

Stars are Blind

by Rose of the West

Sequel to "The Life and Times of Perseus," in which Andromeda Tonks barely survived the war. She lost most of her family, yet her house is somehow full of recovering Death Eaters and other lost souls.

New Orbits

Chapter 1 of 24

Sequel to "The Life and Times of Perseus," in which Andromeda Tonks barely survived the war. She lost most of her family, yet her house is somehow full of recovering Death Eaters and other lost souls.

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Author's note: This story follows "The Life and Times of Perseus". I don't think it's mandatory to read that first because I tried to keep it consistent with the canon, but if you find yourself confused, you might want to give that story a quick read.

Lord Voldemort droned on and on in his self-serving speech to Harry. Hermione kept looking over at the professor lying on the floor. She thought about his snake bite and wondered whether he was really dead. She remembered that Mr. Weasley had been bitten by the same snake but didn't die. He needed a special potion for the wounds to heal, but as long as the wounds were properly bound he didn't bleed excessively.

The awful voice stopped talking, and Harry went back into the tunnel with Ron right behind him. Hermione looked back over at the body on the floor. He was evil and rude... He killed Dumbledore... and yet... She couldn't do *nothing*. She wasn't sure if she understood everything going on, but she didn't think he could be all bad if Voldemort wanted to kill him.

"Hold on, Professor Snape," she said. She tore a curtain from the window and made a bandage, which she wrapped around his neck as tightly as she could without suffocating him. "I'll send someone here for you as soon as I get a chance."

The next thing he remembered was pain along his throat and hearing a somewhat familiar female voice. "I know I said I'd take a special patient, but I didn't realize it would be him. I'm not sure I can, Cissy. I've lost too much... I have an infant to take care of..."

"A Mudblood husband and half-breed frea...ouch!" He heard a crackle of magic and wondered what the other witch had done. "Fine. You've lost too much and you miss your husband, but you have to do it. He would be in danger at our house, Andie."

"How could he be in danger in your house? He was on your side."

"No, he was on your side, just like Sirius, and even Regulus. They were all on your side." Narcissa's voice was more resigned than bitter.

A voice he recognized as Poppy Pomfrey's was heard. "Andromeda, we trust you, and this is an out-of-the way sort of place. It was perfect all those years ago for Alastor, and it will be perfect for him, too. Please do it... for me? Albus would have wanted this, too."

The women's voices traveled down a hallway, and he chanced opening his eyes. Everything was blurry. He only had vague impressions of the furnishings and walls, but he recognized the smell and feel of this bedroom. He had stayed in it a year before while he worked with the middle Black sister, teaching her to make Wolfsbane.

It came back to him. Of course, he remembered. Her daughter was in love with the werewolf, and she was a loving mother. She had freely admitted some lingering prejudices from her youth about werewolves as they worked. Her husband...her late husband...he realized, had talked her around, and she learned to make Wolfsbane for the sake of her daughter.

Andromeda. The name rolled through his mind in the same way that it had often rolled off his tongue. She was a bit timid, compared to her sisters. It was likely due to the fact that she had lived essentially in hiding during the first war. When her older sister had escaped from Azkaban, she was forced back into a quiet life again. Even so, she was quite smart, though her self-taught Potions skills lacked some polish. They had developed a rhythm together. He had found himself enjoying the art of brewing potions with her so much that he asked her if they might make some others while he was there.

It had been with some sadness that he had left the Tonks home when it was time for him to go back to Hogwarts and shortly after that into disgrace. On the other hand, it had been the best thing to go. He had found himself more than a little smitten with her. He had returned to Hogwarts with thoughts of her rich hair and bright eyes, the sway of her hips as she moved around a workbench or kitchen, and the way she ruled over her small domain. Perhaps the most attractive thing about her had been the way she looked at that chubby, ordinary piece of humanity she had married. It didn't seem fair that a man like Ted Tonks should have had such good fortune.

Altogether, it had been the most enjoyable holiday in his memory. Perhaps that had been why Dumbledore had encouraged his taking that leave. Maybe the old manipulator had wanted him to have that interlude to enjoy life a little, to lust a little, and to recall the grace of the world they were trying to save.

For some reason, he had been brought to her house, now. He tried to piece it together. On the last day in his memory he did what had become the ordinary things. He had gotten up and managed to endure the day. The Carrows were excited by something that afternoon, and then a message had come through Voldemort's servants. Harry Potter was expected to arrive in Hogsmeade that day and under no circumstances was to be allowed in Hogwarts. The Dark Lord himself would come after attending some urgent business.

Somehow Potter had made it to the school and had been standing, in his father's invisibility cloak, as McGonagall decided to start a duel. Snape was sure of it. The devil was in trying to fight the hellcat off while not hitting the boy with a stray spell. Finally, it was easiest just to leave... for a while.

Where had he gone after that? He had managed to look busy while staying on the outskirts of the action. There had been injured people who needed tending, and then the Slytherin students had been sent from the castle and into Hogsmeade. Most of them had been annoyed over this development, but Severus had silently thanked Minerva McGonagall for doing this kind-hearted thing. Had the tables been turned, the Dark Lord would no doubt have used the students as bait before torturing and killing them.

A summons had come and he was filled with dread. There was too much to think about tonight to face the Dark Lord, yet not to go was to face certain death. He was vaguely aware of having kept his secrets, but also of the snake and a magical cage... There was a task he should make sure he finished for Dumbledore. He tried to sit upright and failed. The blankets on the bed weighed a ton, and he ached in every joint of his body. Nevertheless, he tried to get up and to move his arm. A glass fell from the table beside the bed and broke.

The voices in the hallway returned. Poppy's was heard now. "If Draco can help with the heavy lifting..."

The voices stopped and the door opened. "Severus?" Her voice was soft and kind. She was no longer the put-upon sister. Right now she was an angel of mercy. Although he couldn't really see her face, he had an impression of kind concern.

"Need... Potter..."

A gentle hand touched his forehead, and she said a bit more loudly, "Cissy, could you come tell him what you told me about what happened to Harry Potter in the forest?"

Seeing the look on his face, Andromeda stayed by his side as her sister came in. Narcissa sat down and took his hand. She then told him about how Harry had come of his own accord into the forest and allowed the Dark Lord to blast him with *Avada Kedavra*. She described everyone's stunned horror when both spell caster and victim had fallen to the earth. She then explained that Harry was actually alive and managed to kill the Dark Lord in a final duel in the Great Hall.

"How...?" He couldn't find the words or much desire to say them, but he had to know. "Me?"

Andromeda spoke then, and he pictured the kindness in her eyes. "You were bitten by his snake. Mr. Potter thought you were dead, but Miss Granger bound your wounds. She asked Poppy to see what could be done, and the potion that was used on Arthur Weasley was obtained from St. Mungo's. Since you're out of immediate danger now, they decided to bring you here so that you wouldn't be in the middle of everything."

"Look at that. You're getting along just fine." Narcissa got up. "If you're all set then, Andie, I'll send Draco along this evening." She sighed. "There are so many things, right at once. There's also Bella..."

The angel of mercy let out a huff. "Don't expect me to mourn her, Cissy. There's also Nymphadora, whom she killed. Don't expect me to feel bad for you. You haven't lost a husband or a child. If Molly Weasley had not killed your precious *Bella*, I would have." Severus was not too weary to think that in her righteous anger, Andromeda Tonks sounded magnificent.

There was silence for a minute. Severus would have given anything to see the looks the two witches were exchanging. Who would win this battle of wills? Andromeda gave a tired sigh. "Yes, we'll be fine. I see that it's really the best option for him." The elder sister acquiesced, but who actually won?

Narcissa said her goodbyes and went back out into the hallway. The voices out there started up again and moved down the hall and out of the house. Andromeda was still beside his bed, looking at him in concern, he thought.

"You... don't... want..."

She patted his hand soothingly. "Severus, it doesn't matter what I want. I can't have it, anyway. I've lost them all...my husband, my daughter, my son-in-law... all of them. None of it is your fault, though. From what we hear, you did what you could to help, more than anyone had a right to expect from you. Cissy and Poppy are right. This is a good place for you. I need to have something to do with myself, anyway, or I'll start brooding and that won't be good for anyone."

"Thank... An... a"

"You stop straining your throat and your neck, Severus Snape. From the sound of it, I and every other resident of England should be thanking you." She patted his hand and held a glass to his lips. He recognized some sleeping or calming potion, perhaps one he had made and Poppy had brought, or perhaps one made by Andromeda and him together. She took the glass away and adjusted the blankets over him. "Rest well; you're safe." As he tried to analyze the ingredients that still coated his tongue, he forgot to stay awake.

She remembered Cissy's long-ago distress that the Dark Lord would somehow mistake this child for the one mentioned in a prophecy. Andromeda looked at the boy and mentally shrugged. He seemed pretty dull by her standards, but then she wasn't his mother. She stopped herself. This boy, this young man, had been through war. He was shocked and hurt by what he had seen and done, and perhaps what had happened to him in the bargain.

Draco took his bag up to the room she indicated and came back down the stairs to the kitchen. He didn't seem inclined to talk. He ate his dinner and sat at the table while his aunt cleared up. The house-elf then took over the washing as his aunt led him to the sitting room. She sat on a chair and indicated that he should sit, too.

"I thought I could answer any questions you might have about me or my home," she said.

"I don't have any. You're a blood traitor, and this house stinks of Mudbloods."

"I suppose your parents taught you to think that way, and I suppose that, technically, you're right, although your choice of vocabulary is inflammatory. I should educate you on one point. This house was built by a pure-blood wizard, your grandfather's brother and your Great-Uncle Alphard."

"It smells of blood traitors, then. Aunt Bella said you were a blood traitor whore who ran off with a Mudblood."

"Again, your facts are technically correct. I did leave my family, and I did marry Ted Tonks. Do you know what my other option was?"

He blushed because he did know.

"Can you imagine what a nineteen year old girl would go through if she was handed over to your uncle's brother?"

He looked away because he had seen what Rabastan Lestrange did to women.

"Would you really want someone in your family to go through that? Your mother's pure-blood sister? Surely you care more for family than *that*."

"You didn't care for your family," was the sullen response.

"They didn't care about me. They had already handed me over to him." Her eyes became distant as she watched a memory. "I was alone in a garden with Rabastan, and he was scolding me for being an inattentive fiancée. I can still feel how tightly he held my wrist as he tried to make me accept his touches. He was going to put me under an Imperius Curse. No one should be treated like that, yet my father and mother simply handed me over to him so that he could do that to me."

Draco was looking at her now as she continued. "Instead of casting the spell, he fell over... and there was Ted. I wasn't in love with him or anything. He was just the only one who cared enough to do something. Consider that with your ideas of nobility and blood purity. He was the only one who wanted to protect me or take care of me."

"He held out his hand and offered me another choice. We got married that night and moved into this house. One member of my family took us in. I had one suitcase, Draco. My loving family must have burned everything else that belonged to me, right after they blasted me from the family tree. The only thing I had of real value was the emerald necklace that had been promised to your mother."

He was interested. "Why did you have it?"

She smiled. "They matched the dress I wore to that party. It was assumed that after I was compelled to marry Rabastan, I would return the emeralds, and then Narcissa would have them."

"Mother has a lovely antique emerald necklace, now. She wears it to important parties and has a funny smile when she puts them on."

"The very same one, I suspect. I traded it back in exchange for control over the trust fund that had been established for me at birth."

"I wouldn't have given those jewels back."

"They served their purpose, and I didn't want to hurt Cissy. She lived on every word that came from your father's mouth in those days. The Malfoys were very specific in demanding those emeralds... and you. I was able to give the jewels and news that I was pregnant with your cousin, and my mother finessed the rest of it."

This was a view of his parents that Draco had never heard. He found himself asking questions, and the evening wore on surprisingly pleasantly. He wasn't prepared for the look of concern she gave him when they stood to go up to bed.

"Are you all right, Draco?"

He didn't know what she was asking, so he just looked at her.

"Everyone has been through a terrible ordeal. If you need to talk or take a break or anything, please let me know."

He shrugged and said the first words out of his mouth. "Why do you care? Your side won. It's not like you would understand."

She laughed bitterly and shook her head. "I suppose it did, but there's not much to celebrate right now when I've lost so much. First I lost my entire family as a Black, and now I've lost almost all my family as a Tonks. I probably would have some sense of pretty much anything you could want to talk about."

He took a long look at her for a moment. "Thank you, Aunt Andie, I appreciate your concern," he said politely. He lit his wand and went up the stairs.

She sighed. He couldn't be expected to open up to her in one day, she supposed. He didn't have the free and easy Tonks blood to offset the Black stiffness. She shook it off and went to the sick room to check on her other guest. He was lying there with his eyes closed, but somehow she thought he might be awake.

"Do you need anything?" she whispered. If he really was asleep, she didn't want to wake him.

"Stay?" His hand flopped on the coverlet.

She looked around the room and moved the easy chair near the bed. Then she sat down and took his hand. He was too thin, she thought to herself. He probably didn't feel like he had a friend in the world, either. She should talk to him, let him feel a connection to things, but she didn't know what to say. What could a person say after believing the worst about someone for a year and then finding out the best?

She remembered their work together the previous year. She had been so embarrassed by her unprofessional technique, yet he had made suggestions that were kind, from him. He had also been very interested in her garden and plans for future potions. He had made good recommendations, all the while knowing she would revile him within weeks.

"I took your advice on moving the mandrake patch near the pond," she said to start. "I set it off with a section of elephant ears and the other parts of the garden perked right up." Did she imagine a different warmth in his hand as she spoke to him? She continued. "I changed the way I dried the aconite, too. I did notice that your technique seemed to make a better potion every month. The transition seems to be smoother for Remus..." she broke off with a gasp. There was no reason to make Wolfsbane this next month.

The darkness of the time after Ted died beckoned to her. She took a deep breath and another one, but couldn't stop her hands trembling with emotion. "You have to do this," she told herself under her breath. "You can't hide from the world this time. You're a Black. You have to do this..."

This time she didn't imagine it. The hand within hers gave a little squeeze. "Con...dolances." It was very quiet and came from barely parted lips, but it was sincere.

"Thank you," she whispered. The room was quiet for a few minutes, except for his labored breathing and her struggle to regain control of herself. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but it wasn't quite companionable. She started again. "I've also followed a great many of your other recommendations in my still room..."

A/N: This is a rather ambitious work for me, since I will be trying to work several storylines together with the main one. I hope you will be patient with me as I try to improve my skills. Please drop me a line and let me know what you think so far.

Trickie Woo is my beta reader and sounding board. Some of my cleverest ideas have come from conversations with her.

Interstellar Communication

Chapter 2 of 24

He frowned and lay back. "Then for the love of anything good, if I have to stay in this bed, find some way for me to entertain myself!"

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A famous witch and wizard stood on Andromeda's doorstep about a week after the war ended. They rang the bell and waited, sure of their entry. When a classmate of theirs opened the door, they made faces.

"You're the last person I expected to see here," said Hermione.

"This is my aunt's house, Granger. It's been in my mother's family since it was built. I don't see the point of *your* being here." Hermione drew back to her full height. Why should Malfoy act like this when his mother had been so supportive?

"I wanted to find out how Professor Snape was doing, since I helped him during the battle."

"Oh, I guess I see why you came to Aunt Andie's house. But no, I meant I don't see the point of you existing."

"Careful," growled Harry. "Without her we might still have to deal with Voldemort."

Draco drew back at the sound of the name. "Yeah, whatever. I guess you came to visit the half-breed pup?" He was talking to Harry, now.

Harry's back stiffened, and he checked for his wand. "Is Andromeda here?"

The witch in question had overheard enough of the conversation to come to the door. She felt busy enough without the addition of a teenage spat in her front hallway. "Ah, Harry, if you'll go into the sitting room here, you'll find Birdie with Teddy. Draco, I could use your help in Severus's room."

"Mrs. Tonks?"

Andromeda turned to look at the younger witch. Hermione was a bit put off by her resemblance to the witch who had recently tortured her, but this one just looked a bit hurried, not unkind. "Hermione, is it? What would you like, dear?"

"I just wanted to know how Professor Snape is doing."

"He's still quite ill, but we have every confidence of his full recovery."

She was confused. "Why is he still sick? Mr. Weasley was fine after a dose or two of the antivenin potion."

Andromeda shook her head. "The snake, Nagini, was much stronger toward the end. The Dark Lord fed her witches and wizards he had killed, and she absorbed their magic. Therefore the potion that was used on Arthur is working more slowly on Severus. Professor Slughorn is working with some other Potions masters to develop a better one. Severus is improving, but it will take some time."

"May I see him?"

Andromeda gestured her permission, and Hermione followed the witch and her nephew down the hall. As they got to the door, Hermione heard a rasping voice calling, "Anna, Anna..."

Hermione stood in the door and watched as the older woman hurried to the bed and took his hand with one of hers and patted his head with her other. "I'm here, Severus."

"I thought I'd dreamed you."

"No, I'm here to take care of you, and Draco is here, too."

"You were gone."

"I had something to take care of, but now I'm back."

"It hurts to move."

"I know. I have a potion for that, but you need to wait another hour before you take it."

"Will you stay here until then?" His hands clutched at hers.

"Of course."

Hermione was assailed by a great many thoughts at once. Professor Snape was looking a great deal better than he did on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. His color was better and he wasn't at death's door. He was so weak though, and his dependence upon Mrs. Tonks was so un-Snapeish, that she recoiled at it.

On the other hand, Mrs. Tonks was a wonder. She seemed to have a way to soothe his aches just by touching his forehead and softly speaking to him. Hermione watched as the older witch coaxed some soup into her patient without him seeming to be much aware of it. The younger witch slipped away, thinking to herself that if she were ever sick or injured, she wanted Andromeda Tonks to take care of her.

Severus was in and out of consciousness for days. Poppy stopped by and made pleased noises, and his hostess-turned-nurse seemed to be by his side whenever he

wanted her. When she wasn't there, Draco was. He couldn't remember a time when he felt so safe and cared for. Slowly, his moments of coherence grew as did the number of words he could say at a time.

She was as much an angel as his first impression of her. Her hands were gentle even when she caused him pain. She cared for his wounds, fed him, washed him and dressed him. When he was irritable because he was tired of sleeping, she quietly hummed or whispered lullabies recognized from his childhood, and he drifted off. As he recovered, he enjoyed watching her face come into focus. Her own grief was plain to see, but still she was kind to him. He found himself staring at her, wondering how he could ever have thought she looked so much like Bellatrix or that she was a homelier version of Narcissa. The better he could see Andromeda, the more it seemed to him that Narcissa was a washed-out version of her older sister.

He didn't like being tucked up in a bed and having all of his needs cared for. One morning he tried to get out of bed and only succeeded in knocking the blankets and the glass on the nightstand onto the floor again.

