Your cauldron, too.

He remembered laughter, sharing brandy by the fire.

Nothing after that.

He suspected, however, that the welt on his head and her potions theft related somehow to the single silver sandal he'd found under his bed.

She was twirling the other sandal around her finger, glaring moodily through a tumbled curl at her table, where potion bottles arrayed themselves on a chessboard, playing through a series of moves only to stop, re-set, and start over.

No series of moves was longer than six.

She didn't look up at his arrival, just sat twirling her shoe.

"I've returned its mate."

"So I see."

The potions bottles continued their abbreviated games.

"Do you plan to explain your hasty departure?"

The twirling stopped. She held up her shoe, giving him an excellent view of its heel.

"No. Deduce it."

The blue queen bottle checkmated the black king bottle. The pieces reset.

"I remember nothing after you joined me for a drink after the ceremony."

She examined the silver heel. "That doesn't surprise me. I'm amazed you're standing this morning."

"You brained me with your shoe?"

A dimple that could only be described as "bitchy" appeared, but she did not look at him.

Hermione twitched her wand at the blue bottles. The queen rose and hovered in front of Severus' hand.

"That's not a headache potion."

"Two points to Slytherin. What is it?"

"Contraceptus."

"One point. And its date?"

Blast.

The blue bottle returned to its place on the board. The game began anew.

Hermione stopped twirling the sandal and fingered the heel. "Why, Severus?"

With all the dignity he could muster, standing as he was in her flat holding a silver sandal, the mate to the one she'd clocked him with the night before, he muttered, "Why... what?"

She shot him a disgusted look. "Please."

"Why do I have a Contraceptus potion in my private stores dating from your sixth year at Hogwarts?"

Her eyes blazed an affirmation.

"You were a student."

"Who was she?"

"No one of consequence."

"Who was she?" Hermione demanded, her cheeks reddening.

"It is none of your business, Hermione."

"It is when I go to your stores intending to rejoin you in your bedroom only to discover... that."

The blue bottle hovered mid-move for emphasis.

"I repeat. It is none of your business."

"Not any of the staff, I'm sure..." Several black pieces left the board in quick succession. "Dumbledore would not have allowed a Death Eater inside Hogwarts. Visitors were curtailed, students forbidden." Her eyes glowed with enough intensity to inflame the board.

"That leaves the Order. Was it Tonks, Severus?"

He paled.

His voice a low whisper. "How dare you, Hermione?"

She looked pointedly at her shoe in his hand and tilted her chin.

His hands were trembling.

"You've not denied it, Severus. Do you ask me to believe that your prevarication skills have slipped?"

His hand tightened around her shoe.

"You always communicate by not speaking. Always. How do you think I knew to save you, knew how? Not because you spoke the words, but you told me, just the same, because I knew to look. I'm looking now, Severus."

"And you see what?"

"I see a pathetic attempt —"

"*Stop.*"

The board re-set. The black headache potion bottle moved one space forward.

"I said she was no one of consequence. You have correctly surmised that the potion was made for no one on staff, that no Death Eaters were in the castle, and that students were forbidden. It was not the Auror. It was made for..." He muttered something inaudible.

His skin felt clammy. He'd never hated himself more.

Uncharacteristically, Hermione said nothing.

"It was made in case..."

A blue pawn moved forward.

He raised his clenched fist to his forehead and turned away. "For you. In case they won."

Fool

Chapter 2 of 5

Severus has found Hermione's shoe. What's next?

II: Fool

"For me."

He couldn't look at her. He nodded.

She closed her hand around the blue queen. "Me?" She gazed, amazed, at the back of his head. His hair brushed his collar. His back an uninterrupted field of black wool. Shoulders rigid, neck taut.

Oh, Hermione.

They both thought it.

He heard her unfold from the couch. The clink as the bottle returned to the board. Her bare feet on the carpet.

"Why, Severus?"

He flinched at her closeness.

The hand she had raised to touch him hung, interrupted, between them.

His jaw clenched.

"You don't want to know."

She couldn't possibly want to know why – why, in the silent, secret night of the castle he had made his furtive way to his lab to brew a contraceptive for the girl who was then his student.

She couldn't want to know that he had extended its brewing over the course of nine full moons – extraordinary care to take for such a simple potion.