"Severus?" She came to look in on him.

"I should be up and about," he muttered.

Her hands were soft as she tucked him back into bed. He felt a little achy and willingly submitted. "Poppy says we need to wait until you're truly ready."

"How will we know when that's happened? How do you know I'm not well, yet?"

"She did say that it would be after you started agitating to get up."

"So, then, get my robe and help me."

"You're still weak as a Pygmy Puff. You haven't even had a proper dinner yet. Poppy said that the poison is probably still lingering in your system at this point. There's no rush, Severus, truly. You have nothing to do but relax and heal."

He held her hand close to his face. "I don't like being this way."

"It will only be worse if you get up too soon."

He frowned and lay back. "Then for the love of anything good, if I have to stay in this bed, find some way for me to entertain myself!"

She tugged on her hand and finally freed it. "I'll see what can be done."

"See that you do."

Draco came after lunch and set up the Wizard's chess set. "Aunt Andie says it's been in the family for four generations."

Finally some mental stimulation. The wizards selected their sides and played for several minutes. "What do you think of your aunt?"

The young wizard shrugged. "I don't know. I'd never met her before."

"You've heard about her all your life."

"Mother always said that she turned her back on the family when it needed her the most."

"That's the sort of thing Narcissa would worry about."

"When I brought it up, Aunt Andie said that the family had already turned its back on her by handing her over to Uncle Rodolphus's brother."

"I've never heard about that."

"Grandfather signed a contract on her and promised her to him without even asking her. So she ran away and ended up married to the Mudblood."

"I stayed in this house once before. She and Ted Tonks seemed very much in love."

"She told me that she was lucky because they came to know love afterwards."

"There you have it, then."

"So did she desert the family or did they desert her?"

"It sounds as though it depends on who tells the story."

Draco fingered a pawn. "Aunt Bella used to say that Aunt Andie was a blood traitor whore who betrayed the family."

"What exactly did your Aunt Bella do for your family, again?"

Draco couldn't answer that question.

The next day Andromeda came into the bedroom with a stack of newspapers. "Poppy says your eyes are strong enough to read, now. I've been..." She drifted off but then handed them to him. "I would have read these to you, but they're about the battle, and there's discussion of the casualties."

He took them from her, noticing that she gazed upon the top one. It showed a picture of her husband. "How did it happen?" he asked.

She let go of the paper and sat down. "Kingsley Shacklebolt...I should call him the Minister, but on that day he was just a tired, muddied man...came and told me. They had been caught by Snatchers, and Ted knew it was all up with him, so he sent me his Patronus." Here her voice cracked. "He sent me his Patronus and put himself between the Snatchers and the others. A Goblin was killed, but the others got away, including Kingsley himself. They came to tell me a couple of days later, and I honestly don't know anything else from that day."

"I'm...I'm sorry."

She looked thoughtful. "I've never considered it until this minute, but I hope someone gave Kingsley a bed and something to eat..."

"Having known the hospitality of this house, Andromeda, I'm sure the right things were done."

They spent several days going over the stories in the paper together. He was saddened to see the list of students who were killed. "Those poor kids. They followed Potter to the very end."

They discussed people with whom Andromeda had grown up and Severus had known as Death Eaters. There was some sadness in realizing how many lives were wasted. Andromeda remembered boys and girls who were still sweet and innocent. Severus had known them as hopeful young wizards and witches who were looking forward to their adult lives.

The most distressing stories, from Severus's standpoint, were those about himself. He read of his activities during both parts of the war and his teaching record in between. The description of his friendship with Lily Potter angered him. "They make her sound too good for me and at the same time like some sort of seductress," he growled. "They don't know her...no one is alive that knew her as I did."

Still, there was some good that came from reading the stories and learning to accept that it all had happened. They knew, from reading the papers, that they were not alone in suffering. Seeing it all in print made it seem more real and more complete.

When Draco came to play chess with him, Severus said, "Your aunt brought me the newspapers. I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"It's what you get for being a Death Eater, I guess: Time in Azkaban." was the reply. "I guess I'm lucky to have gotten off and only sent away to an aunt."

"What about the others?"

The boy shrugged. "Aunt Andie wouldn't go to Aunt Bella's funeral, and Mother said she wouldn't speak to her because of it. Of course she has already. Mother can't seem to resist trying to run things over here. Uncle Rodolphus was also killed in the battle, so he was buried with Aunt Bella. His brother is missing and presumed dead."

"You sound very much like the newspaper report. Is there no further word on them than that?"

"No, no one cares. Mother doesn't really care, either. She took care of Aunt Bella and her husband because they were family. Mostly now she's trying to get Father out of Azkaban."

"And trying to run things here?"

"Mother manages to get a lot of things the way she wants them, but when Aunt Andie puts her foot down, it's down."

"What did Narcissa want that Andromeda wouldn't do?"

"Well, there was the time Mother wanted Aunt Andie to come to the funeral, but she said, 'I mourned the loss of my older sister decades ago. I'm not going to do it again.' Mother was pretty upset about that. She told Aunt Andie that she had no family feeling. She answered that what little she had left was going to be used for her son and grandson."

"Then Mother wanted to send over some house-elves. She said they would help, but Aunt Andie knew Mother just wanted them to spy for her. She told mother that she was out of the habit of being a pampered baby and that any house-elf Mother sent over would get clothes. Mother fussed a lot and asked what about Birdie, but Aunt Andie said that was entirely different. She mentioned Aunt Walburga and an elf named Bennie, but they were both talking so loudly at the same time that I lost track. Somehow Aunt Andie said something about Uncle Alphard, and Mother suddenly stopped talking. She said, 'I don't agree, but we'll do it your way.' Then she left."

"I wish I could have seen that."

Draco shook his head. "It was awful. Aunt Andie looked really tall and fierce when Mother was here, but after the fire died down in the Floo, she flopped down in a chair and started crying. It wasn't the pretty crying Mother does when she wants Father to buy something, either. Aunt Andie scared me. It was like how I felt when the Dark Lord threatened to kill Mother. I wanted to leave the room, but I was afraid that if I did, she'd notice. When she stopped, she looked up and saw me and then she said, 'I'm sorry Draco. When I see your mother, sometimes I remember things from years ago and I still feel the hurt and the rage.' I mumbled something and left."

"What have you heard from your House-mates?"

Draco was in the process of capturing a knight. He held it tightly for a bit and then said, "You heard about Vince, didn't you?"

Severus nodded his head. "Yes. I warned the Carrows about their curriculum, but they claimed the Dark Lord wanted it taught."

"He never quite had that spell, but he loved to play with it. I don't think his mother will ever be the same. Greg is pretty lost these days without him. I try to do things at the Goyles', but I'm supposed to spend most of my time here. Out of Slytherin House, a few of the kids were injured, but McGonagall told the younger kids to leave the castle. Pansy made sure they were kept safe at Honeydukes. There was one underclassman who saw her parents on High Street and ran out. She was killed by a passing giant who wasn't watching where he was going."

Snape winced. He'd read of the child's death in the paper, but there hadn't been details. He would need to write the parents a letter. He looked again at the boy in front of him. "Will you go back to finish your education?"

Draco shook his head. "Right now I never want to leave here. I didn't think I would like it, but it's quiet and peaceful. Aunt Andie knows when to let a guy alone. I can think here, and if I don't want to think, there's plenty of work to do."

"You'll want to leave sooner or later. You'll get past this."

Draco sighed. "I suppose I will. There will be special N.E.W.T.s during the month before the regular N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s. I suppose I'll study and get ready for them."

"When you're ready to start studying, why don't you bring your books here and I'll tutor you." When the boy looked up in horror, he added. "I can at least tell you what to study, if you don't appreciate my help."

As Draco sighed, his professor moved a bishop and won the game.

A/N: Thank you for the warm response to Chapter 1! I hope this chapter doesn't disappoint. This has been beta read by Trickie Woo.

Geocentric Orbit

Chapter 3 of 24

"If it was just any dunderhead, I would say no. You, Miss Granger, are a special case."

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When Hermione and Harry came back for another visit, this time with Ron, Andromeda was a bit more relaxed. She sat down with the boys in the sitting room and directed Hermione down to the patient's bedroom by herself. "Just keep things quiet and peaceful," she said. "He's quite sensitive to sudden movements and loud noises right now."

Hermione walked down the hallway and tapped on the door, which was ajar. "Professor?"

He looked up from a newspaper. "Miss Granger." He turned back to the paper and finished reading the article he had started. Then he put the paper down and looked at her over reading glasses. His voice was still quiet and raspy, but the look on his face was not unpleasant. "Don't just stand there. Come sit down and tell me how it all happened."

She entered the room gingerly. He looked again at her, this time in expectation, like when he wanted someone to recite during class. "Well, you know Harry had some sort of a mental connection with Voldemort?" He nodded. "Harry needed to kill the snake. He could peek into his mind enough to see that the snake was with him in the Shrieking Shack. We went down there and watched from the tunnel when he ordered...well, you know." She wouldn't say it aloud when he had that look in his face.

He gestured, so she continued. "Afterwards, Harry leaned down over you, and you gave him those memories."

"You conjured that container."

"Yes."

"You're quick on your feet. I like that."

There was a pleased sound in his voice. She blushed. "Then Voldemort started talking with that voice, and the boys stopped to listen, but I couldn't stop thinking about you. As far as I knew, you were the worst of the Death Eaters, but still... I couldn't let you just die. Then I remembered that Mr. Weasley was in that hallway forever before someone went to rescue him and how as long as there was a binding around his neck, he didn't bleed too much."

"That's my smart girl," he said. She was a bit surprised by his tone of voice and the smile on his face, so she stopped and looked at him for a moment. Their eyes met, and something passed between them. To cover up her confusion, she continued in a rush.

"I tore up one of the curtains in the window there and wrapped it as tight as I dared. Then when I was finished, I caught up with the boys in the tunnel and we went up to the castle. Harry went somewhere, but I went with Ron into the Great Hall, where most of the families were taking care of the injured people. I found Madam Pomfrey and told her where to find you. I guess after Harry beat Voldemort, they went and recovered you. I found out later that they brought you here."

Professor Snape was looking fretfully at the door, so she stopped talking. "Do you need something?"

"I think a small tea will be coming soon."

There was a rattle in the hallway and a tap on the door. Hermione watched as he smiled in anticipation. When the door opened, Mrs. Tonks looked at Severus with a question in her face, and he smiled back. It made her feel funny, as though there was a conversation going on that she wasn't a part of. She needn't have worried, however. Their hostess set the things on a table that she placed between the bed and Hermione's chair and then made her way to the door.

"I thought you would stay," said Severus.

"And ruin your chance for a tete-a-tete? I don't think so." Andromeda smiled. "Besides, I have other duties than tending to you, and you must get tired of just me all the time. Enjoy your visit." She slipped out of the room.

He looked a bit disappointed, but turned to his guest. "Well, Miss Granger, if you would pour, I would be grateful. I must admit my motor skills are not yet returned to normal." He watched as she did so. "You were telling me about the battle. What happened afterward?"

Andromeda shut the door and sighed in relief. She remembered her conversation with Narcissa after the funeral for Nymphadora and Remus. The younger sister had been quite particular in her directions. It was more of Narcissa's meddling, but at least it wasn't directed at Andromeda.

The girl has expressed an interest in pursuing Severus romantically, Andie. Let her visit as often as she wants. There are some who are proposing backlashes against the old families, and this girl can soften the blow. Keep him as long as he wants to stay and do all you can to promote the match. Let's keep her happy so she'll be good to us, all right?

It wasn't like she owed anything to Narcissa, but it cost her nothing to play along. Andromeda tried to decide whether it was working or not. Severus had looked forward to Hermione's visit, and his demeanor expressed a real interest for her. He certainly seemed as happy to be with the girl as she was with him, but there was something about his behavior that didn't seem quite lover-like. She shook it off. What did she know of the mating rituals of Potions masters? Ted's earnest methods had been endearing, and they had certainly worked on her, but she had never fooled herself into thinking they were typical of all wizards.

She went back to the sitting room, where Harry and Ron were eating biscuits and watching Teddy make faces while his hair turned shades of green and then brown again. "How are things in here?"

"Is that all he does?" asked the dark-haired boy.

Andromeda laughed. "It's quite a lot, actually. You try going from barely knowing how to breathe to being able to smile at people within the space of ten weeks. He's almost got control over his head, and he's trying to roll over. After that he'll start to move around and before you know it, you'll be chasing his broom all over the garden."

"Mum says Ginny was walking by nine months and on a safety broom at a year."

His hostess smiled and nodded. "I remember. She had to grow up fast to keep from getting squashed by one of you monsters." Her face became more serious. "How is Molly doing, these days? I meant to go see her, but somehow I'm always busy lately."

"She's okay, I guess. We know when she's been crying about Fred." Both boys looked at Andromeda a little guiltily. She swallowed and patted their hands, so Ron continued. "Dad's always telling us to mind ourselves and be good around her, but she says she hates that. She said when we're too good it's as though the soul of the whole family was gone and not just Fred. So during the day we're allowed to have some fun, but not too much because George isn't really up to it, either, and when Dad's home from the Ministry, we all act like Percy."

Harry groaned in corroboration.

"She said that when she gets a chance, she'll come over for a cup of tea sometime."

"I'd like that," answered Andromeda. "I would like that very much. You tell her to come on over whenever she's ready. It will make things seem almost normal."

Hermione came to the Tonks cottage alone late in July, and the door was opened by a tallish young man. He had medium brown hair and an expression in his eyes that said he'd never met an enemy. He looked like someone Hermione had seen before, but she couldn't place him.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I thought this was the Tonks home? Have I gone wrong?"

The young man laughed and said, "Oh, no. I'm Tim Tonks. I've made myself scarce for a few years because I'm a Squib. Now with the Dark Lord gone, I can come and go as I please. Since Dad and Dora are gone, I need to look in on Mum from time to time. I take it that you are the Hermione Granger we hear so much about?" He opened the door wide and waved her inside. "You and your friends Harry and Ron accomplished the impossible, I hear. I'm pleased to meet you."

She regained her composure and shook his hand. "Yes, I'm Hermione. I was terribly sorry to hear about your father and your sister. I met him once or twice and got to know her a little bit more than that. Everyone seemed to like her a lot."

"We Tonkses can't escape it," said Tim with a laugh. "Dad was the sort who thought everyone was his best mate until they started trying to hex him, and Nym would try to keep the party going at all costs. This nephew of mine is almost her way of doing that, keeping the party going even after she's gone." He looked at Hermione conspiratorially. "Of course, Mum can be loving and generous, but she's always said it was Dad rubbing off on her."

"She must miss him horribly."

"She does, if all this extra work she's taken on is any indication." He looked around the hallway and lowered his voice. "I admit I'm shocked to see this supposedly-reformed Death Eater in the house. Is he all right, do you think?"

"Yes, I really do think so," responded Hermione. "He was very much in love with Harry Potter's mother, and Dumbledore got him to act deep undercover as a spy. He did the things Dumbledore wanted even on the last day of the war."

"That's what Mum says, and I guess I should believe her. Good old Dumbledore! At least he was there when my parents needed him, but he couldn't resist meddling in everything, could he? At any rate, Miss Hermione Granger, I believe you're expected, so I shall not hold you up any longer."

Hermione felt a bit surprised by the whole thing. Imagine the Tonkses having a Squib child that no one knew about! He seemed very comfortable in his skin, though. She would think about it later. Right now she was here to see Severus.

"Aha, Miss Granger! You look quite fetching today. Do I detect preparations for a date with Mr. Weasley after your visit with poor old me?"

Hermione blushed. Mrs. Malfoy had carefully coached her on how to prepare for her visits. She had also paid particular attention to the sort of things to say... and what *not* to say. "Actually, Ron and Harry are too busy studying for their Auror entrance tests. I was wondering, would it be possible to ask for your help studying for the replacement N.E.W.T.s?"

"If it was just any dunderhead, I would say no. You, Miss Granger, are a special case." He thought for a minute. "I believe that I will take you on. Draco works with me after breakfast, so... perhaps an evening or two during the week?"

"That works for me."

There was a tap on the door and Tim Tonks brought in the tea things.

"Where is your mother?" asked Snape, a bit shortly.

"I sent her upstairs to rest. She's running herself ragged, and I can take care of things for an afternoon, I think."

"I'd like to see her as soon as she's able," was the fractious reply.

"I'll let her know when she comes down," said the young man smoothly. With that he was gone.

"Did you know they had a son who is a Squib?" asked Hermione. She poured, as was becoming the custom.

"Everyone did at one time or another. It was a huge scandal in pureblood circles."

"He obviously has a lot of affection for both his parents."

"Yes, and Andromeda is quite proud of the boy. He's achieved middling to high honors at university and there's a very eligible young lady in the mix."

He looked to the door. "Confound it, she's not coming, is she? I should send my Patronus to her."

"Would she come?"

He sighed. "She would probably just send hers back. Have you seen it?" He looked at Hermione. When she shook her head, he said, "It's a dove. I watched her send it to her husband once. She cast it and then held it in her hands and whispered to it. Then she held out her hands and it flew away like a real dove. She's an amazing woman."

Hermione found it all fascinating, in a way, but she wanted to know more about her professor and she wanted him to ask more about her. There were times he seemed fond of her, when he said, "Hermione, I couldn't be prouder of you than if I raised you myself," or something like that, but she never really felt the connection she was hoping for. Still, he seemed happy to speak with her, so she continued to come, hoping that when he was fully recovered he would be ready to pursue a further relationship.

Tim was haunting the hallways when she came out of Severus's room. "So you fought in the war and everything?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Did you actually get to see the Dark Lord, and talk to him?"

"I never actually spoke with him, myself. Just being in the same room while Harry talked with him was enough."

"Mum once spoke with him, back when he was less scary to look at, she says. Frightened her to death, the way she tells it, chasing her right into Dad's arms."

Hermione laughed. "I doubt Voldemort would be pleased to know he was a matchmaker."

"Ha! You see the joke!"

As they laughed, his eyes became wistful. "I heard he used to say that Squib kids, like me, had our magic stolen by the Muggle-borns. Do you think that's what happened? Do *you* have my magic?"

He suddenly looked so serious that Hermione took a step back. "I d...don't *think* so."

Tim laughed. "Mom said it's just a pile of dragon dung that only people like her paranoid sisters would believe. Dad said that if someone somehow took magic from me, they're only taking it back because he was Muggle-born, you know."

Hermione smiled weakly. "Oh, yes. I believe I'd heard that."

"I'm just messing with you. You're all right!" He put out his hand again. "At any rate, I'm glad to meet you, Hermione Granger."

"Yes, it's a pleasure." She walked out of the house in bemusement. Tim Tonks might not have inherited the family magic, but he did seem to have more than a bit of the mischief she was used to seeing in Sirius Black.

Draco watched over the stair railing as his cousin walked the Mudblood out of the house. He didn't envy Tim the opportunity to talk to the increasingly confident and attractive witch, he told himself. He did find himself impressed by the other young man's easy manner, though. The Squib was a misfit, but he spoke with Hermione as if there was no distinction between them.

The other young man shut the front door and looked up the stairs. "Do you need anything?"

Draco was caught spying and he knew it. Had the Squib known he was there all along? "No," he answered, reaching for lofty importance and landing upon sullenness. "I think I'll be in my room until dinner. I'm not sure the company is what my parents would wish for."

His cousin laughed. "Not enough magical pedigree, eh?"

Draco didn't condescend to answer.

A/N: Tim will show up from time to time in this story. He's probably 3-5 years older than Harry and Hermione, since he was 2 1/2 years younger than Tonks. Although he has his own Muggle-based life, he feels as though he needs to keep track of his mother. I keep thinking of AA Milne's "James James Morrison Morrison" whenever I write scenes between him and Andromeda.

Thanks is due to Trickie Woo, and again to the many readers and the reviewers. I'm quite grateful for your kind attention.

Gravitational Pull

Chapter 4 of 24

... She was stunned. She quickly told herself that she needn't be. If he felt affection for her, it was due to their relationship over the past month or two. He had recovered from a life-threatening injury in her house, after all. When he was well, he would go on to his life and she would...

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"You asked for me?" inquired Andromeda.

Severus peered at her carefully. She didn't seem to be any better rested than she had been that morning, but he wasn't the best judge. He looked again. If he guessed, he would say she had spent several hours crying. Well, he reflected, she had plenty to cry about. He cleared his throat.

"Yes, I wanted to ask your advice."

"I'm not sure of its value, but I'm a Black...enough to enjoy giving my opinion."

They both laughed a bit at that, bringing a little sparkle back to her eyes. He looked at her and wished for a different world. He shook it off. "It's this," he said, placing a vial filled with a smoky gray substance on the table. "These are the memories I gave Potter. I can't decide whether to replace them."

"Do you remember them at all?"

"Just vaguely; I recall what they're about insofar as they intersect with other memories."

"Why wouldn't you want them?"

"I think I'm happier without them. I'm pretty sure one of them involved one of my worst moments ever."

"So then why would you want them back?"

"I honestly don't know. Miss Granger encouraged me to just let them go."

"Has she seen them?"

"No, but Potter told her what's in them."

"So young Mr. Potter has seen them?"

"Therein lies the crux of the problem. Do I want James Potter's son to have a better memory of my past than I have?"

"There's another consideration." He looked at her expectantly. "Those memories, for better or for worse, are of events that helped make you the person you are now. They put yourself in context, so to speak."

"That's the answer." He smiled at her.

She stood to go. "I'll leave you to it, then."

She patted his hand. Quick as a flash, he seized her hand and brought it to his lips. Then he brought both of their hands back to the table near the vial. They looked from their clasped hands to each other's faces in stunned silence.

Rather, she was stunned. She quickly told herself that she needn't be. If he felt affection for her, it was due to their relationship over the past month or two. He had recovered from a life-threatening injury in her house, after all. When he was well, he would go on to his life and she would...

There was no value in following that train of thought. She cleared her throat, and he finally spoke. "I'd like it if you stayed."

"What would you like me to do?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I would like you to just sit there, in case I need someone. I might want to talk about my memories as they settle back in."

"Shall I sit over by the fire, then, to give you some privacy?"

"No, I want you here, within a hand's reach." They both looked at the table, and she realized that her hand was still firmly within his grasp.

She nodded. "All right. Is there anything else you need?"

"My wand."

She waved at a corner of the room. "It's over on top of that wardrobe. Why don't you try to summon it?"

He had not used magic since his injury. There was just the slightest doubt about it, but her face was confident. He said the spell and then smiled when the wand slid into his hand as though it had never left.

He opened the vial and tapped it while saying a charm that would allow the oldest to be extracted first. It siphoned into his wand, which he held to his temple as he digested the past event.

"Pretty harmless," he noted. "It's one of my early memories of Lily Evans."

"A lovely girl, if a bit overly impressed by her own intelligence and moral correctness."

He looked at her in surprise. "You knew her?"

"Oh, yes. Sirius brought all his friends around at one time or another. I met Lily, not long after she and James married."

"You didn't like her?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I just got a little tired of the whole Gryffindor 'we're morally superior' attitude. She would have grown out of her arrogance. They all would have, if they'd been left alone to finish growing up."

He looked at her for a moment, and she blushed. "I'm sorry," she said, "I told you that I'm opinionated. I should have stayed quiet."

"No," he answered. "I appreciate your honesty."

He extracted the next several memories without much comment, but soon reached one that upset him greatly. He started to describe being pulled upside down by James and Sirius, but stopped when she shook her head.

"Those vile boys," she said. "They were still laughing about it when they visited me over the summer. I know that Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion were essentially ignoring Sirius by then, but I have no idea what the Potters were thinking to let their boy become such a brute. I gave them the scolding no one else would, but Sirius just laughed it off as house loyalty. He made some nasty remark about Slytherins slinking together, and then he and James had a laugh at my expense. I sent them away without the dinner they expected."

By now it was late in the evening, and Severus looked at the vial with trepidation. "I think it only gets worse from here."

"You don't have to if you'd rather not."

"I think I need to."

"All right, then."

He placed the wand near his head again and again. Each time, he became a bit agitated, but after a few minutes he tapped the vial for the next memory. After a few such memories, he reached for Andromeda's hand. "Lily's dead," he whispered. Tears ran down his face as he relived the death of the only friend he ever wanted.

Without realizing it, he was clasped to a soft form. A soothing voice in his ear said, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

He pulled back enough to look into her eyes. They were filled with tears of sympathy and perhaps her own pain. "I'm sorry for yours," he responded.

"Should we stop here for tonight?"

He smiled at her pronoun. Out of the Blacks...out of all the people he knew, rather...only Andromeda would share his troubles. He looked in the vial. "There aren't that many left. Do you mind?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not." She rose from the bed, embarrassed by her impulse, but he held her hand.

"Stay... please. I don't know exactly what's left, but I think I need you near."

The next memories increased the intensity of his distress, but didn't add new distress until the very last one. "He made me do it," he mourned. "He made me do it."

He buried his face in her neck. He breathed the soothing essences of her still room that lingered in the tendrils of her hair touching his face. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Anyone would have done this," she answered.

"Not as you did it." He lifted his head and looked at her. "I don't think anyone does anything the way you do it." He lowered his face toward hers.

She realized what was about to happen and placed her hand over his lips. "Let's not. It wouldn't be right to do this now."

Hope gleamed in his eyes. "Another time, then?"

"That's not what I meant."

"But perhaps?" He pulled her close. "I'm smitten by you, Andromeda. I've been smitten since the time I taught you the Wolfsbane Potion."

"You're recovering from an injury, and I'm almost the only person you've seen for weeks."

"It's not like that."

"It would be wrong."

"It was wrong a year ago, but I hope you would consider me as an appropriate suitor now."

"Of course you'd be appropriate... but you're supposed to..." She was dazed, and suddenly she needed to leave that room. She shook her head and pulled away. "Surely you have other interests. I should see how Teddy is doing with his Uncle Tim."

"You'll come back won't you? I don't want to be alone right now."

She paused, not sure how to proceed. She finally nodded. "I'll be back in just a few minutes."

He held her hand as she walked away from his bed, until she had to tug to get free. "I'll be waiting," he said.

She went through the house and ended in the nursery. Tim was half asleep in the rocking chair with a sleeping Teddy sprawled across his chest. The mother and grandmother smiled. "I should take a picture of you right now. It would seal the deal with your Sophy."

"I don't know if she's that kind of girl."

"If she isn't, she's the wrong kind for you."

"Mum! Muggle women don't want to be thought of as breeding mares these days."

"Ah, but I bet they're still looking for men who will be good fathers. The right girl for you will appreciate your open heart and your way with your nephew."

She leaned down and lifted Teddy. She whispered, "How are you, my little man? Uncle Tim has taken care of your diaper and your evening bottle? I trust I can put you in bed, then." She did just that and summoned the house-elf. "Birdie, would you mind staying close to Teddy tonight?"

"Oh, yes, Mistress, Birdie stays with Little Master while Mistress watches over sick Master."

"Thank you, Birdie." She turned to her son. "Have you seen your cousin anywhere?"

"He mumbled something about there being too many Muggle-borns and Squibs around the house and went to bed early."

Andromeda sighed. "Maybe he'll help me with the garden tomorrow."

"It's too much, Mum. You're overworking yourself. You should rest more."

"So I can spend hours at a time doing nothing but cry over the people I've lost?"

"Mu-um..."

"When you use that expression to refer to me, please remember that it's a one syllable word. You can go home now." Her voice softened as she pulled him into a hug. "Thank you very much for your help today."

"Mum, I need to ask you about this Snape and his position in the house. I don't trust him."

She let him go and moved toward the door to the hallway. "He's a very sick man, Tim. His position is 'patient,' and right now what matters is that he trusts me."

"What happens when he's not so sick? Mum, I can tell he's quite dependent upon you... and maybe something else, too. What if he tries something?"

She waved it off. "He's just dependent upon the witch who's nursing him back to health. He has a future and other interests."

"He was miffed that you didn't serve his tea this afternoon."

"He's used to me serving his tea, and he was crotchety about the change. People recovering from illness can be like that. For that matter, I'm fairly miffed that I spent all afternoon in my bedroom unable to do anything but cry over your father and sister. Neither one would want me to waste so much time when there's work to do."

"Neither would they want you to get taken in by a sad story. Somehow I think he plans to sponge off you."

Andromeda turned and looked sternly at her son. At seeing the face so familiar to the beloved one and recalling that she had so few members of her family left, her own face softened. "Your dad was the most generous man I knew, often to his own detriment, including the day he died. And I believe you once accused your sister of being taken in by a sad story as well. It made her happy to marry Remus, and now we have Teddy, who's a consolation. Severus is a very clever wizard, but he's too sick and run down to plot anything."

She smiled sadly and patted his cheek. "Look at you, trying to find an angle to all this. You would have made a very good Slytherin, dear. Now, you run along home and I'll be fine here."

She finally sent her son away and returned to the sick room with draughts of two potions. She found Severus trying to get out of bed. "Oh, Severus! You mustn't!"

"I needed to find you," he said petulantly.

"I told you I would be right back. How could you doubt me?"

"Everything aches, and my head hurts."

"Of course it does," she said soothingly. She placed a cool hand on his forehead. He pulled her toward the bed.

"Severus..." she said warningly.

"Please, I just want comfort."

"This is better for you. One will soothe your mind, and the other will ease your aches." She gave him the potions and then sat primly in the chair and held his hand. His deep breathing told her when he was finally asleep. She smoothed his sheets and made her way into her own room.

When she got into her bed, Ted greeted her, as he did every night. "*Ah, Dromeda, you're as pretty as ever but too sad. Let it go...*"

"*Ted, I've missed you so much.*"

"*Come, my dove.*" He pulled her close and started to kiss her.

Where had that name come from? It didn't matter. His lips were divine. She kissed him hungrily as Ted faded and a dream lover took his place.

She sat up, gulping for air. She remembered back to a day when, in his delirium, Severus had called her "my dove." Later, she had asked why, and he recalled to her the Patronus she cast. She remembered laughing and asking if he didn't know a pigeon when he saw one. It used to be a dove, before Ted had to leave. Recalling that conversation now, she was haunted by the sudden realization that the dream lover had slipped into her dreams over several weeks. She shouldn't have dreams...*those* kind of dreams...about anyone other than Ted.

You didn't do it on purpose, said Ted's voice in her head. *Some day you will, and it will be right. When you're ready, you'll let me go.*

"I don't want to let go," she whispered. It would be like saying she hadn't been happy with Ted.

She fell back into another uneasy sleep. Ted returned to her dreams, kissing her properly and loving her as only he could do. As she dreamed of his arms holding her, the dream lover returned and started kissing her again. She didn't notice as the two became mixed up in her mind.

Andromeda was a bit headachy the next morning when she and her nephew started working in the garden. She trimmed up the flower bushes and weeded around the borders as she directed Draco in harvesting some herbs.

"I don't appreciate being treated like a house-elf," he grouched.

"Draco, that comment is beneath you. A little work with our hands now and then helps to ground us, to give us perspective, and round us out."

"I wouldn't mind less ground on my hands."

She chuckled at that. "It will wash off, and think what you're learning. Look at how nice the lavender and thyme look now that you've harvested them and trimmed them up. Why don't you take some pride in a job well done?"

He looked at his handiwork and shrugged, but he couldn't resist a grin. Watching him look at the garden with a new light in his eyes, Andromeda felt the strain behind her own eyes start to ease. He was starting to be like a different person, even if he complained about it constantly. Well, that was the age, she supposed. Some moments with Nymphadora at the same age were difficult, too.

A/N: Thank you, dear readers and reviewers, for your comments.

I would like to acknowledge that part of this chapter has been influenced by Liberty Elyot's "The Man with the Missing Past."

Trickie Woo has beta read this.

Stars Fall Down

Chapter 5 of 24

"What does a man have to do to inspire that kind of passion?" he asked under his breath.

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Early in August, there was a day when Severus noticed that his hostess seemed particularly withdrawn and unhappy. He watched her as he ate his breakfast. She sat and chatted with him, following a pattern they had established early in his convalescence. He noted that she seemed on the point of tears the entire time. After she cleared up his dishes, he captured her hand. "What is it?"

She cleared her throat and shook her head. She looked at his hand beseechingly. He let go, and she slipped out of his room quickly. Something was going on in the house, but he didn't know what it was about. He quickly dressed for the day.

He had been granted greater mobility by the Healers and walked to the door of the sitting room to discover that Molly Weasley, a couple of Order members, and Andromeda's son Tim were there with her. He stepped away from the room and continued to the kitchen, where he poured himself some coffee from a pot kept warm throughout the morning.

He sat and read the paper, only catching a word or two from the other room when the conversation got loud. The baby cried and Tim said that he would take care of him. The young man came to the kitchen and settled at the table with the baby and a bottle.

"I see you're up," said Tim, suspiciously.

Severus decided to answer the words instead of the tone of the statement. "It's painful at moments when I try to bend my knees too much, but I'm getting better."

"It will be good for mum not to have quite so much to do."

"I never wanted to be an imposition. Poppy and your aunt had me brought here."

Tim laughed bitterly. "Dear Auntie Cissy. She's very good at making others do her bidding. How does she do that?"

"There's this look she gets in her eyes, and suddenly it seems as though it would be the worst thing in the world if you don't do what she wants."

"That's almost exactly what mum said."

They settled into an uneasy silence.

"Why are there so many visitors today?"

Tim huffed and thought for a minute, trying to find a reason to refuse to answer. He didn't have one. "It's the anniversary of the day you Death Eaters took over the Ministry. My father left this home the next morning and Mum never saw him again until he was laid out for his funeral."

"I see."

He would have protested that he was not involved in the Ministry take-over, but Severus knew that Tim didn't trust him. He wished he knew how to reassure the younger man. Perhaps there was no reassurance he could offer that would be truly sincere. He had to consider his own wishes where she was concerned.

Severus wanted to ease Andromeda's pain. She had done so much to heal him that he felt he owed it to her. The problem was that in order to ease her pain as he wished

to do, he would have to encourage her to let go of the man she had loved for many years. He would have to wait, cherishing the hope that when she had moved beyond her grief for Ted Tonks, she might see that other men existed.

Andromeda saw her guests away and stood at the gate of her garden. She watched them go a little way down the lane and then Apparate, just as she had watched Ted a year before. Severus watched from the door until the rain started. He walked down to hold an umbrella over her. She looked around and gasped in surprise when she saw it was him. "Severus! You'll make yourself sick."

"I saw the umbrella by the door, and I thought you might be getting wet."

She looked up and shrugged. "I suppose I am. Thank you."

"If it's not impertinent..."

"You want to know why I'm standing at this gate and looking down a misty lane."

"The question had occurred to me."

She didn't answer at once. When her voice came, it was quiet. "It was a brilliant, blue-skied day. He knew he had to leave, but I held onto him, hoping for just one more hug, one more kiss, one more caress..." Her hand was reaching over the gate, toward something that wasn't there.

She sighed and cleared her throat. "He knew he had to go, and he was right. The Ministry arrived less than an hour later. Dolores Umbridge was the only person I ever knew who hated Ted. After twenty-five years, she got her revenge upon us, and my older sister came along for the ride. I thought I'd never get Uncle Alphard's things properly put back together. I guess Dolores got even more revenge when he was killed."

"I'm sorry, Andromeda. He was the most likable person I ever knew."

"He was, wasn't he?" She smiled sadly. "I didn't even want to fall in love with him, but he was somehow so appealing. He always had a smile and a kind word for me, even when I acted like a snotty pureblood brat. I needed him to get me out of a jam with Rabistan Lestrange... and then I was lured into his sympathetic kindnesses... and then I needed him in a whole different way."

Her voice broke, and for a minute all he could hear was her gulping breaths.

He slid an arm around her. She startled and looked up at him. "It's just so we'll fit better under the umbrella," he said. She didn't believe him any more than it was true, but she let him hold her. In fact, she tilted her head until she was resting on his shoulder. It was supportive, and that was a comfort.

He was tempted to tell her that he wanted to become what her lost husband had been to her, but he knew it was too soon. It was also untrue. He would never be what Tonks was. Excellent though the man was, Severus Snape didn't really want to be an aging Hufflepuff Ministry hack. He caught a whiff of her hair and resisted an urge to kiss her forehead, which was just about in reach of his lips. It wasn't the right time.

The body within his arm tensed, and she looked up. "Sometimes I get so mad at him."

Severus looked the question and she answered. "He kept saying that things would be fine. 'It'll turn out, Dromeda.' He said it endlessly, especially at the end. He was wrong about that. It's not fine. I'm all alone with an angry son who could use a guiding word or two and a baby whose mother abandoned him."

She broke away from Severus and shouted down the lane. "It's not fine, Ted Tonks! I'm not fine! Shame on you for being wrong!"

The lane didn't answer. She sighed. "I guess I'm as bitter as my son. Nymphadora didn't abandon her baby; she just thought she could best help him by going to the battle that night. Maybe she was right. They won the battle and the war, after all. I used to have to keep close to home because if some member of my Black family ran into me there could be trouble. Now I can come and go as I please, but there's no one to share my freedom with."

Severus stood quietly, holding the umbrella over her as well as he could. If she would allow it, he would try to shield her from this pain. Somehow it seemed that she needed to pass through it.