Once a month, for one night, he had allowed himself to imagine he could get it to her in time.

For one night, once a month, he'd allowed himself to think in the future tense.

He couldn't tell her that he'd swept to her chair after every class, hoping to find a few stray hairs that would key the potion to her – only to her.

That he'd curled them around his fingers in his pocket while teaching. While talking to Albus. That afterwards, when Albus would never speak again, he had saved one to twist hard around his finger until its indentation would remain for long minutes after he released it, coiling it carefully, returning it to his pocket. One extra hair he'd never intended to use in the potion.

That was for him.

He could never tell her –

"Why, Severus?"

He had to tell her.

His throat was dry.

"I was foolish."

Her voice stretched thin, delicate. "Surely not."

He couldn't bear her confidence. "Did you never give a moment's thought to what they might have done?"

"Of course," she said quietly. Then, "Oh."

"I was merely –"

Her touch on his elbow broke his words.

"Why me, Severus?"

"You were a student."

"We've established that," she said gently. There was no sting in her words.

"It's not immaterial," he barked, rounding on her. "Surely you see ..."

But he saw her face.

Her small, cool hand pressed his cheek and she brushed her lips softly, fleeting, against the roughness of his skin.

"Thank you."

He gripped her shoe harder, his eyes flat. "Miss Granger, not even you can possibly be so foolish as to find anything honourable in my behaviour."

Her eyes flashed, but her hand stayed gentle. "All of us – most, at least – would have been hard-pressed to define honour by the end. You intended to protect me; I can honour that desire now."

Desire? *Oh, Hermione.* What he had desired had had nothing to do with honour.

He'd used her.

"The Contraceptus potion is, by definition, protection." His lip curled. "Who was to have done it? I intended, Hermione, that if..."

Her finger rested on his lips. "You intended that, if it had to be, it be you."

His eyes roared with black fire. "You were a student. My student."

"If they'd won, I'd've been chattel, Severus. I know that – knew it even then. I was young, not naïve."

An angry arm brushed hers away.

His lips cooled where her touch had been, but this did little more than register in his mind.

"I didn't merely 'intend.' I hoped."

He waited for her to leave, forgetting entirely that it was her flat he was standing in, clutching her ridiculous shoe.

He waited for the sharp sound of her hand striking his face where it had rested, so gently, moments before.

But she only smiled sadly at him.

"Nine months it takes, I believe, to achieve full potency?"

He nodded, his eyes raking her face for his dismissal.

"Made with my hair?"

He hesitated for a long moment before nodding again.

"Ah," she said simply.

She couldn't know that those nine forbidden, full-moon nights were the only solace he'd known.

He waited.

"For me," she said, finally.

The weight of long, taut years without sleep rushed into his throat. "Yes."

"You hoped."

"Only if they'd..." He swallowed. "Yes."

Her eyes shadowed.

He awaited her judgment.

She shook her head, and, deep within him, something inarticulate died.

"There was little chance you could have got it to me in time, if they'd – but of course you know that."

His eyes glittered, his face impassive.

She closed her hand over his, which was still holding her shoe. "May I have this back now?"

He released his hold abruptly.

"You foolish man."

"I'll leave you, then."

"No – Severus, I..." *Sixth year*. Her sixth year. Nine nights, long, isolated nights, of which she, asleep in Gryffindor Tower, had known nothing. "Severus, I'm sorry, I..."

His eyes hardened but a fraction of a second after his heart.

"I – I need to think. It would be best if –"

"Very well." He turned to go.

"Wait –"

His head turned slightly, and she searched his eyes for something. Anything.

There was no hope in them, and she winced.

He recoiled.

"Your potions."

His voice an echo out of emptiness: "I can always make more."

"No, please – I... I've given you a headache the size of Hogwarts."

His glance was naked. Raw.

"I only meant with my shoe, Severus," she said softly. "Please. They're yours."

"I would far rather you kept them," he said coldly. His breath was threatening to choke him, hide it as he would. "They are no recompense for my offense." *Pathetic*. "Just... please."

He turned away again. Only then did he raise his eyes to the ceiling and try to inhale.

"I'm not offended – really. Astonished – obliged." She gestured helplessly. "I don't know the right word."

He did. *Disgusted*.