She turned and became aware of him. For that instant she had forgotten he was there, but now she was embarrassed. She simply did not make scenes, certainly not in front of house guests.

"I apologize. How embarrassing." She moved toward the house. "I think some of the flowering plants will be ready to cut this week. Some of the potions you've been taking might work a little better with fresher ingredients."

She sounded suddenly confident and calm, but he wasn't fooled. He could see the look in her eye, and he had seen her do this before. When he came to make the Wolfsbane, one night at dinner Severus and Ted had discussed the possibility that Nymphadora and Lupin's children would be werewolves.

Andromeda got choked up about it and then suddenly became falsely calm. She remembered some dish that she had borrowed from Molly. She immediately got up to lay it out so that she could visit that evening to return it.

"Dromeda..."

She muttered as she left the room and Severus's host smiled kindly. "She changes the subject whenever she's upset. It's the way she avoids conflict and calms herself down." Then Ted got up and followed his wife from the room. When Severus brought his dishes to the kitchen to lay by the sink, he found the couple standing in the middle of the room. She clung to her husband, who swayed her gently and spoke quiet nothings into her ear.

There was no one to comfort and soothe her now. He didn't know how to do what Ted Tonks had done with such ease, so he just offered his arm. "Come."

She meekly preceded him back up the walk. He didn't put his arm around her but judged it appropriate to place a guiding hand at the small of her back. Her spine was rigid, as though someone had charmed just that set of bones with some sort of targeted Body Bind. Druella Rosier had raised her daughters to be quiet ladies who bore their emotions out of sight of the general public. At least two of those daughters had learned the lesson well.

She went up to her bedroom and knelt at his side of the bed. Putting her head on her husband's pillow, she quietly sighed and sniffled. "I'm sorry, my love. I shouldn't get so angry with you."

She heard his voice in her head. *You need to set it aside and move on.*

"I can't move on, Ted."

We didn't teach each other how to love so that you could spend your life on a dead man.

"It's too soon. It would be wrong. Please don't make me."

It won't be like this forever. Soon you'll stop being so painfully aware of me and then you'll be ready to let go.

"Please don't leave me."

Ah, Dromeda, I'll never leave you. You know that.

Hermione's study sessions with Professor Snape went quite well, if one was only considering the likely affect to her N.E.W.T.s. scores. Hermione was keeping a second score card in her mind, and that one was not as successful. Professor Snape was entirely too easily distracted. Perhaps it was an effect of the snake venom on his nervous system. He seemed to constantly need Mrs. Tonks to bring him tea or fluff his pillows. It was unnerving to see him this way.

Tonight he wasn't constantly trying to summon her to the room. They had been going over Arithmancy until rather late, and Hermione's only complaint was that he kept looking out the window he was seated near. Of course, it finally gave her an excuse to come see him.

"If I exchange these two terms in the same equation, why does it make such a difference in the result?" She brought him her notebook to look at.

"It's not a commutative operation," he explained without looking. "Really, Miss Granger, if you're asking that kind of question, it must be too late in the evening to study."

She was as close to him as she'd ever been, and her heart was starting to beat faster. If he would just lean toward her... But no, he was looking out the window. It was really an awkward angle, and she probably looked like an idiot. She took a step backwards.

"What's out there?"

"I believe it's the Perseids, tonight. Here, douse the light."

She did as he asked and then came back to kneel beside his chair.

As Hermione's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she caught sight of Andromeda Tonks in the garden. The older witch was holding a shawl around herself. She stared intently at the sky as her unbound hair fluttered in stray breezes.

"What is she doing?" Hermione thought she looked a bit otherworldly.

"I'm not sure. She's been standing there for quite a while."

As they watched, meteors started to fall, and the witch in the garden held out her fingers as if she was trying to touch them. Suddenly Severus shifted his chair around and put his hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"Come away from the window, Miss Granger. We have no business watching."

"Then what is she doing?"

"What?" he said. He looked distracted, so she asked again. "Oh, she's mourning her husband."

"I don't understand."

"I see that we shall have to review your astronomy, next. Her namesake is Andromeda, the princess that was once chained to a rock, just over there near the horizon. I seem to recall hearing that Tonks rescued her from the Death Eaters in a burst of uncharacteristic heroism. He snatched her away from the serpent like Perseus, just a little way over in the sky. Tonight's the Perseid Showers, the children of Perseus and Andromeda. Therefore, I gather from her posture that she's mourning her husband and daughter."

"Oh," said Hermione, glancing at the window. "It sounds so dramatic and romantic. I figured they just fell in love, and..."

"And what, Miss Granger? Do you naively believe that she walked up to the brother and sister-in-law of Walburga Black twenty-five years ago and said, 'Dad, Mum, this Mudblood and I are getting married?'"

"Well, it does seem unlikely when you put it like that."

A keening sound came from the garden, and the two in the room glanced out the window to see that Andromeda was now kneeling on the ground and appeared to be crying. Severus turned away first. "What does a man have to do to inspire that kind of passion?" he asked under his breath.

"I shouldn't think that you would have to do much at all," answered Hermione, turning slowly so he wouldn't see her face. "You are just as great a hero as Mr. Tonks ever was."

"I wouldn't assume that, Miss Granger. Ted Tonks was an ordinary Ministry hack with a pleasant life who, on at least two occasions, risked everything for the sake of the woman standing outside. I, on the other hand, had nothing to give up when I risked my life. Who took a bigger gamble?"

She couldn't immediately answer. After a minute, she said quietly, "If you both risked everything, how can you really compare it? You're looking at the total quantity when it's a question of proportion."

"You have learned something in Arithmancy, after all." He patted her arm. "Thank you."

She felt herself glowing under that touch and the one by the window. They weren't passionate caresses, but they were progress. She wondered if she could get him to touch her again. "If you had more to risk, like Mr. Tonks, you still would have done it all, wouldn't you?"

Severus looked toward the window again and said, "I'm not sure." He seemed to retreat into himself and become more distant. Hermione never knew what to do when this mood came upon him. Maybe he was tired. He was very much recovered and able to walk around the cottage as he needed to, but weariness seemed to strike without warning sometimes. She left soon afterwards.

The wizard she left behind observed the witch in the garden. He had caught more than a glimpse of the shape of her mourning, and he deemed it appropriate to keep a watchful eye over her. He wasn't sure what could happen, or what he would do, but he would watch and ensure her safety if he couldn't bring her peace of mind.

Particle Collision

"... It's like a wand pointing aimlessly while an Unforgivable Curse lies at the tip of the tongue. When the curse comes out, everyone will be surprised, but no one should be."

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Hermione couldn't concentrate on her lesson the next time she visited. Andromeda happened to walk in, offering a light meal, when she overheard Severus say, "If you cannot focus your magic better than that, Miss Granger, I don't understand the point of our continuing." Andromeda watched the girl's brown eyes fill with tears, and then she set the tray down.

"Severus, can't you tell that there's something the matter?"

"Before you interfere, Mrs. Tonks, consider how soon she must be able to perform this charm."

Andromeda opened her mouth to snap back at him, but noticed something, some small ache of longing in his eyes as he looked at the girl, that gave her pause. Shifting her attention, she shut her mouth and walked over to Hermione. Putting her arm around the younger witch, she set her down in a chair and spoke gently to her. "Why don't you tell us all about it?"

"I got a letter from my parents today," she whispered.

"You told me they had decided to stay in Australia, is that right?" Hermione nodded. "What did they say this time?"

The girl nervously crumpled her robe in her lap, only to discover that a napkin and plate were resting there. "They say I needn't come for Christmas. They say that they knew all along I never really belonged to them."

Andromeda looked at Severus again, wondering if he wanted to comment. His face was as impassive as ever, but his eyes were not as dead as they had so often been in the past. Somehow she knew he was sharing the young witch's pain. He wanted to help but wasn't sure what to say to help her.

The older witch decided to step in. Perhaps a little motherly attention or advice was called for. She started asking questions. "Exactly what did they say when you returned their memories, again?"

Hermione explained how her parents had been happy to see her but a little angry to have left their lives behind. They chose to stay in Australia at that point, and communication since that time had been strained. Now they were saying that they didn't understand her or her life, and this last letter said she had never belonged to them. After Hermione recounted the story, with the older witch asking questions on every point, she discovered that she had consumed half a glass of milk, a sandwich, and several biscuits.

Severus watched and listened in amazement as Andromeda drew on Ted Tonks's experiences with his own family and with her experience with Tim. "Give them time, and keep in touch with them. You'll find common ground again."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. I see Tim more now than in years. Meanwhile, with your teacher's permission," she said, looking at Severus, whose face was far from denial, "why don't we go clean all this up in the kitchen? It's not intricate charm work, but you may still find it helpful."

As the girl preceded her into the hallway, Andromeda heard, "Thank you," from the bed room behind her. She turned, and his eyes burned into hers.

The Hogwarts Express pulled out of King's Cross for its historic first run back to the school after the war. An extra carriage was added to accommodate an extra-large student body this year. In addition to a full first-year's class, most of the students who should have just finished their seventh year were returning for an eighth year.

Not every student with that option went back to the school. Harry Potter moved into his godfather's house, along with his best two friends. The two wizards would prepare to take the Auror entrance exams that winter while the witch followed the private course of study she had started with Professor Snape.

During the week after school began, Professor Snape went to St. Mungo's for a check up. Since he had gained some mobility, the Healers judged it appropriate for him to come to them. Andromeda saw him to the hospital and waited with him until he was called, but then she returned to her household duties. When he finished with the Healers, he was met by Narcissa, who had decided that he needed a trip to Madam Malkin's establishment.

After an hour of being fitted for every possible piece of clothing that a curmudgeonly wizard could want, and after more time on items *he* didn't want, Severus was exhausted. He begged his companion for mercy. She wanted to order some things for herself, but agreed to meet him at a coffee shop just down from the bookstore.

He placed his order and sat down with a Potions periodical that he had picked up along the way. Andromeda was good about getting him the paper, and there was an Herbology publication she took that was not without merit, but she had no idea what else he liked to read. He would have to tell her about some of the better journals and magazines. He smiled at the thought of sharing such things with someone. His coffee came and he looked up. He took off his reading glasses and looked again in surprise.

"Harper! Shouldn't you be in Transfiguration class right now?"

His waiter shrugged nervously. "They didn't really want me there."

"You have N.E.W.T.s to prepare for, boy. How are you going to start your career without your exam scores?"

"I'll have to do something else, but at least I'll be alive." He looked over at a table, where several other teenagers sat. Snape realized they all should have been at Hogwarts at that time. After a short conversation, he realized that they were unable to go back to the school, and yet without going back their futures would be crippled.

The Professor and short-term Headmaster was aghast.

"Andromeda, might I have a word with you?"

He watched her look out the window longingly before she sat down. Her lover was not out yet, and he judged that there was perhaps an hour before her desire to watch the stars would be insurmountable. "What can I do for you, Severus?"

"I ran into several of the seventh- and eighth-year Slytherins today."

She was instantly engaged. "Weren't they supposed to be at school? The younger ones, especially?"

"They've been told by others that they're not welcome. It's even been in the *Prophet*." He handed her an editorial page they had read together a month earlier. She re-read it. Suddenly she realized that a paragraph about the students who had died during the Battle of Hogwarts was a thinly-veiled threat. Of-age Slytherins whose families had Death Eater sympathies were "encouraged" to stay away from the school.

Now Andromeda was aghast. "What are they supposed to do? Fester in Knockturn Alley until one of them becomes a new Dark Lord?"

In spite of the problem, he was filled with a sudden warmth. "You understand! I was hoping you could help me."

She nodded. "Of course."

"I would like to prepare them for the N.E.W.T.s, just as I am working with your nephew and my...Hermione. This is the only place I can do so, however. Would it be possible?"

She looked troubled. "I don't know. It's so much... How many students are there?"

"Of the twenty in those two classes, one is deceased." Hardened as he was during his time as a Death Eater, Vincent Crabbe's death was still difficult for him to comprehend. She nodded encouragingly. "Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini, and several of the seventh-years have gone to Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Half a dozen were mixed-blood and their families never participated in Death Eater activities, so they were welcomed back at the school. That leaves six in addition to Draco."

"My still room is so small."

"Only one of the six intends to take more than three exams. There will only be two working in Potions besides Miss Granger."

"I just don't know..." She had an idea. "What if we ask Cissy? Her house is big enough that she wouldn't even notice..."

He shook his head vigorously. "And have them surrounded by the trappings of the Dark Lord's last home? Surely you see why it can't be there?"

"Must it be here?" she asked. "I've devoted my adult life to helping the people victimized by the parents of those children. How will it look if I let them into my home...into the place where Ted and I lived, and where our children were born? What will my son and all my friends say?"

"What I will say, and what I hope any thinking person will say, is that Andromeda Tonks has been a brave person. She's a witch who left her heritage behind when that heritage was destroying the world. Such people will say that she's still just as brave a witch who helps those who have the same heritage and who so desperately need her assistance."

Her eyes glistened. "You're as bad as Dumbledore, or Alastor Moody."

He shuddered at the name of the Auror but smirked. "I learn from the best." At her smile, he pressed his point. "Andromeda, these children need not just a place to improve scholastically, but a mentor who can show them how to be pure-blooded yet above the pettiness that so often comes with it. They need an example who has overcome the prejudices of her childhood to be a witch worthy of admiration. Your sister can't do that. Only you can."

She shook her head in confusion. "I'm not sure. You make me seem nobler than I am. I wasn't anyone special, just a girl who got caught up in a place and time where she didn't belong."

"That's what makes you perfect for this. I watched you with Hermione. While I ached to help her, to break through whatever was disturbing her, I didn't have the first clue. Your approach was much better. I think that, between us, we can make all the difference."

"Do you honestly think all Theo Nott needs is milk and biscuits?"

He nodded. "As a matter of fact, I think what they need most is a good meal and a kind voice. Their parents ignore them most of the time as they bewail the tragedies they've brought upon themselves. When they notice these kids, it's only to yell at them. To avoid their homes, they hang out at the coffee shop where they get evil looks from the proprietor and other customers. It's like a wand pointing aimlessly while an Unforgivable Curse lies at the tip of the tongue. When the curse comes out, everyone will be surprised, but no one should be."

"And you think I can prevent it?"

He took her hands between his. She was struck by how similar it was to another night. Was it really just over a year since she was convinced to let Harry Potter use her home for an hour? She looked up to see that Severus was still speaking.

"I don't know if anyone can prevent it, but I think we should try. You can do this, Andromeda. You and I can help at least these few students and perhaps through them we will help others as well."

She had never seen his eyes look so alive and intent. In the whole time she had known him, there had always been a sort of dullness in the way he looked at the world. In this moment, however, his eyes burned with a fire that made them glow. For some reason, she wanted to keep that glow on his face so she said, "I don't suppose it would hurt to at least try."

"Thank you, my dove." He pulled her hands to his face and kissed them. She was embarrassed by it and pulled away. "You're leaving?" He hoped she would stay a little longer.

"I need to think about this... and about how I shall ever explain it to Molly Weasley." She glanced out the window again, and he realized that there was one other person she would ask.

Molly wasn't difficult about the tutoring program Severus began in Andromeda's cottage. She wasn't exactly positive on the subject, but she and Arthur were both pure-bloods, and they knew how difficult things might be for their own children if the situation were only slightly different. She didn't want to be part of it, and she carefully stayed away on the days when the students would be present, but she was not above bringing over an extra batch of biscuits or providing a sweater for one of the kids whom Andromeda thought looked cold.

Andromeda had also worried about Harry, but it seemed as though as the autumn began, he was busier than ever preparing for his Auror entrance exams. When he came to visit Teddy, it wasn't for long, and he was too tired to waste energy fretting over who Andromeda's other guests might be. He usually came with his friend Ron, and both boys usually sat in the kitchen and ate. The food only added to the palette of faces they could make at Teddy, who was old enough to enjoy their antics but wasn't able to do much else, yet.

Tim was displeased but knew better than to cross his mother on something like this. She was a Slytherin, after all, and he knew she was quietly loyal to her House. He recognized the value of helping the students, but he distrusted the fact that Professor Snape was involved. His main worry, that Snape would somehow dazzle his mother and leave her destitute, was not alleviated by this new scheme. Yet it seemed harmless, at least at the moment, and Mum was still clearly in control of herself and her home. He would continue to watch over her, and he would wait for signs of greater danger before he said anything again.

Draco, of course, was happy to renew the friendships with his housemates. He enjoyed having the opportunity to laugh and joke with others who shared a similar upbringing and the terrors of their teen years. Andromeda listened to him laugh one morning and decided it was worth the trouble if her nephew could be actually light-hearted for whole hours at a time.

The trouble came in the person of Hermione Granger. She was most displeased on the first morning to arrive and discover Tracy Davis flirting...*flirting!*...with *her* Professor Snape. She stepped back from the drawing room without being seen and stormed into the kitchen, where a placid Mrs. Tonks was laying out a tray of sandwiches.

"Who said those Slytherins could be here?"

Andromeda was taken aback by such a comment from someone who was, after all, a visitor in her home. She had wanted Severus's... guest... to feel comfortable, but this was beyond the pale. "I guess that would be me, the owner of this home, and as it happens, a Slytherin."

Hermione really looked at her hostess for the first time in weeks. Standing at her full height, which was an inch or two shorter than her own, Andromeda Tonks was not very imposing. Yet there was something in her eye and the set of her chin that told the girl she had overstepped. Suddenly she remembered that this witch was the sister of Bellatrix Lestrange.

She moderated her tone. "Oh, well, I guess I wondered why the children of Death Eaters would be in a house where the family fought against them."

"Precisely for that reason, Miss Granger," answered Andromeda. "They're learning how not to fall into the mistakes their parents made."

Severus put his head in the door. "Andromeda, they're ready for their lunch."

"I have it here," she answered. "Why don't you send them in?"

He went and summoned the students while Hermione stomped off into the still room. After seeing to the comfort of the visitors, Snape followed her there. "Is there a problem?"

"I thought I was special."

"What does that have to do with Gregory Goyle finishing his two N.E.W.T.s?"

"You don't understand."

"Then you will explain it." He stood with his arms folded, a look of displeasure on his face.

She struggled over the lump in her throat. "I thought you were working with me because I was, as you put it, a 'special case.' I thought I wasn't just 'any dunderhead.' Now you're working with all of those others." Why was it impossible not to whine when stating such a thing?

"So somehow preventing the waste of your contemporaries' minds takes away from the work you and I have done?"

"No..." Clearly he didn't get it.

"Is there something wrong with ensuring a future with less animosity between houses?"

"That's not it."

The line between his eyebrows got deeper. "Well, then, Miss Granger, suppose you explain the problem that caused you to walk into a house where you have only been treated with kindness and start spouting accusations."

"I thought I was special to you."

"You are."

"You don't treat me any differently than those other witches!"

"Don't I?" His eyebrows came together as he looked at her. "Have you been tripping over them every time you've visited? Were they allowed into my sick room? Have I been teaching them several times a week all summer?"

"No." She said it quietly, but her heart was slowly free of the lead weight that had fallen upon it. "No... Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry!" She threw herself at him and hugged him.

His arms came around her, but not as enthusiastically. He patted her back. "You're forgiven, but try not to jump to conclusions."

"I won't," she said.

"And you might apologize to Mrs. Tonks. She has a right to do as she sees fit in her own home."

"Of course! I'll do that right away." Her arms tightened and then he was released to go back to his class while she went to assist with the cleaning up in the kitchen.

Late that night, Andromeda passed his room and Severus invited her in. She leaned against the doorframe. "I'm sorry she acted that way," he said.

"I think it's the age," she smiled. "She's so close to being grown up, and she's mature for her age, but these little dramas will come and go. It's better to just ride them out. They'll fade as she gets a little older."

"Surely it's an event to anticipate with felicity."

Andromeda smiled. "She's a wonderful girl and she's growing into a wonderful woman."

"I'm quite grateful to the Grangers, to the Weasleys, and I think even to you."

There was an awkward silence. She needed to break it. "How did the lessons go?"

"I was able to establish what they each should do, and we set up a tentative schedule. There won't be more than three here at any time, and that only on two days per week."

"That's fine, Severus. I rather like the sound of them in the house."

"You're an incredible woman, Andromeda Tonks. Ted Tonks was a lucky man."

He was looking at her intently, with those glowing eyes she had admired just a week before. In lieu of an even more awkward silence, she chose to leave the room.

Thank you for reading and reviewing! Thank you especially to Trickie Woo for beta-reading!

Bodies in Motion

Chapter 7 of 24

Men she had known as boys danced with her, and their wives and sisters welcomed her back to the world she had not known while in her self-imposed exile. She smiled, chatted, and even flirted a little, enjoying a freedom she had never known even as Andromeda Black.

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There was a ball to celebrate the first fall of Lord Voldemort on the anniversary of that event. Days before the dance, Hermione sat in Andromeda's kitchen and told her all about the dress robes she'd had made specially for the evening. This would be an important night in her estimation, a night when she would be viewed in a different light than before.

"I'm staying at the hotel for the night, so I'm having my hair done in the hotel's salon and dressing before the ball right there in my room. It's going to be perfect."

Andromeda watched the lights come and go in the eyes of the younger witch and remembered dressing for one particular wizard, whose lips had always smiled when he saw her. It was better not to follow that train of thought. "I'm sure that whoever he is will be suitably impressed."

Hermione, who was still really a girl, looked wistful. "I hope so. What if he isn't?"

"Then maybe he's not the right one."

"He has to be! We're perfect for each other!"

Andromeda patted the younger witch's hand. "It will be fine, I'm sure. I can't imagine a lovelier sight than you're going to be next week."

Hermione looked up and nodded hopefully. "He can't help but notice. He *has* to notice."

During the weeks leading up to the ball, the occupants of Andromeda's house discovered that very few Slytherins had been invited to the event. Severus was invited because he was considered a hero while Andromeda was invited as the wife and mother of heroes. Draco was invited along with his mother because she quietly enabled Harry Potter to win the final duel with Voldemort.

However, none of the other students Severus was working with was included on the guest list. Their parents were also excluded, as were the parents of nearly all the Slytherins who had returned to Hogwarts that autumn. Severus was surprisingly philosophical about it, having long since become accustomed to subtle and overt slurs from those who disapproved of Slytherin House. Andromeda was enraged.

"Don't make waves," said Narcissa under her breath. "We need only to outwait them, and it will be our turn again. They won't keep us down forever."

"How can we go if the others aren't included? What sort of message are we sending?"

"Well, well, well," Narcissa said. "You rejected us all those years ago, and now you want to be part of the House and the family all of a sudden?"

Andromeda opened and shut her mouth.

Narcissa laughed cruelly. "Take advantage of being on the right side, dear sister. You're sure to be on the wrong side again, soon enough."

Severus explained it to her differently. "If we stay where they see us, they'll know we're here, and they'll know the others are here, too. It's a strategic advantage for everyone if those of us who were invited go."

She couldn't decide whether she should go or not. On the evening of the event, several of Severus's students arrived and told her they would take care of her grandson. "Maybe you'll get your picture in the paper," one said. Another of the girls all but pushed her up the stairs.

There was nothing to do but look through her closet for something to wear. She finally found, near the very back, a dress robe her mother had forced upon her while putting together the trousseau she had been expected to need as Rabastan LeStrange's wife. Druella had called it "a lovely little black number." Ted hadn't liked it so she had never worn it.

Ted had always encouraged her to wear colors, and Andromeda had not cared for black as a young bride, either. She wasn't a young bride anymore, and the color was appropriate for her new state in life while the cut and length of the dress were suitable for tonight's event.

There was really nothing else, so she dressed and put her hair up; when she finished, she thought she might look acceptable. When she came downstairs, Draco whistled under his breath and looked away. Severus just stared at her for a moment that lengthened and became uncomfortable.

"I didn't know you could look like that," he said before preceding her to the fireplace. Andromeda's heart sank, but there was nothing that could be done. She couldn't do anything but follow Severus since Draco was following her.

The ball room of the hotel was magically altered to accommodate everyone who wanted to come. Several hundred witches and wizards were there.

Severus claimed Andromeda's hand as soon as the dancing began. She accepted, seeing that Hermione was paired with Ron Weasley to lead off. "Have you thought about the request I made the night I restored my memories?"

"What's that?" she responded with a smile.

"I want to court you."

"Ah..." She was a little surprised, but then decided he was flirting and played along. "I could have sworn you had other interests."

"I have many interests, but you're the woman I imagine holding in my arms at night."

"Go on!" she said in smiling disbelief. "Now I know you're just making talk for the sake of the dancing."

"Think what you like," he said, a little annoyed.

He didn't speak again for the duration of the song. Instead he held her captive with his eyes, fixing her gaze back to his own and holding it tight. Unbidden, she remembered her nights in which the dream lover, who had recently grown black hair, kissed and caressed her. Severus smirked as he looked at her.

She couldn't account for his attention. Narcissa was so sure that he would want to marry the other witch. Yet every time they were alone, Severus seemed interested in her. Even now, the position of his hands wasn't quite as proper as it should have been. The hand that was supposed to support her back was at her side. It was innocent enough, but his thumb... How could something as inconsequential as a thumb wreak such havoc upon her? It brought her back to the question at hand. Was he looking for a witch to while away the months before he could begin a proper future?

As she looked into his commanding visage, Andromeda had the sensation of being touched from her shoulders to her toes and back again. Severus's smirk became a smile as her own emotions became confused and yet eager. She wasn't sure how well she was breathing by the time he gently saw her back to the side of the room and kissed her hand.

"I'll be waiting," he whispered as Hermione walked up to claim a dance. He smiled and led the young witch back to the dance floor. Andromeda watched, telling herself how lovely they looked together. Then wizards she hadn't seen in years came to request dances from her.

Suddenly Andromeda felt like a belle of the ball. Men she had known as boys danced with her, and their wives and sisters welcomed her back to the world she had not known while in her self-imposed exile. She smiled, chatted, and even flirted a little, enjoying a freedom she had never known even as Andromeda Black. Through it all, she was somewhat conscious of a pair of dark eyes that were always aware of just where she was in the room.

Severus danced with the witches who seemed to expect it. A surprising number seemed attracted to him, but perhaps it was the new Order of Merlin medal that gleamed with his attire. Andromeda had smiled teasingly when Minerva had called him forward. It seemed that she had known, and certain decisions about which dress robes he would purchase and wear were made for him by the Black sisters in advance. He saw her now, in the arms of some US Ministry representative, and wanted to blast the man.

He looked over at Hermione and watched her dancing with the Finnegan lad. She looked up and saw him watching her. Her whole face lit up, and she waved. He smiled and nodded in response and found that he had to beg pardon of the matron he was leading... Madam Clearwater, maybe?

Later, he found himself dancing with Narcissa. He'd had more fun than he expected, yet something held him back from enjoying it fully. His partner was smiling and prattling on about Andromeda's success this evening. It was something he found more than a little irritating. She pointed out that Andromeda was dancing with Kingsley Shacklebolt at the time. "Wouldn't that be something?" she asked. "First Lady of the Ministry of Magic!" Severus's face fell like a thundercloud.

At the same time, Hermione's joy in the evening knew no limits. Severus had been most complimentary during their dance. He was almost cheerful as he looked around the room and then back at her when they danced. It seemed her hopes were moving forward. Surely he understood that they belonged together. She watched as he danced gallantly with the older witches and thought to herself that she only needed to bide her time. She was unprepared when his face became so angry. He eased Mrs. Malfoy to the side of the room and walked away before the song was over. He stalked out the door, and Hermione made out the sound of Disapparation.

From then on, the ball lost some of its energy for her, but it was still glorious, and Hermione never lacked for dancing partners. She was complimented and praised by everyone who stopped to talk to her. Andromeda's funny Squib son danced with her, and at one point even Draco Malfoy asked.

He brought her to the floor and lightly led her into the flow of couples. "Why did you ask me to dance with you?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Would you believe me if I told you that you're the loveliest witch here?" he asked snidely.

She sniffed. "I'd like to believe that, but it wouldn't be true. There are several young women here with much more classically beautiful..."

"Never mind," he sighed.

"So... why?" She was genuinely curious.

"My mother wants me to be seen dancing with you. I'm supposed to make you laugh and to generally be seen as a friend to all people."

Hermione could barely stifle a snort. "You're kidding, right?"

"Making you laugh: check. It will *look* correct if it isn't exactly what was wanted."

"So why does your mother want it to look like we're friends?"

He laughed a little unkindly. "Can't you imagine?"

She thought for a minute. When it came to her, she gasped and shook her head, but she could see from Draco's nod that it was all about currying favor in the correct circles.

"What are you doing outside, Aunt Andie?"

"Hm?" She felt him put her warm wrap around her. "Oh, thanks, Draco; you're back from the ball, then? I was just looking up at our big, awful family."

He looked up, too. "Who's up there?"

"Everyone, tonight." She turned her head and smiled. She nodded at one set of stars. "Look at you up there, minding your own business. That's the best thing for you at the moment. I'm right in the middle, chained to that damn rock, waiting for my doom, with Daddy and Uncle Orion on either side to make sure I don't escape. Ted's going to rescue me, though... I think... somehow. And with Uncle Orion we have Sirius and Tri...ixie."

He heard the break in her voice. "I thought you were glad that Aunt Bella was dead."

"Not exactly, although I guess my sense of justice is satisfied. Yet I'll always mourn Trixie."

"I don't understand."

She shook her head. "I don't either, but I remember her, more even than Mother and Daddy. She was always there during my childhood, usually playing a mean prank on me, but sometimes she was sweet. She was my big sister, and she taught me a lot. She showed me around Hogwarts, and even if I made some choices specifically to be different from her, she had that much of an influence. I loved her, and I mourned when she went to Azkaban. For just a split second when the Dementors came, she looked afraid, and I worried about her."

"I heard that you would have killed her if Mrs. Weasley hadn't done it."

Andromeda shook her head. "I couldn't kill Trixie... She was already gone. That Bella... that you knew... I could kill *her* in a heartbeat. She murdered my little girl..." Her voice broke and Draco almost couldn't stand the pain in it. He quietly put his arm around his aunt and she tilted her head onto his shoulder.

An hour later, there was a crack of Apparition just outside the garden gate. Neither really noticed it until a voice said, "I'll look after your aunt now, Draco."

"Yes, sir."

The young wizard stepped away from his aunt, who leaned up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "You're a comfort, Draco. I'm glad to have you here."

The boy kissed her cheek in return and went into the cottage. Andromeda and Severus stood for a while, watching Perseus chase his maiden across the sky a little longer. She finally sighed.

"You haven't been up and around that many weeks, and you danced for a long while this evening. Where did you go? Are you trying to wear yourself out?"

"I didn't think you noticed. You seemed quite occupied with all those wizards."

"They were simply being polite, just as you were."

"It wasn't good manners that questioned the status of your trust fund over the drink table and speculated about your fertility on the terrace."

"It's what pure-bloods discuss at their gatherings, Severus. Surely you know that by now. I didn't think many would be there, tonight?"

"It was just the Slytherin who weren't invited. Plenty of Hufflepuffs were there, even those who were complicit last year."

"So one house is going to be blamed for everything?"

"He considered himself the heir of Slytherin." They both knew to whom Severus referred.

"So Slytherin is the repository of evil?"

"We're receiving most of the blame."

She sighed. "If they were mostly Hufflepuffs, then the conversations would have been even worse. They pretend they don't care, but they all want a wife who'll help them at the Ministry. If you'd stuck around, you would have heard them mention the finances and likely fecundity of every pure-blood witch between the ages of twelve and sixty."

"It's never affected me before. It's never been about my witch, before."

She laughed, hoping to diffuse the issue. "Why would you consider me your witch?"

"I'm smitten by you, Andromeda, my dove. How can you fail to notice that?"

She couldn't let the conversation go on in this vein. It was time to change the subject. "I noticed enough to know that if you have a setback, it will reflect badly on me." She finally turned and looked at him. "Where did you go, Severus? Didn't you realize I would worry about you?"

"I don't want your worry."

"Is there something you do want?"

"You." He was going to insist on continuing the conversation he had started. "I wasn't just being polite, or trying to make small talk. I want to be with you."

"You could have chosen any witch there. You don't need to look at a frumpy housewife in a decades-old dress."

"I'm looking at the witch who attracts me every time I look at her, and especially tonight. I was struck by a desire to kiss you when you came down the stairs, right there in front of your nephew."

For some reason, it was sweeter than any compliment she had received that night. The sting she had felt earlier was completely erased. She found herself wishing that she could accept his attention, but Narcissa and Hermione came to mind.

"You can't possibly mean that...I'm old, past it. You have a future to consider."

He didn't answer for a minute or two. "I've watched you, Andromeda. Every star-lit night you're out here with him. I didn't think sex was possible after death, yet here you are, sharing your body and soul with a man who can't enjoy it. You're very much a living, vibrant woman, my dove. You have a future of your own."

Her lips twisted peevishly. "Stop calling me that. My Patronus is a nondescript bird these days."

"It's a dove, as gentle and soft spoken as you are." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I want you as my dove... in my hands... in my bed... however I can get you in my life."

She put a hand over her mouth and made a sound. "You can't seriously want me. There are others."

He shook his head. "Just one other. Tonight I went to her grave. The thirty-first of October wasn't all happiness." He swallowed hard.

Andromeda was moved in spite of her intentions and put her hand along the side of his face. "I'm so sorry."

He took her hand in his. "It was time to accept the reality that's existed seventeen years. I don't need her any more. I told her about you, and I think she approves."

Just as Ted seemed to approve. She shook her head to dispel the thought. "I can't, Severus, and you don't know what you're saying. You should be with someone young, someone with a future to give you."

"You have a future."

She turned away, still shaking her head. He stepped around her until he was facing her. He took her shoulders in his hands and held her still. "I don't care about the future. I've been living in some distant future or past for at least twenty years, maybe my whole life. I want to live now." One of his hands moved to her chin. He tilted her face up to his lips.

After a moment of torture...or heaven...she broke away. "I can't. It would be...I can't." She stepped backwards. He let her go, but the longing in his eyes was magnetic, so she turned and walked to the house without looking.

Outside Forces

Andromeda was bewildered but accepted that this was now part of her life. It was ridiculous to her, but it seemed to make Cissy happy.

Disclaimer: The characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Draco was glad to have the garden as an excuse to escape the house the next morning. Mother was gleaming with accomplishment when she arrived to gloat over Aunt Andie's many admirers. Professor Snape was in pain from so much exertion and from getting a chill in the nighttime air. Even from the garden, Draco could hear him roar at Mother to stop prattling on about Aunt Andie's prospects. If he strained his ears, he could make out Aunt Andie. She would either be trying to soothe Snape or remonstrate with Mother, perhaps both in the same breath.

Hermione arrived, looking fresh and smartly cheerful. Draco wanted her to stop so he could look for just a minute. "You don't want to go in there."

He was rewarded, but briefly. "Why not?"

"He's not feeling well and it's making him mad. Mother can't stop talking, and it's making him even madder."

"Maybe he won't mind me." She couldn't help saying it archly. She remembered certain looks exchanged across the ballroom the night before.

Draco shrugged as he trimmed a vine and tied the remaining branch to a trellis. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Hermione walked down the hall to Snape's room and heard Draco's mother say, "Well if you're going to be so rude, Severus, I'll leave and then you'll have one less visitor while you're not feeling well." She flowed out of the room. A minute or two later, a door of the house closed.

"Good riddance. Why did she have to come, anyway?" he muttered. "And why is she constantly trying to marry you off to someone?"

"It's the family past-time, Severus, to play matchmaker to unsuspecting pure-bloods. You're lucky to only be half."

"You don't need a matchmaker."

"Of course not. One match to a customer."

"Just one?" Andromeda had finally gotten him under the covers, but now he raised up on an elbow.

"You're making yourself crazy. Calm down."

"I don't want to calm down. I want to finish the discussion we were having last night. I need to know..."

Hermione looked over at the bed, where Andromeda was finally succeeding in fluffing Severus's pillows and smoothing his bedclothes over him. She was speaking calmly and soothingly to him. "I've got a potion that will help you rest and that's all you really need right now."

"I need *you*."

"I'm right here, Severus, and look, Hermione is here to visit."

"Why didn't you say so?" came petulantly from the bed. Hermione took that as her cue to move forward.

"I'm here, Professor."

"Oh... Hermione..." He tried to sit up and look full of energy, but it was easily a losing battle. "What were we working on?"

The girl looked at the older witch helplessly. Andromeda quickly said, "Severus, I think you were planning to take a day off today... perhaps read the paper and chat together?" She handed the professor a small glass with a pale rose-colored potion in it.

"Hm, I think you're right. That's what I recall," he said. He took the glass and drank its contents. As he handed it back he smiled up at Andromeda and quietly said, "Thank you, my dove."

Andromeda patted his hand and stepped away from the bed, saying, "I'm sure Miss Granger can tell you all about what happened at the ball while I clear this away. I'll bring the newspaper when I return."

As she passed by, she saw the slight frown on the younger witch's face and whispered. "He's so unwell that he doesn't know what he's saying. Just start talking. I expect that he'll be asleep by the time I get back. I'll bring the newspaper just in case."