She collapsed on the arm of a chair, head in her hands. "Please take them."

His palm flat on the door, he bowed his head. "The Contraceptus is keyed only to you."

She nodded, her hair curtaining her face. The thin strap of her dress robes slipped off of her shoulder, and his fingers flexed instinctively. Whether he wanted to fix it for her or slide it the rest of the way down –

Either. Both. He couldn't say. It didn't matter.

"Keep it. Use it. Smash the bottle. It makes no difference now."

"It makes all the difference, Severus."

He cleared his throat. An imperious gesture with his wand, and one blue bottle remained on Hermione's table.

A moment later, he was gone.

She stared at the curve of smooth blue glass against the black and white squares.

Moved it back and forth with her wand.

Back and forth.

Ahead. Then back to its starting point.

No pawns, kings, or bishops to impede its movements.

Nothing opposing it.

Nowhere it could not go.

No purpose to its going there.

Back and forth.

Nine times.

All she could see was a black cloak in the darkness far beneath Hogwarts castle.

Honour

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Severus has found Hermione's shoe. What's next?

III: Honour

"...for me," she finished, placing her mug down on the table.

"Poor dear," Molly said, dabbing her eyes with her apron.

"I don't understand it – can't make sense of it. However I reason it, it changes in the very next moment."

"Poor dear," the older woman repeated, patting her ex-daughter-in-law's arm.

"Oh, Molly, I just don't know what to think."

She clucked softly, rising to get the kettle. "You think too much, Hermione. Merlin knows Ron was no match for you."

Hermione smiled sadly. "Molly, we tried –"

"Oh, don't apologize again. I'm his mother, but I'm not blind."

"I know you tried, both of you. You were young, it was wartime, and things happened then that – well, just wouldn't, otherwise."

Hermione nodded. Her ex-mother-in-law's compassionate acceptance of the divorce had surprised her; they'd grown closer since than they'd ever been before. "I know, and I know we've been over this, but..."

"But you have to be perfect, even now." Molly smiled, refilling her mug with one hand and patting Hermione's shoulder with the other. "You're far too hard on yourself, dear."

"I just don't know what to *think*," Hermione said again.

"And that's your problem, Hermione, dear."

With a distracted finger, Molly pushed lemon slices around on a chipped saucer, evening the space between them, lining them up.

She'd been doing that since Hermione had appeared earlier with some nonsense about how the children had left something at the Burrow, something they were obviously doing perfectly well without at school.

She'd listened patiently, waiting for the younger woman to confess the real purpose of her visit, and, when she'd revealed what Severus had told her, her heart had warmed in a way it hadn't in years.

"I can only imagine how he must've felt at your wedding."

Hermione looked at her. "I don't understand."

Molly's mouth opened then she smiled and patted Hermione's hand again. "Of course you don't, dear. You never did understand hearts. Oh, Arthur and I hoped that you and Ron could be as happy as we were, but you couldn't, really – Ron's far too simple a man – no, you need a nice, knotty problem to hold your interest." She laughed gently.

Hermione warmed her hands around her mug. "What am I missing?"

A foreign country of wisdom in Molly's smile.

Hermione didn't know the language.

"The fact that he loved you."

"He wanted to rape me, Molly."

Molly set her mug down firmly. "Hermione Granger, if you insist on being a fool –" At the look in Hermione's eyes, she bit her tongue, and continued more gently. "He made the potion for you, dear, you, of all the women and girls at Hogwarts. He knew he couldn't possibly protect them all from the horrors he was right to fear. I'd bet my life that that tore him apart. How couldn't it?"

Hermione's eyes were distant as she stared into her tea.

"He didn't want to rape you. He *chose* you."

"The chances of his being able to do anything for you – for any of us –" Molly shot Hermione a look that reminded her that she, too, had risked the very same fate. "Oh, my dear, the chances were slim indeed. If you'd been..." She stopped herself, not wanting to say it. "... in danger, and he'd had to choose between saving you and helping Harry..."

Hermione bristled – why, or in whose defense, she wasn't sure. "He'd've chosen Harry. It's one reason he killed Dumbledore."

Molly took Hermione's hands in her own. "He'd've done no worse to you."