When she peeked back in the room, Severus was asleep and Hermione was watching him. "He went right to sleep, just like you said. What was he saying? What were you talking about last night?"

This was the question Andromeda had hoped to avoid. "We talk about a great many things, I'm sure," she prevaricated smoothly. "I imagine there's something that stuck in his mind and tomorrow he won't even remember. You were just as lovely as could be last night," she said by way of additional misdirection.

"Thank you! I thought you were quite good-looking, yourself. All the older wizards seemed to think so. They made quite a mob around you."

Andromeda laughed. "Perhaps. Some were old friends who truly wanted to get reacquainted. Others probably thought I was Trixie, back from the dead. Still others probably want to see the balance sheet of the Rosier trust fund that comes to me."

"You can't be too suspicious, I suppose."

"Unfortunately, no."

Hermione sat quietly for a minute, clearly debating something within herself. Finally a side won. "Why did he call you his dove?"

The answer was a rueful snort. "It used to be my Patronus, but now it's just a fuzzy bird. I think calling me that is his way of mocking me. I'm not as talented a witch without Ted. Nymphadora lost her morphing abilities right after Sirius died, when Remus wouldn't talk to her. I guess it's in the family to lose control of our magic when we're unhappy in love."

Something else bothered the younger witch. "Why was he so much better yesterday and now so poorly again?"

"Poppy thinks that he was feeling well enough that the excitement of the event allowed him to pretend to feel perfectly fine. She said it will actually be a few more months before the effects of the snake venom completely wear off."

"Is he going to be like this for a while, now?"

"No, Poppy just thinks he's suffering a little bit of a setback from too much exertion. In a few days he'll recover to about what he was like before the ball, and he'll continue to improve from there."

Andromeda watched confidence return to the other witch's face and felt relieved. She had no idea what Severus really wanted, but she felt a guilty need to protect Hermione from hurt. Whether his attentions to her were sincere or simply a means of passing the time, she would deflect them as much as possible so that the future Narcissa had outlined might proceed.

Madam Malfoy was greatly heartened by the attention generated by her sister at the ball, and she began her campaign that week. She brought an eligible wizard every couple of days to have tea. For some reason no one could quite understand, she felt it was her duty to find an attachment for her sister. The bachelors had to be within a certain age range, pure-blooded, and with a certain amount of personal wealth. Of course, they didn't have to measure up to the Malfoy level. It might even be better if they didn't. After all, Narcissa wanted to keep her prestige within the family. Yet the men involved were expected to keep within certain parameters for a Black, even one whose first marriage made her a bit off-color.

Andromeda was already busy working with the Slytherin students, but kindly fed all these wizards their tea. She was assisted by the teens, who helped her fix sandwiches by the dozen, bake batches and batches of biscuits, and use the larger water kettle to brew all the tea necessary. After a word here and there with Draco, the students seemed to think it was their duty to help Mrs. Malfoy to straighten out Mrs. Tonks's life. Having been trained in pure-blood mating rituals since early childhood, this was a part of their world they could understand.

Andromeda was bewildered but accepted that this was now part of her life. It was ridiculous to her, but it seemed to make Cissy happy. The extra cooking and baking really wasn't a problem, but at some point she would have to go to the cellar and assess the damage to Uncle Alphard's wine collection. She wasn't sure where Narcissa found all of these men. By the look of things, a few went far between decent meals. Perhaps whoever gave Narcissa hints about their wealth was not being completely honest.

The students were surprising. There had been some difficult moments along the way, when she had been accused of being a blood traitor. Then again, the students had felt annoyed by what they saw as an intrusion into their lives. They were good at looking for opportunities to improve their situations, however, and quickly realized that Severus and Andromeda could teach them things. Andromeda was particularly surprised and touched by the amount of time Millicent Bulstrode wanted to spend in her kitchen. She was particularly good at baking and surprisingly capable at knitting, once shown the rudiments of the skill.

Severus fumed at the entrance of the interlopers, as he thought of Narcissa's parade of bachelors. Fortunately, Andromeda gave no indication that she returned admiration to any of them. It was scant consolation, since she gave no indication that she returned his admiration, either. All he had to go on was the kiss they had exchanged in the garden under the stars. Since that time, she had been careful to ensure that they were never alone. Perhaps that was a good sign.

Hermione came on her visits and worried as she left. Her professor was as perpetually angry as her hostess appeared to be serene. Andromeda encouraged the young witch to spend time in the kitchen, which allowed Hermione to pick up household spells. She remarked once or twice upon Severus's anger.

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Andromeda. "Convalescing people tend to get angry when they feel ready to resume their normal life but their bodies aren't quite ready to back them up. In a few months, he'll be in a much better mood."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Poor Alastor was the same way as he recovered, in that very same room."

"Do you mean Mad-eye?"

Andromeda laughed. "Yes, although we knew him for a while before the accident that changed his name."

Hermione reflected that Andromeda must be old, if she knew Mad-eye Moody before his injuries. Somehow that thought was reassuring. She had started to pick up a certain sensation between Severus and Andromeda, but surely he wouldn't be interested in someone so motherly.

Of course, a mother would be useful. There was something else she wanted to talk over with someone. Maybe this was the time and place. "My parents say they want me to come for Christmas, after all."

The older witch's happiness was genuine. "That's wonderful news! Have you made your plans, yet?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm going for a whole month. I'm just sort of worried. What if it doesn't work out?"

Andromeda nodded sympathetically. "I know what you mean. It would be nice to have some plan for a way to smooth things over, wouldn't it?"

"If you think of something, let me know."

Andromeda finally got tired of her sister's endless line of eligible men and asked her to simply have one event to which she could invite several of the wizards she had in mind. "After that, nothing until the holidays are over, Cissy. This is exhausting."

Narcissa acquiesced. Andromeda had been accommodating and perhaps she would find a wizard soon. If not, there was always the new year. She planned the afternoon in question like a general marshaling troops for a major siege.

Narcissa brought her own house-elves over to help, despite the outraged cries of Andie's pampered Birdie. The house was decorated over Andromeda's outraged cries, and her cries became howls as her sister sent her up the stairs with new robes. An hour later, the younger sister walked through the dining room and drawing room, nodding to herself. Everything was ready. The house looked grander than it ever had, the food was perfect, and the guest of honor...Narcissa looked around and couldn't find her sister.

"Draco, go tell your aunt that the guests will arrive at any moment." She looked out the window. "In fact, a particular guest is already here."

The young wizard went up the stairs and knocked on the door. "Aunt Andie, mother says you need to come down now."

He heard a voice saying something like, "I don't think I can, Ted. No one could replace you."

"Here, let me try." Draco turned and saw who was standing next to him. He decided to go down the stairs.

"Andromeda Black, open the door this minute."

Behind his back he heard a muttering, an *Alohomora*, and a shriek as his grandmother breached his aunt's bedroom door. He didn't wait to see what would happen next. He had peeked around enough corners in his own home to know.

"Mother, I'm warning you..."

"Ah, my dear, don't you look lovely in that robe. You still have your looks."

"Mother..."

"Whatever happened to your birthday jewels? They would be brilliant against the black. I really should congratulate Narcissa on hosting this party."

"Mother, if you don't leave my bedroom, I'm not coming down."

"Yes, you are, my dear, because if you don't, I'll just send the richest of them up here, and it will all be over as far as society cares."

"You can't do that."

"Narcissa checked into it for me. It appears that even at your age, I have the right to arrange a marriage for an unmarried daughter. There's a gentleman coming who was a few years behind me at Hogwarts. A Hufflepuff of course, but then you seem to like them. At least his blood is pure."

"Mother, you wouldn't..."

Druella Black fixed her daughter with a stare. "I will do what must be done for the family, and if I decide that means you should marry Barnaby Fudge, then the contract will be signed." There was a silence and Andromeda waved a hand, opening the chest on her dresser. "That's my good girl. My, I'd forgotten just how beautiful this necklace is..."

Half an hour later, Andromeda was standing in the hallway. Her mother and sister greeted guests as though the cottage belonged to them. They flattered the mothers and sisters of the visiting wizards shamelessly and passed the wizards themselves on to her. Behind her back, she heard a running commentary.

"Have you ever seen anything quite so sad, Draco?"

"What do you mean?"

"If your mother and grandmother have their way, your poor aunt will be forced into an arrangement with one of these upstanding citizens. Look at that one. He's barely standing up as it is."

Draco snickered, causing his aunt to turn and give both wizards a glare.

"Aha, here comes one who supposedly has one of the largest vaults in Gringotts. However, it's said that his first wife was quite disappointed to discover his lack of assets on their wedding night."

Draco couldn't hold back the laughter until his mother turned and looked at him. He resolved to be better behaved, but Professor Snape had endless remarks to make, commenting upon every wizard who arrived to visit Aunt Andie.

From Narcissa's point of view, the party was a success. The wizards were all dashing and Andromeda was more charming than her sister had ever seen her. She wore sapphires that Cissy hadn't seen in twenty-five years along with a black set of robes that set off her pleasing figure. She sat where she was told and smiled gratifyingly. She poured the tea and kept the plates of the wizards filled. Narcissa sighed with relief. Her sister would soon return to pure-blood respectability and it would be to her credit.

The only trouble was Severus. He stood near the door and frowned at everyone, making snide comments left and right. Andromeda said his convalescence was difficult on him, but enough was enough. Narcissa finally encouraged Draco to take him to the garden. Both wizards looked to Andromeda for clemency, but she shrugged helplessly. With the disruptive influence gone, the afternoon progressed beautifully. When the tired Narcissa finally went home, she was delighted with the results.

Severus was tired of Narcissa's constant stream of eligible older bachelor wizards. He had grown tired of the way Andromeda slipped out of his room as soon as she finished a task. He was tired of the ache he felt within himself, wondering if she felt the same way. He decided to take a positive step forward.

After the visitors finally left, he sought her out and found her in the sitting room. "Andromeda, I would like to speak with you."

She looked up in surprise and a little apprehension as he sat next to her on the couch. He softened his tone. "What are you doing?"

She shrugged. "I just sat down for a few minutes. It's been so hectic, lately, with all the visitors."

"You can make it stop."

"Narcissa seems to think it's important, and my mother is threatening to sign a marriage contract on my behalf."

"Can she do that?"

She shrugged again. "Cissy says she can. It has something to do with an unmarried daughter."

"You've been married, though. As a widow, you should have your own rights."

"I can only hope."

"You should probably see someone who can advise you on the law."

They sat in silence for a while, and she sighed. "I wonder what it's like."

"You wonder what *what's* like?"

"I wonder what it's like to have a mother who just loves you, who lets you do what you want, not that she would spoil you, but who's supportive and... and..."

"Someone to rely upon?"

She nodded. "At least not someone I have to question, legally."

"I don't know, Andromeda, but I believe your children have known."

She turned and looked at him with a whisper of a smile on her face. "Thank you."

"My mother had too many of her own troubles to be that sort of person for me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. My dove, you've been that person for me since I've been here, but I confess I don't think of you as a mother."

She looked up in surprise. "Oh..."

One of her hands fluttered. He captured it within both of his. She looked at him again.

"Tell them you found someone. Tell them to stop bothering you." He brought her hand to his lips and then turned it.

She closed her eyes and let out her breath as he kissed the palm of her hand. "It wouldn't be true."

He held her arm gently as he kissed the inside of her wrist and started moving toward her elbow. "You've found me, my dove, and I've found you." She shook her head, and he chuckled. "You don't think so? Why do you tremble when I do this? Why do you sigh with pleasure?"

"Maybe I do, but it's just not possible."

"Why not?"

"You have a future."

"I have a present, and I intend to live it fully before worrying about some shadowy future."

"I can't..."

He reached her elbow, and wrapped an arm around her waist. "I want to make love to you, my dove. I want to bring you life and joy after all you have suffered. Let me be the one you can rely upon. Let me care for you. Let us share this."

Somehow she managed to put some space between them. "And then you will go when your future comes. Where will that leave me, Severus?" Her face was troubled. "I'll be all alone again. Cissy wants me to have a future of my own."

"With one of those men who keep talking about your trust fund and potential for childbearing?"

She sighed. "Where did you hear that now?"

"They talked a lot about it in small groups all over the garden. What would you tell me if I asked?"

She shrugged. "My trust fund is in good fiscal health. My potential for childbearing..." she shook her head. "Let's just say it's extremely doubtful." She sighed and looked toward one of the windows. "I guess I'm a good prospect for an aging widower whose many children are already fighting over his estate." She tried to chuckle, but it sounded like a sob. "I think I should adjust to being alone. I have Teddy to care for, after all."

His hands moved to slide back over her hips. "You'll never be alone if I have anything to say about it, Andromeda." He grasped at her in vain as she stood and edged toward the door.

"I can't, Severus. You should consider what you will wish to have done when your future does start. You should consider what the witch in your future will hope about you."

"My dove, I assure you..."

"Just think about it, Severus. It's more than just the pleasure of a moment or even some short period of time. It's your whole life."

He came upon her again that night, when she stood outside watching the stars. "I've thought about it."

"Then you know that it cannot be."

"I know nothing of the sort," he responded. He leaned down and tasted her lips. She was so surprised, she was unable to close her mouth firmly. As a result, she was kissed thoroughly. For a moment, she forgot. She only knew the joy of sharing such a moment with another person. She moaned and allowed it, allowed him to take glorious advantage of a weak moment.

The ache within her became unbearable. Oh, how she missed it. She wanted this, all of it. Something within her shifted and she threw herself in his arms, pressing against him, her body making promises that it longed to fulfill. He pulled her tight to himself and she rediscovered the joy of merging herself to him.

Except that it wasn't *him*. This wasn't her husband. This was a different body, different arms. The lips that kissed hers came from a different angle. It was the man who wanted to become her lover, but who had other commitments and could never be her husband.

She pulled away and covered her mouth with a hand. She counted ten before she was able to start breathing again. "I'm so sorry, Severus. I lost..." What did she lose? Did she lose control, her senses, her *mind*? She shook her head. "I wasn't myself. It won't happen again. I won't let myself forget that you have a future, and I must content myself with memories of the past."

She started to move away, but he put his hand on her arm. "It *will* happen again," he whispered. "You know it will. We can't be alone without it happening, and you know that. It's why you've been avoiding me. We want each other, Andromeda. If I tried to force the issue, you wouldn't refuse me."

She should say something, deny it, but the thought of his hands on her bare skin came over her in a wave. He was still talking. "I won't do that. I can tell that you're still mourning your husband. I'll wait, my dove. I'll wait until you're ready. It won't be long."

She turned and looked at him. She should say something, reassert her fidelity to Ted. She could only open and shut her mouth until she felt idiotic. Still searching for an answer, she turned and went to the house.

A/N: Thank you for such kind reviews! Thank you, too to Trickle Woo for beta reading!

Constant Velocity

Chapter 9 of 24

"My affection for her grows all the time. In time it will be clear why she matters so much to me..."

Disclaimer: The characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

A few days later, Hermione came early for her study session so that she could help with gingerbread and chat with Andromeda about her parents. "We're looking forward to

seeing each other again. I guess you were right. It's been hard for them to send me into the Wizarding world, and the rest of this upheaval has only made it worse."

"I've been thinking, what if someone came with you for the first few days, just to smooth things over?"

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Tim, actually, I've spoken to him about it, and he's willing. He knows Muggle ways and he has his dad's talent for charming people. If it didn't work out, he would be able to help you make arrangements to come home." She saw Hermione's face and changed it. "Of course your Ron is very charming, and you've said that your parents already know him."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "They barely remember me. I don't know if they'll remember Ron."

"Draco isn't familiar with Muggle things, but he's very good at charming people, too."

Hermione laughed. "Tim it is, if you think he would do it. I just don't want to impose. We don't know each other that well."

"He was eager when he realized it meant a chance to visit some warm beaches. Don't worry. It will be fine."

The two witches exchanged a hug, and the younger one got up to go to her lesson. The elder cleared up the baking supplies while the last few gingerbread men baked. She didn't know for sure if she was doing the right thing by helping Hermione go away for a month, but whatever was good for the girl would ultimately be good for Severus. Perhaps he would glower a little less because of it.

When the study session was over, both the professor and the student came to the kitchen for a biscuit and glass of milk. The mistress of the house greeted them with the requested refreshments and listened happily as the two discussed the young traveler's plans. In all, it was a pleasant way to end an evening.

After Hermione took the Floo to Harry's London home, Severus reached for Andromeda's hand. "I should thank you." She shook her head, and he continued. "My affection for her grows all the time. In time it will be clear why she matters so much to me..." He didn't have to explain; she knew. He looked at her for a minute before saying, "I take it as a personal favor to me that you're doing this."

"I'm sure you're both welcome," she responded in embarrassment.

"Not to mention, it was brilliant of you to arrange that we would have fewer distractions for a fair portion of the month." He leaned over to kiss her. He smiled as she tried to regain her breath.

Finally she answered. "It's not like that. It won't be..."

"Everything is coming together, my dove," he whispered. His lips softly touched her forehead, her cheeks, and her eyes. "Our time is coming, and you're helping it along." This time his lips touched hers, and he gently worked her mouth open to receive his tongue. He kissed her for several minutes and finally lifted his head to look at her.

"You seem a bit dazed," he said. "We can't have that. Young Mr. Lupin will be wanting an evening bottle soon."

She stood up, placing her fingertips over her lips, and made her way out of the room.

After she put the baby to bed, she went down to her still room. She needed to look over some materials and plan how she would use the plants that had recently been harvested. She was washing a cauldron and some measuring devices when she felt rather than saw or heard him come in behind her.

"Why won't you say yes?"

"I'm a married woman," she answered.

"I don't wish to belittle what you shared with Ted Tonks," he replied, "but you're a living, breathing woman, Andromeda. I've sensed the passion within you. I know you ache just as I do."

She hugged herself tightly. "No."

"I can tell that's a lie even without looking into your eyes, my dove."

"Please, I don't want to be someone's tawdry fling."

"This isn't some quick shag, Andromeda. I've felt you respond to me. I know that if I pushed just a little harder, our moment could come here and now. I'll wait because I want more than one cheap clinch."

She turned her head so that her chin was over her shoulder. "Wouldn't it be like that, anyway?"

"No," he purred into her ear. She turned her head, so he changed sides and whispered into the other. "We have a stronger bond than that."

"I can't..."

His breath was on the back of her neck and his voice was quieter than a whisper. "When you finally allow me to make love to you, I think I'll start here." She jumped as she felt his lips. "I'll kiss this tiny curl at the nape of your neck, and I'll nibble all along here." She felt him do exactly as he described, kissing her neck down to her collar. "And then, when I'm intoxicated by your essence, I'll remove your hairpins." She heard the sound of the pins hitting the counter top next to where her hands were clutching the edge for dear life. She felt her hair tumble down around her shoulders, burying his head.