"I just wish," Hermione began, her voice a whisper, "I wish I could see it that way for more than a moment at a time." She heard him again in her mind: "*I hoped.*"

She'd been so reasonable at the time. So ready to thank him.

She *had* thanked him. Reflexively.

She shuddered. "It's too slippery. My thoughts won't stay straight. One minute I'm grateful, the next I'm angry... I wish I'd never seen that stupid potion."

Well, this won't do, Molly thought, sitting straighter. Briskly, she said, "Do you ever wonder what would've happened if there'd been no war?"

"Poor dear. War's all you knew, isn't it?" She sighed sympathetically. "Let me tell you how it should have happened. He'd've courted you. Honourably. He'd've spoken before you graduated, I think." She smiled wistfully. "I'd never have had Rose and Hugo, but you might have been happier."

Hermione's cheeks went pink.

"Do you really think, Hermione, that in the whole history of Hogwarts, no master ever felt anything for a student?"

"But there was a war. And if he'd had to – I don't even want to think about it."

Molly shook her head. "He didn't either, but he did."

"If he'd had to –" If Severus could think it, she could say it. "– to rape you, Hermione, he'd've found some way to protect you."

"Obviously – the potion –"

"More than that, so much more. He'd've told you with his touch. A whisper. In the way he held you. If you could have seen it, his eyes would have told you."

Hermione's hands clenched on the heavy mug as she compared Molly's words to the man she'd been ready to embrace as her lover not three nights before.

"He'd've found a way."

Perhaps he would. She'd never know.

Molly sighed. "You said yourself that you could read him, didn't you? When you saw no portrait in Minerva's office, you knew he'd taken steps to keep himself alive, and you knew what to do, after you thought about it, yes?"

"I pieced things together."

And she had. The way he'd sneered at her for her ignorance of footnotes in books way beyond the Hogwarts curriculum – knowing she'd read them. The way he'd delivered his most scathing criticisms of her – the ones she'd remember and cry over, after class – every time, he'd been standing in the same spot.

He'd deliberately humiliated her from the corner of his classroom. Everyone else received his cutting criticism from wherever he happened to be.

But for her, he'd stalked away dramatically, each footstep echoing like an academic funeral bell in the vast Defense classroom.

By his tolling steps, they'd all known his worst was coming.

For her.

Only for her.

He'd hidden everything she needed in a house-elf gargoyle that stood in that corner.

Untransfigured, it had contained instructions, in his own hand, for restoring him to himself, no matter how he'd appeared to die.

He'd known her so well.

Trusted her.

Hermione sighed.

"He'd've let you know, somehow, that he was sorry. That his heart was breaking. He would've told you, somehow, in the midst of whatever he had to do, that he'd keep you safe. The potion was only one clue, and if there'd been no time for it – well, he's an honourable man, whatever the rest of us wanted to believe. He'd've found a way."

Hermione swallowed. "How do you know?"

"He loved you."

Hermione brushed tears from her eyes. "Oh, Molly," she said, helpless to control the break in her voice. "I hit him with my shoe."

Nine nights. Nine amongst thousands.

He'd slipped silently through the dungeons, counting each footstep, each closer to his cauldron.

He'd whispered, stirring gently....

It deserved to be caressed.

The forces of life in his hands.

There were other nights for death, he knew.

For nine nights, he'd allowed himself to imagine.

However horrifying.

Imagining telling her, silently, that he was sorry.

That his heart was breaking.

He had to imagine to plan, didn't he?

With the forces of her life simmering beneath his hands, how could he not find solace?

When he despised himself for it afterwards, it didn't show.

Errata

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus has found Hermione's shoe. What's next?

IV: Errata

"You... you did what?"

"My shoe," Hermione sniffled loudly. "I hit him with it."

"Oh..." The corner of Molly's mouth twitched. "Oh, my."

"Don't laugh, please."

"Of course not." But her mouth twitched again, and she couldn't help chuckling. "Your shoe..." She chuckled again. "Oh, I'm not laughing at you, no, of course not. But really, between the two of you, do you think you could find a less painful way to say 'I love you'? If you tried?"

Hermione was stunned. "Love? Me?"

At her look, Molly's laughter deepened. "Of course! Whatever else did you think we were talking about?"

The older woman spoke very gently. "He still loves you, you know."

Hermione's thoughts frayed into incoherence.