"After that, I'm going to slide my arms around you and pull you against me." His left arm was around her middle as his right hand held her lower belly, pulling her whole body against his. "We'll continue from there." Her mouth was dry, and her head leaned back against him, almost of its own accord.

He judged the moment wasn't quite ready, so he took a step back and turned her into his kiss. It was a hard kiss, quite passionate, yet as it continued, she felt him pulling back. He softened it until it was almost chaste. When she opened her eyes, Andromeda found that she was standing on her own two feet and his fingertips were barely touching the sides of her face. He pulled the rest of the way apart from her and tapped her lips with a finger. "Good night, my dove," he said as he stepped out of the room.

She had to sit down in the closest seat. She leaned on the workbench and pressed her face to the surface. Did he know how close she was to letting him do just what he described? Did he know how she ached to feel a man's touch, how much she desired his touch?

When she went to bed that night, she stopped beside his door and lifted a hand. What if she tapped on the door? What if she let him make love to her? What if she made love back to him? What would Ted think? She could hear Ted's voice in the back of her mind. *I said from the beginning that if it doesn't work out you could find someone else.* She choked back a sob. Surely he didn't mean something like this. It had worked out beautifully for twenty-five years after all. She just couldn't...not tonight.

Her dream lover came to her that night. He kissed her until she was dizzy. She allowed her head to fall back, and he kissed her neck and chest, leaving her to hope he would continue. Then he started working at the buttons on her nightgown, his hands touching her everywhere as he moved down her body...

She sat up, her chest heaving. How did she come to this pass? She was a grandmother, for the love of Sal. This man had stumbled into her life and set it on its end, where she teetered and tottered. He stood below her with open arms to catch her when...*if*, she told herself, *if*...she fell, but who would be there to pick up the pieces when he dropped her again to start his future with Hermione?

She was left sleepless for the remainder of the night as she fretted over the question. She didn't think she could make love with the man without falling in love with him. Yet he was clearly looking just to fill an interlude before he began the rest of his life. Could she knowingly allow herself to be nothing more than a nice memory for him?

She turned her pillow over and realized that the other side was already damp with her tears. The problem was that her heart was already attached to the wizard. *Oh, Ted*, she thought, *I wish you had the answer to this one for me.* She recalled her wedding night and how she had approached it almost as a business transaction. Ted had changed it, had changed her. He had insisted on making love to her until she enjoyed it as much as he did. After that, he had won her heart, and now she couldn't separate the action from the emotion.

Severus watched her as she brought his breakfast the next morning. "You don't look well," he observed. "Didn't you sleep?"

"What do you think?" she snapped.

His response matched his facial expression. "Ah, my dove, you need only say yes and I will promise you sweet dreams every night."

Her face crumpled as she laid out the various plates and cups on a side table. "And how will I sleep after you leave me for your future? What will become of me after that, and what if I become...attached...to you in the meanwhile?"

His hand on her wrist was gentle as he held her close. "Andromeda, who says I plan to leave?"

"Don't you? They've all left for one reason or another. All I've got left is that baby, and it won't be long before *he* leaves me, too." She sighed. "It's probably no more than I deserve. It's what I did, after all."

"That was completely different." He tilted her face over to meet his lips. The kiss was just a whisper. "I don't want to hurt you, Andromeda. I just want to share moments with you that we can both enjoy."

The kiss she gave him in response was much more passionate. Something deep within her opened and flowed out. She wanted him in every way possible, and not just for an interlude. She knew she would be hurt; it was clear from what he had just said that Severus could not want more than a few months at the most. It was impossible for her not to be hurt now. At some point during the previous night she had become attached to him. What difference would it make if she gave him her body?

He felt her acquiescence and kissed her, still softly. "Ah, my dove, what we will share together..."

He lay her back into the pillows as he continued to kiss her, his hand creeping across her waist and pulling her close. More than anything he wanted her to feel safe with him. Given the way she clung to him as he pulled their bodies closer together, he knew this was right.

She opened her eyes for just a moment to look into his. She traced his face and looked at him. "Please be kind to me. I worry about what will come after..."

"You will not suffer at my hands, for any reason," he promised.

She turned away and stifled a sigh. It was clear that he didn't understand. She didn't have time to think about it, because the full force of his passion was turned on her during the next kiss. Her lips would be sore from the pressure, she thought. He kept kissing and kissing her until she sighed with delight, her worries momentarily forgotten.

He was gently working the fastenings of her robe and kissing her eyelids when the sound echoed

through the house: the front door bell. Andromeda jumped up as though stung and readjusted her clothing. "That will be Hermione and maybe Harry. I believe I should go." She looked at his breakfast, lying forgotten on the table. "I'll bring you some fresh coffee, too."

She watched as the girl's face lit up on the threshold of Severus's room. When she came back with fresh coffee and an additional cup, she watched the two talk excitedly. She withdrew down the hallway, toward the still room. She remembered what had nearly happened the night before in that room and continued to the kitchen. Perhaps she should see about dinner.

She stood watching the garden through her kitchen window for a long while, forgetting the time until a clock's chime reminded her of her housewifely duties. She wasn't a housewife, she reminded herself, and then thought for a while about what the proper term would be. She finally decided she didn't know.

She remembered, when she was peeling onions, that an affair with Severus would hurt his future wife. She couldn't do that to Hermione. Andromeda put down the onions and looked unseeingly into her back garden. She remembered his hands on her and imagined them going farther. Then she imagined him sneering his goodbyes to her as he left with his young bride.

She didn't know how long she stood there, but it must have been a couple of hours. The shadows shifted a little bit and a clock in the hallway chimed an hour. The next thing she knew was Severus's hands on her shoulders and his lips on her neck.

"I think she grows on me more with every visit, but I couldn't wait for her to leave this time. Where were we?"

Andromeda used a dishtowel to wipe her eyes, and she turned and spoke overly brightly. "We were going to do something terrible, but fortunately we were interrupted." She put a hand on his cheek and said, "I do want it, Severus. I can't tell you how much. If we give in to our desires though, we would regret it eventually. It would hurt too many people."

He took her hand in both of his and brought it to his lips. "Andromeda, how can anything like what's between us hurt anyone?"

"How can you ask that?" Those stupid onions were still making her tear up. "If you don't care about how this affects anyone else, Severus, please think of me. I do believe this thing has the power to destroy me utterly."

He pulled her close and held her. "I won't let that happen."

She pulled back away. "I don't see how you can prevent it. If we start... I know that I'll probably fall in love with you." There wasn't any value in mentioning that she was most of the way there already.

Her whispered comments had an effect on him. "Do you have any idea what your voice does to me? Have you any idea how much I want you?"

She thought of the ache in her own body and wrapped her arms around her middle. "I think I can guess."

"Why would falling in love be so awful?"

"Because eventually the affair would have to end."

"Who says it must end?" He reached for her.

She looked up at him in horror at the thought of continuing after he was...she pushed away. "You can't mean to... I can't possibly... It would be wrong..."

She escaped from his grasp and ran up to her bedroom. Vestiges of the snake's venom that had settled into his joints made stairs still difficult for him. It took him several minutes to follow her, but eventually she heard him scratching at the door. "Please, my dove, tell me what worries you. I assure you that I have no intention of seeing you hurt."

"Damned Slytherin!" she hissed to herself. "He'll say anything to achieve his goal for the moment." Louder she said, "Please leave, Severus. One thing that is sure is that it won't happen in this room, where my husband and I shared our marriage. Please... go..."

She heard him make his way down the stairs and into his own room. A part of her knew she should go down after him to look after his comfort, but another part of her knew that she put herself at risk if she did so. Another part wanted desperately to go down the stairs and help him into the bed as a prelude to joining him, but the loudest part of her couldn't face the possibility that he would hurt her. She knew he wouldn't hurt her on purpose, but the thought of him carelessly tossing her aside was almost as bad as that of him doing so with malicious intent. Worst of all was the thought of him leaving her sadly, well aware of the pain he was causing. She didn't want him to regret her.

In the midst of this indecision, the baby cried. She was grateful to have a duty to attend. She made her way to the nursery to change a diaper and prepare a bottle. Within an hour she and Teddy were ensconced in the sitting room. The child went to sleep against his grandmother's chest. In that position, after a night of scant sleep, there was little for her to do but fall asleep, too.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading!

Fragile Inertia

Chapter 10 of 24

She knew the strength of the passions between them, but tried daily to forget it. She had gotten into the habit of letting him kiss her as they parted for the night. She knew it was wrong, but told herself that allowing this small liberty was a way of avoiding a major catastrophe. The fact that she enjoyed it was something she ignored but couldn't quite escape.

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Severus and Andromeda went to the airport early in December to see Hermione and Tim onto their airplane. Dressing for Muggle situations always made Andromeda feel awkward, but somehow this situation was more so. She decided upon a rather sedate black dress in a jersey knit. She told herself that it was warm even if it did accentuate her figure. She told herself not to notice how good Severus looked in a black jumper and jeans of the same color. The kids, of course, looked perfectly normal in blue jeans and colorful jumpers of their own.

They made their way to the departure lounge, pushing the baby in his Britax and chatting about various things. They might be any family group dropping off some relatives traveling over the Holidays. When the time came to part, Hermione clung to Severus until he gently pushed her away, and then the young witch gave Andromeda directions.

"Make sure he eats properly, and see if you can cheer him up."

"I'm right here," he growled, "and I'm not a child who needs to be managed."

Hermione ignored him long enough to pull Andromeda close and whisper in her ear. "And keep those Slytherin girls from flirting with him!"

Andromeda's eyes turned to circles, and she spluttered out something she hoped was suitable as she nodded. The girl smiled brightly and showed her ticket to the agent. Then she waved and went through security.

Tim pulled his mother into a last hug and said, "I love you, Mum. Look after yourself until I get back and can do it properly."

"Oh...you!" She laughed and pushed him toward the agent. He waved one last time, too, and barely turned around again before the tears finally escaped Andromeda's control.

"He'll be back in two weeks," said a voice right next to her ear. Severus had come up behind her and slipped an arm around her. She had snuggled into him without realizing it. How had these touches become so natural to them? She stepped away and turned around, reaching for the handles of the pushchair.

"I just don't know about these Muggle forms of travel."

"The train was invented by a Muggle, you know, and you've ridden the Hogwart's Express."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Severus. The feelings of motherhood go beyond rational thought, and you'll simply have to accept that."

"I'll accept anything that comes with you."

She looked up into his face, wondering how she would manage the next week and a half without succumbing to those eyes, that voice, or those hands.

"Look at that baby with the turquoise hair!" said a man walking through the airport. "I can't believe they would dye a child's hair so young."

"Yes, well look at his parents," said his wife with a sniff. "The whole family are weirdos."

Severus and Andromeda looked at Teddy. He had pulled his hat off and was chewing it happily. Then they looked at each other.

Severus brushed Andromeda's arm. "Don't worry. You look quite elegant. I think they just don't like the color. People are suspicious when they see a lot of black."

"It's not that." She looked up at him in mortification. "They thought we were Teddy's parents, that we're... *lovers*. I'm sorry."

His hand moved to the back of her neck. He caressed under her ear and down to her chin. "Don't be ashamed or embarrassed, my dove."

She knelt to fix the baby's hat. "I know that you have other plans."

"How do you know that?"

"Narcissa says..."

"Andromeda, my dove, your sister never once asked me. If she had, I would tell her it's none of her business. It's a little awkward, having people think I'm Mr. Lupin's father, but it's not critical, and they're only Muggles, after all." He helped her up. "Besides that, why should I mind if they think we're lovers? It's my dearest wish."

She had to remind herself to breathe. It might be his dearest wish, but she knew it was only for the moment. Unfortunately it was becoming her dearest wish as well, but she wished for something far more permanent.

They worked their way to an unused concourse. Severus unfastened the baby and handed him to his grandmother. Then he folded up the pushchair. Both adults Disapparated, taking the baby and his paraphernalia with them.

There wasn't much to do in the weeks before Christmas. The students prepared for a holiday by finishing a few lingering tasks. They all came at their usual times, helping Andromeda and Birdie in the kitchen while they talked over various events.

Severus spent a day on Diagon Alley. Based upon some of the comments Severus heard between the students, he had decided to visit with a solicitor while he made a few purchases for the holiday. He then spoke with a contact at the Ministry and came back to Andromeda's cottage quite concerned.

"You need to move the bulk of your money," he told her. "Can you transfer your trust fund?"

"I believe I can. Do you really think I need to?"

"I've heard some things. Do you mind giving me a breakdown of your finances, the approximate value of the house, and your various sources of income?"

She outlined it for him, and he made some suggestions. "I believe this portion would be safer at Gringott's Helvetica."

"Zurich?"

"Berne. I've heard Lucius say that so many use the bank in Zurich that if someone wanted to find the money, that's a place they would look. The tellers there are a little too easily bribed nowadays."

"If you think I should..."

He was a little surprised that she would act so quickly on just his word. "Do you trust me so much?"

"Yes." It was a little awkward to have it out there like that, so she hastened to add, "Besides, I've heard Narcissa say some things, and all those bachelors that keep coming have spoken about moving large sums of money abroad. Will it save us? I have to consider Teddy, and there's Tim's legacy from his father."

"Tim should be fine. They're hammering out language that will protect him. Most of the pure-bloods will use methods they've had for generations to protect their funds. It's you I'm worried about, my dove."

She considered the situation and looked at him. "Do you think this will work?"

"If what I have heard is truly going to happen, I think it's the only possible way to protect yourself."

She nodded. "How shall I do it, then?"

"I spoke with one of the goblins today. If you wish to proceed, you need only ask for him, and he will set the accounts up as he and I discussed. Then you will bring a certain amount of cash away from the bank as if that is what you intended all along. The transaction will be completely confidential. No one will know your true purpose at the bank, and no one will even know how much money was in your vault originally."

"Thank you, Severus." She couldn't resist touching his hand and squeezing it. "I'm sure I will owe you a great deal after it happens."

"I already owe you," he responded. He reached up to smooth a tendril of hair away from her face. "I feel so much for you, my dove, including an overwhelming desire to protect you."

She looked down, embarrassed, and saw their hands entwined on the table. She shook herself and stood up. "I forget myself. Please excuse me."

He stood as she did and wrapped his hand around her wrist. "It's nothing, Andromeda. When will you realize the power of what we share?"

She knew the strength of the passions between them, but tried daily to forget it. She had gotten into the habit of letting him kiss her as they parted for the night. She knew it was wrong, but told herself that allowing this small liberty was a way of avoiding a major catastrophe. The fact that she enjoyed it was something she ignored but couldn't quite escape.

It had started as a simple meeting of the lips before they whispered their good nights. He was always gentle to start and then more and more assertive. Within days it became an open-mouthed conversation that left her regretful yet aching for more. After a week, Andromeda went week-kneed. Severus pulled her into his arms to steady her, which allowed him to kiss her more deeply and allowed her to notice that her innocent diversion had all-too-real effects on both of them.

An evening came when she and Theodore Nott were making eggnog and talking together. Ted told her of his troubles with his parents, and Andromeda gave him a word or two of guidance. Then Ted shared his troubles with a girl he liked.

"She's so childish."

"At your age, it's common enough."

"I can't help but compare her to a real woman like you."

Andromeda was checking the consistency of the custard and didn't see the look in his eye.

"She wrote to me that since I'm Slytherin, her parents would prefer that she stick to her own house. Can you imagine? Worrying about her parents?"

Andromeda missed the intonation entirely and asked, "Which house is that, again?"

"Ravenclaw."

"They can be snooty at the best of times, you know. It seems worse these days, since we Slytherins are taking the blame for everything." Andromeda touched his arm to reassure him as she spoke.

"Oh, Mrs. Tonks, you seem to understand everything!" He hugged her tightly. "Do you have a boyfriend?" His face came all too close to hers, and she ducked quickly to avoid what she hoped wasn't a kiss.

"Ted..."

"Isn't it kismet that I have the same name as your first husband?" he whispered into her ear. "I'm sure I can take as much care of you as he ever could. Certainly I'd be better than one of those geezers Mrs. Malfoy wants you to marry."

"Ted, please..."

"Anything... may I call you Andie?"

"Ted, you flatter me greatly, but I don't feel that way about you."

"I'm sure you could grow to love me."

"Please understand. Not every friendship, not every kindness, not even every *touch* has romance behind it. I wanted to comfort you as I would my son..."

"But now we know it's so much more. Oh, Andie, Andie..."

At that moment, Severus walked into the kitchen. He didn't need Legilimancy to see Andromeda silently begging for help over the shoulder of his student. "Mr. Nott, please unhand Mrs. Tonks."

He finally let go and faced the angry wizard. "I'm going to marry her, Professor."

The look of annoyance that passed over Snape's face should have frightened the young wizard. It did worry the witch.

"I don't think so, sir. Why don't you look into my eyes?" The young man couldn't disobey his mentor, who quietly raised his wand. "*Obliviate!*"

Half an hour later, Ted had gone home, planning to write a note to the Ravenclaw he liked. Severus and Andromeda were left staring across the kitchen table at each other. She didn't know what to say. He spoke first. "You don't need a boy like that. You don't need anyone who isn't me."

She looked down at the floor. "I'm so embarrassed. I wasn't trying to attract him. Have I been forward with them?"

"You've been just as you should be. It proves what I've been telling you all along. You're a desirable, vital witch with a future of your own." He gently made his way around the table.

"But I'm not..."

Whatever she was going to say was lost in his lips. He had reached her and crushed her against himself. Now his mouth plundered hers, having learned many of its secrets over the course of the past weeks. He pulled her close and traced the curves of her back, but then allowed a little space in between them so that he could explore the neckline of her dress. He finally growled his impatience and dragged her toward his bedroom. She whimpered her reluctance, and he growled again. "You want this. You know you do."

She couldn't deny it. "Oh, yes... Severus..."

Once upon his bed, Andromeda found herself the recipient of attentions she hadn't experienced before. He whispered softly at the closures of her garments, and they seemed to fly apart. Then his lips returned to hers as his hands worked her arms out of first her robes and then her dress. Her own hands were unfastening his robes, and a while later they knew the bliss of lying together, skin to skin.

A moment of lucidity came to her. "I don't know..."

"I respect you, Andromeda, and I have the highest regard for you. Surely everything we've done together this year shows you that."

"But afterward..."

He kissed her temple as his knee worked between hers. "Afterward we will have even more to share. I don't want just your body, my dove. I want so much more."

"I..." whatever she was going to say was lost in a whimper as he found just the right spot to caress. Her lips searched for his as they begged him...for what she no longer knew.