"You did leave the ceremony together, openly – and this is Severus we're discussing..."

"Oh... right," she breathed. Since finding the potion, she'd not thought about that part. About his searching her face intently, scarce daring to believe that she'd accepted his hesitantly offered arm. About the first brush of wool, his arm solid, warm, beneath her awed fingers. His blink of surprise. His eyes, his bearing, the hitch in his breathing all asking if she was really sure.

He *had* found a way.

Hermione's chair scraped suddenly across the floor, and Molly found herself crushed in a tangle of curls, a slightly damp cheek pressed against her own.

"*Thank you.*"

The younger woman had already opened the door by the time Molly regained her breath. "Hermione, dear?"

She turned.

Molly saw the combination of fear, hope, and determination in her eyes, and her heart jumped in empathy. "May I see the potion?"

The blue glass glowed softly in the sunshine. Inside, the potion that had borne such confusion and agony swirled serenely, innocent of everything but the purity of light, liquid, glass, and motion.

Molly's eyes glistened. "Such a lovely color... same as your dress robes, isn't it?"

"Always - since my first ball."

As Molly watched, a new layer of understanding appeared on her face. "Oh," she breathed, her hands cradling the bottle with a gentleness that brought tears to Molly's eyes.

"I've always thought it suited you... seems I'm not the only one..." Her smile could not have been more wistful had Hermione been her own daughter. "If you'll accept a free bit of advice?"

"Of course."

"Drink it before you go. He won't be able to hide from an empty bottle."

The Contraceptus potion depended on the perfect balance of life and time.

It effected a delay in which a woman might live out whatever might be left of her childhood. The final choice of when childhood ended, if it ended, could remain her own, no matter how shyly offered or violently rent the rest of it might be.

He'd allowed himself to imagine he might possibly be able to give her that decision.

Just that much.

Too much to hope, he knew.

In his hands, life.

Hers.

Her.

When he finished brewing, he'd shuddered with the need to touch her.

And if he'd crept back to his rooms under cover of darkness with her imagined skin singing under his hands, no matter how loathsome, how vile the reasons, if he'd waited to bathe, inhaling deeply the scent of a forbidden potion made with her hair, for her, about her...

Just a dream.

Nine short dreams in a nightmare of waking.

His hope in a gargoyle, her life in a cauldron.

Unreasonable, like all dreams.

Her life in his hands. In hers, his.

Him.

Not the way it was supposed to be.

Just exactly the way it was supposed to be.

He lay on the sofa, remembering hope.

No point remembering. She'd think her way to forgiveness, eventually.

Enter logic, exit wonder.

He shifted on the sofa. He couldn't get comfortable.

He should have destroyed the potion. Or never told her. Died.

When she'd accepted his arm, the acrid tang of remembered shame dissolved in the graceful silence of her "Yes."

He knew perfectly well why he'd told her.

He mashed a cushion with his elbow.

Perfectly, bloody well why.

He'd told her for the same reason he'd let her get the potion from his cabinet: he'd wanted her to know.

The crook of his elbow over his eyes, his cheekbones sharp against his arm.

He heard a soft knock.

"Severus?"

He didn't move. For once, he'd take it lying down. "Enter."

He heard every click, every bit of friction in the hinges, and waited.

The door closed, and still he kept his arm over his eyes.

A soft rustle as she moved, the quiet sigh as she sat in a nearby armchair. The quiet clink of a bottle on his table. Then silence.

Inwardly, he braced himself. The words would start soon. He mentally bade nine private, sleepless nights farewell.

"You should not have done what you did," Hermione began.

"I apologize." His voice seemed to have lost all resonance.

"Don't, please. You shouldn't have risked thinking of me at all."

"Risk? Had Voldemort learned of my plans for you, I assure you, he would have approved."

"Flawless thinking."

"If it had been otherwise..." His mouth went dry. "... had there been no war, I would have spoken."

"You're speaking now."

"Don't insult us both by deliberately mistaking my meaning."

"I'm not, Severus," she said evenly.

He realized she wasn't nervous.

"Uncover your eyes?"

He did.

The bottle was empty.

His arm paused mid-air as he stared at the empty bottle.

"No need to rise, Severus." She blushed. "Sorry," she muttered, "I'm usually more careful with my words."

Seeing a sharp wariness in his eyes, she hastened, "I didn't come here to condemn you, Severus."

"You have every right to do so."

"Yes," she agreed, "but I'd rather prefer to touch you."

He blinked.

"Illogical of me, isn't it?"

"Entirely."

"The Contraceptus wasn't your whole plan, was it?"

Something flickered in his eyes.

She took a long breath. "Show me the rest?"

He reached for his wand.

"Not that way."

He didn't dare reach for her. "You ask me to believe you desire my touch?"

"Yes."

"Knowing what I would have done? Planned to do?" he demanded. "Don't play me for a fool, Hermione."

"Then show me the same courtesy. You didn't want to rape me."

His eyes became mirror-hard. "No."

"But you would have."

"Yes. Had events transpired a certain way, I would have done."

“Because you cared. For me.”

His voice felt thick. “Yes.”

For a long moment she stared into his face.

“Could you really have done it, Severus?”

He nodded.

“How?”

“The same way I murdered Albus.”

As he'd intended, Albus's name hung between them like a blade.

“When you killed him, it meant both more and less, something far beyond the casual surface.”

“There is nothing casual about murder or rape.”

Her look was steel. “Nothing about you is casual. Killing Albus was less ‘murder’ than an act of mercy, of heroism, of self-sacrifice.”

“It was still murder.”

“Every act is colored by context...” She shook her head, frustrated. “You didn't rape me, Severus.”

“Make no mistake – I imagined it.”

“Which? Rape, or touching me?”

Silence.

“What did you imagine, Severus?”

“*Everything.*”

“Then show me.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“I am no girl, Severus – no terrified teenager tossed into your path in the chaos of battle. There are no witnesses, no humiliation, no degradation. Show me what you would have done, and how – then, or on another night, had things been otherwise.”

“Things were not otherwise!”

“They are otherwise now – because you nearly died to make them so.” Her voice rang in his chambers. “Severus, please.”

His breath faltered. “Potter told you what Albus said.”

“Yes. I used those words deliberately - for the same reason he did, Severus.”

“Impossible.”

“No. True.

Terminus

Chapter 5 of 5

Severus has found Hermione's shoe. What's next?

V: Terminus

She could not mean that she loved him. Not really.

But his eye fell on the blue curve of the empty bottle.

“Show me, Severus.” She stood and reached for her cloak clasp.

“Wait.”

Her hands froze.

He sat up slowly, leaning his elbows on his knees. Dark eyes glittered through a lank fall of hair. “You're asking for the impossible.”

Her fingers rested on the clasp, and her eyes were calm. “Really?”

"I cannot show you, Hermione, because..." Damn. She was right. "Because the circumstances no longer exist."

"They never really did." She released the clasp, letting her cloak fall.

"Who do you want me to be, Hermione?" He gestured toward the bottle. "The man who long ago spent nights dwelling in violation, excused by a crime he'd be helpless to prevent and thus intended to commit, finding solace in the forbidden? Or simply the man who offered you his arm and was undone when you accepted it?"

"Yes."

He scowled.

"I want to know, Severus, how it feels when you hold me, to know the silence of your touch, see your eyes at their darkest." She shrugged simply. "I want what you offered three nights ago."

"However tainted?"

"However."

"The only difference, Severus, is that I know. It doesn't make me want you any less."

"Impossible."

"No." She gestured to the empty bottle, and the thin strap of her robes slipped off of her shoulder. "Believe that, if nothing else."

His gaze transfixed on the strap where it curved, softly blue, on her skin.

He couldn't breathe.

Slowly, he rose to stand. He'd meant to speak, but instead, he felt his hand raise, his finger extend to slip the strap back up to her shoulder.

Skin met skin.

Their eyes closed, and they released the breaths they'd been holding.

She felt him trace her arm and slide the strap up, back into place.

In a shaking, too-breathy voice, she asked. "Is that a 'no'?"

"No." His lips curved slightly, and his eyes did not leave hers as he offered her his hand. "No." A gentle pressure drew her back to the chair.

She sat down, not knowing what to think.

"Before we proceed, you'll forgive me if I take a moment to disarm you."

He knelt before her and slipped his hand under her foot to lift it.

She watched, awed, as he unbuckled her sandal with trembling hands.