He answered in the affirmative to all her requests in his kisses and touches. His eyes glowed, and she wondered to herself if he knew she couldn't resist him when he looked at her that way. Her arms circled his neck as she waited for him to remove the very last bit of her clothing.

Then there was a banging sound from the direction of the kitchen along with a great deal of swearing. Quick as a flash, Andromeda was out of the bed, Summoning her clothes from every direction. "It's Tim," she explained. "He hates to come by Floo, but it's really the only option this time of night."

"You'll come back?"

How could she say no, but how could she agree? "I think this was Fate. I'll try to stay out of your path for a few days."

"How can you just leave me like this?"

"How can I leave you as I am?" she returned. "Somehow I'll manage, and you have a bride to consider in a future that will come sooner than you think."

"I don't..." he said, but she was already gone.

The puffiness of her son's eyes decided her. Andromeda pulled out her wand and tickled the kettle into action. "What happened?" she asked.

"I came back early, because I missed Sophy." He swallowed hard and looked at his mother. "She was out with another student we know. He's been telling me for ages that he planned to steal her from me."

"Has he stolen her?"

"She's not a piece of furniture, you know." He sighed. "She said she still loves me, but it's hard, Mum."

"You've told her about us, right? She knows your family is magical?"

"She was here for the funerals, remember? She understands that part. I'm a Squib and all, but sometimes unexpected things happen in little ways. I had to explain it to her years ago."

Andromeda nodded. "You used to spend a lot of time with her before the war ended, didn't you?"

"I still do... just not as much. I have to look after you, now."

"Timothy Tonks! I'm a grown woman, you know. Ruin your life if you like, but don't blame *me* for it."

"A grown woman with a great many distractions right now. I don't want someone to take you for a ride, especially not that Snape person."

Andromeda lowered her face into the steam of her tea to hide her blush. "Your inheritance is perfectly safe, dear."

"That's not what I meant. I've never known my mother to have so many buttons on her robe mismatched before."

He caught her looking. She couldn't hide the blush this time. "Let's not delve into that, shall we? What shall we do about you and Sophy?"

"She says we never spend any time together any more."

"Well, that's easily fixed. Stop coming here quite so often. Once per week should be sufficient to look after your worries about me."

"What about Christmas?"

"It's going to be fairly quiet here. Draco is moving back to his parents' house on Christmas day. His mother says she can't do without him, but for some reason, he trusts Father Christmas here more than at Malfoy Manor."

"I'm having a big dinner with the Slytherin students on Christmas Eve, then breakfast with Draco the next morning, and after that very little. Suppose you bring Sophy around for breakfast, and then do whatever she likes the rest of the day?"

"Are you sure, Mum? That won't be like the Christmases we used to have with Dad and Nym..."

She patted his hand. "But it will be a far sight better than last year when I had none of you. We need to change along with all the things that are changing in our lives, dear. It's simply the way it is."

He stood and smiled. "Thanks, Mum. I'll ask Sophy and send you a note."

She sighed and looked at him for a moment. "You look so much like Dad when you smile like that."

He smiled more brightly because she mentioned his father and moved to the Floo. Shouting the name of a wizards' pub near the university, he disappeared into the flames, and she was alone. Just then, the baby cried.

"It never stops," she muttered to herself. Nevertheless, it was a relief to have a reason to shrug and pass Severus as he stood waiting outside his door. She waved the bottle in her hand and motioned upstairs. He could hear the child as well as she could and just rolled his eyes before moving back into his room.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading. I really appreciate the comments I've been getting in the reviews, too. You folks are very kind.

Stars are Blind

Chapter 11 of 24

After several days of constant cooking, cleaning, and decorating, Christmas Eve finally arrived.

Disclaimer: The characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

"Why are you torturing me this way? Why are you torturing both of us?"

She looked at him and barely remembered to put his breakfast tray down. There was a dressing gown, but he hadn't tied it. It was nothing she hadn't seen, but he was a different man than the one brought to her the previous May. He had eaten properly, and he was stronger. He didn't need her to do things like spoon his food into his mouth any more... or some of the other things. The thought of bathing him now was... Some of the china on the tray rattled although she was no longer touching it.

The glare in his eyes became a twisted smirk. "If it's causing unintentional magic, then perhaps it truly is affecting you." He walked toward her slowly so that he wouldn't startle her. He stood in front of her, and she still hadn't moved. He thought to himself that she was his for the taking. Her eyes looked nervous, but the way she stood was an open invitation. A gentle approach had brought her to this state; he would continue with it.

"My dove," he whispered. His hand paused just a whisper away from her cheek, as he thought about how best to proceed.

The smell of cinnamon permeated the room. Her hands rushed up to her mouth in dismay. "The baking!" She ran out.

He dressed slowly enough to enjoy his coffee but quickly enough to make it into the kitchen while Andromeda was still there. She turned from the oven as he set his tray on the table. Seeing that she was using the table as she worked, he chose the end farthest from the oven. It also gave him the best view of her. Tendrils of her hair came unfastened and stuck to her neck in the heat of her baking. She stopped moving to rest for a moment and caught him staring.

He busied himself with some toast and jam. "I really don't need breakfast in my room, anymore, although I admit I do enjoy having my coffee as I prepare for the day."

For some reason, Andromeda remembered the last time she had helped Severus to dress. *He was sitting on the edge of the bed. She knelt on the floor to slip his trousers over his feet and was sliding them up to his knees when she suddenly face to face with proof that his recovery had progressed considerably. She stood back up and said, "I guess you can take care of it from there."*

He leaned back on an elbow. "You never know, my dove. Perhaps there's some other way you could help me?"

She looked anywhere but his intense eyes or indeed at him at all as she had handed him his shirt and then the rest of his clothing.

She took a deep breath and put her attention back on the breads and rolls she was making. It didn't keep her from wondering if that had been the first time he had used that name for her. It was certainly around that time, she decided.

"Perhaps it was," he said, sipping his coffee leisurely. "I know that's when I became sure that we should be together. It was just one of the many delightful moments I've had with you."

She turned right around. She knew he was an expert Legilimens, and it wasn't the first time he had caught her out. Foolish witch! If she gave him control of her mind, she would never get through the holiday with an intact...What was she trying to keep intact, anyway? Was there virtue in aching so desperately for another man while remaining technically true to her husband? What would Ted say about that? His voice in her head was strangely quiet.

After several days of constant cooking, cleaning, and decorating, Christmas Eve finally arrived. Dinner was a success, and the students enchanted her with their efforts to entertain each other afterward. Severus saw them off in a jovial mood, and then Draco quietly wished them a Happy Christmas and went to bed. Andromeda went upstairs with her grandson.

It was difficult, getting Teddy into bed that night. He was overexcited from all of the Christmas activities. It was quite late before Andromeda had a moment to herself, when she put on her own nightgown. Following some whim, because it was Christmas after all, she wore a pretty nightgown with lace trim. She stared at herself in the mirror as she brushed her hair.

She didn't think she would ever be beautiful. She didn't have Trixie's full blown sensuality, nor Cissy's delicate loveliness. She did have a pretty enough face and figure. Ted had made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Severus had been openly desirous, but of course he was not a consideration. He might desire whom he pleased, but his future was with Hermione, according to Cissy. Andromeda would simply have to see if another wizard whom she could love would ever come to her cottage.

There was a terrible yearning within her tonight. Usually she could stave it off by remembering Ted's touches, but this time it wasn't working for some reason. Instead she kept remembering Severus's kiss under the mistletoe and the way she had laughingly pretended it was just a joke when the kids had looked at them. She couldn't close her eyes, for she would recall the look in his eye that had told her it wasn't a joke to him. What had he whispered into her ear as he deliberately snapped off some of the sprig?

Our moment is almost here.

There wouldn't...there couldn't...be a moment for them. Andromeda understood that it was hard to wait until the younger witch was ready, but surely he realized that it would be better if he did. He didn't really need to have a mistress for just the few months until the N.E.W.T.s were over.

Her hair crackled; she had brushed it too hard for too long. She set the brush on her dresser and turned toward the bed. There was only one pillow on it, one space where one body lay. When, exactly, had it become just her bed, no longer the one she shared with her husband?

The dream lover came back. He started by touching her through her nightgown and then slid a hand through where it had gaped open during the course of the night. He hummed delightedly as he traced along the edges, touching and stroking until her back was straining her body into his hands.

His mouth started to take action. He kissed and his tongue moved over her skin, raising goosebumps and her blood. He continued, suffusing a delicious heat throughout her entire body. A soft moan escaped her, and he chuckled as he loosened her nightgown, sliding it gently over her shoulders...

She came abruptly awake. He was haunting her day and night, now. There was only one way to escape him. She let herself out of the house and stood in the garden, looking at the stars. "Please, Ted," she begged, not sure what she was asking for. There was some comfort in seeing him up there, rushing across the sky to see her.

How long had it been since she had heard his voice in her head? She tilted to the side to look at the constellation again. Was he rushing away, instead? All this time, was Perseus moving away from Andromeda? Is that why he never caught her? She looked up into the sky, willing Perseus to turn his head and look at her, but the stars were blind.

Severus heard the house door open and close. She was going outside again. He went to the window and watched her stand there in an insignificant nightgown. The starlight was bright enough for him to see her form silhouetted against the sky. He put on his own robe and shoes. Then he went down to the mud room and found the shawl she often wore when stargazing. He quietly made his way across the lawn.

"Why will you never come back?" he heard. "Why must I be tortured with this ache? If you would just look at me..." He stood in indecision and then started to back away.

She sighed and spoke a bit more loudly. "It's all right, Severus."

He came forward then and covered her with the wrap, holding his hands over her shoulders. She shrugged into the comfort it offered and then looked back up at the stars. "He's never coming back, is he?"

There was no hiding the obvious. "No."

"He's gone." There was a pain in that statement that was hard for him to stand.

"Somehow I think you'll carry him with you wherever you go." He didn't need to explain why he thought that. She knew.

"It's not the same. Maybe it would have been better if my sister had killed me instead of just breaking my things. My life is over."

"No," he averred. "You are a vibrant and passionate woman, Andromeda. One part of your life has ended, yes, but another part can begin."

"Perhaps. All I know is that he's gone and I'm alone."

"You're not alone as long as I'm here."

How long would that be? She wondered. For over six months they had spent more time together than most married couples. She had looked after his needs, had entertained him, had sat quietly with him when both were engrossed in their own pursuits... He was right, she had not been alone during that whole time. He was so much to her already, and she would miss him when he was gone.

She sighed at that thought. If she allowed him to become even more to her, she would be completely lost when he left. Already there had been the day he had gone to Diagon Alley to do his shopping for the holidays, and Andromeda had wandered through her cottage unable to sit down, not quite at home without the need to do something for him. She turned to look at him again, and within that heartbeat everything was different, although nothing actually changed.

He watched her, wishing he knew what to do for her. He desired her, and he knew she desired him as well. He knew the pain of having lost a great love...to a point. He understood that her loss was greater than what he experienced in losing Lily. Just now she was the loneliest person in the world, and he begged the stars above to show him what to do to ease her pain.

Maybe she turned to slip away from him, or maybe he judged that the time had finally come for a small push. She made a movement toward the house, but he pulled her close and kissed her. It was only a moment, but it was long enough. He pulled away to search her eyes. Andromeda wasn't sure what she was feeling or what she wanted, but whatever it was must have been what he was looking for. She felt Severus's lips touch hers a second time, and her last conscious thought was that she couldn't get close enough to him.

She was vaguely aware of somehow making it into the cottage. There was a sort of movement into a bedroom and onto a bed. His hands were everywhere, doing the most exquisite things to her. She had the impression of a pleasure that spread through her entire body, followed by a sigh of delight that bubbled up and through her.

When she regained full awareness, he was shifting his naked body away from hers. They were in a bed...sweet Helga, don't let it be Ted's and hers! She quickly raised her head to see that it was Alphard's room and lay back in initial relief.

She looked at him and realized what they had done. She couldn't stop the tears as they started. "Andromeda," he said as he pulled her close and held her tenderly, "please don't cry, my dove."

"So much lost," she whispered. "My husband, my daughter, your Lily..." She wouldn't mention Hermione at such a moment, but she cried for the girl who had lost a small something this night, too.

"Oh, my dove, I'm sorry," he soothed her as he held her, letting her cry. It occurred to him that she was expressing his grief as much as hers. He kissed her and patted her hair as she cried. After a little while, her sobs quieted, and she tilted her head back to receive his kisses.

She changed in his arms, and he knew that she would receive his attentions again. He touched her hair and her face as gently as he could. She sighed and melted into him. He held her and roused her with delicate touches until her sighs became insistent. She spoke in breathy murmurings until one long, shuddering breath indicated to him that he had brought her bliss. He quickly followed as pleasure washed through him and into her.

She looked up at him with unreadable eyes, and he searched for a way to reassure her. "Thank you, Andromeda. I knew we would find something exceptional together." She didn't speak but instead curled into a ball. He put his arms around her comfortingly. She stiffened but then settled into his side.

Just before dawn, he became aware of the door to the bedroom opening for a moment and then closing again as her nephew, holding the baby, looked in on them and quickly stepped back out. Severus was so completely relaxed and at peace that it didn't seem out of place to him. He kissed her head and settled her more firmly against his chest. She whispered something unintelligible in her sleep and put her arms more closely around him. As he fell asleep again, he felt the greatest contentment he could remember knowing.

A/N: Again, thank you faithful readers for following this story. I do enjoy your comments when you have a chance to make them, so feel free to say what's on your mind. This has been beta read by the wonderful Trickie Woo.

Free Fall

Chapter 12 of 24

She put Teddy down for a nap and backed out of the nursery only to discover she had backed into the tall wizard's arms.

"At last," he whispered. He pulled her tight against his body, leaving her in no doubt.

Warning: Language

Disclaimer: The characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

She was gone from the room when he awoke to full light. She brought him his coffee with a trembling hand and her eyes cast down. She was as perfectly put together as ever, and yet something was off. He had the impression that the eyes he couldn't see were puffy and red.

"My dove..."

She gasped, and her cheeks flushed carmine. The cup rattled in its saucer. She set it down quickly.

In that instant, he knew that it meant something different to her than to him. He cleared his throat. "Andromeda, are you embarrassed about what happened last night?"

"I'm so ashamed," she moaned. "I haven't been widowed a full year, and now I've been un...unfaithful to my husband."

He clasped her hand and pulled her close. "Sit down so we can discuss this." She looked at the bed nervously and Summoned a chair. When she was seated, he continued, "You were completely distraught last night. Was it unfaithfulness or a desperate need for comfort?"

"I don't know," she moaned, wringing her hands and looking down and away. "Maybe I needed it, but, oh, if I could only have been true to Ted!"

"It was beautiful. *You...* are beautiful."

She shook her head and looked out the window. "I feel so dirty. I never even kissed a man until Ted at the end of our wedding vows. There's never been anyone but him for me in any way, until the night of the Halloween ball."

"So now you feel that I've destroyed or sullied something?" He leaned away from her. She'd learned enough of his body language to know that he was hurt by the thought. "There may have been good reasons for it, but you were abandoned and widowed, my dove. Your loneliness last night was a cloud that surrounded you. I felt you tremble within my arms, and I heard your sighs. I know that you experienced it fully. If I broke through your loneliness and grief and gave you a few moments of joy, I'm not going to apologize." He folded his arms and glared.

She thought about how best to explain. "*You* haven't done anything wrong, Severus. You did bring me joy, and comfort and... oh, such pleasure... In and of itself, it was wonderful."

He smiled a bit at that and lifted an eyebrow. She struggled to find the words to explain further. "But now I've become some sort of casual affair until the younger witch is old enough to marry you."

"I have no intention..."

"Please, Severus, I can't bear it, not today." She got up and rushed from the room.

They shared Christmas pleasantries and made the day merry for the child, but they were awkward with each other, and it permeated breakfast. Tim had brought Sophy

over for the meal, and Andromeda was overly cheerful in her manner to the young Muggle woman. She all but ignored the males present, with the exception of her grandson. Tim picked up an undercurrent between his mother and Snape. It gave him a reason to spend most of his time at the table glaring at the older man. Severus found the look of anger on the friendly Tonks face to be incongruous. He spent the meal stifling his amusement.

Draco alone seemed unconcerned as he ate his meal with the gusto of a still-teenaged boy. If the grown-ups' relationships were complicated, it was no better or worse than the Great Hall of Hogwarts most mornings. Such things shouldn't be allowed to interfere with meals. He left for his parents' house soon after breakfast.

After a heated exchange with his mother in her bedroom, Tim left, taking his girlfriend with him. This left Andromeda alone with Severus. She saw to Teddy's diapers and feedings and helped the child play with his new toys, but the day was somewhat flat for her.

Severus haunted her thoughts, only to appear before her in person at odd moments. When she needed to get a new bottle, he would appear without warning in the kitchen. When she wanted a diaper balm from her still room, he met her at the door of that room, holding the jar out to her. It wasn't odd or strange; Severus was aware of the child's schedule, and he himself had told her that she would soon need to replace the jar of cream in the nursery. She put Teddy down for a nap and backed out of the nursery only to discover she had backed into the tall wizard's arms. "At last," he whispered. He pulled her tight against his body, leaving her in no doubt about his desire.

"I don't know..." she whispered. She shouldn't do it again, or let him do it...what exactly had happened the night before? She shouldn't do it, but somehow her hands were reaching up and behind to circle his neck, and her traitorous body was snuggling closer to his.

"Yes, you do know," he responded. He kissed the nape of her neck as he once said he would and started unfastening her hair pins. He finished that task, and his hands pulled her close again. As his right hand pulled her flush against his own body, his left slid between the fastenings of her robe. He felt her go weak in his arms and said, "You want to make love to me as much as I do you."

She should deny it. She should tell him that he was mistaken and that she would never do such a thing, but it wouldn't be true and they both knew it. She turned in his arms. He pressed her against the wall and kissed her. It was wrong, and she shouldn't do it, but somehow Andromeda wasn't sure whether she was struggling to get away or pressing her body into his questing hands.

"Let me make love to you... properly."

She didn't hear the word that came from her mouth, but based on the look in his eye, she must have consented. He took her hand and led her down the stairs. They stopped to kiss outside his bedroom door when the door bell rang.

"Who could it be?" he asked against her lips.

"I have no idea," she answered. "I'll get rid of them and be right back."

He pulled her tight to himself as he kissed her one last time and then released her. "Don't be long."

"I won't."

When she got to the door, she saw it was her younger sister. She let her in and brought her to the sitting room. Narcissa didn't wait a heartbeat to swing her arm around and slap Andromeda's face.

"You *fucking whore!*"

Andromeda closed her eyes in shame and collapsed into the nearest chair, sure that whatever Cissy used to follow her opening would be equally vituperative. She wasn't disappointed.

"I should have realized that once you became a blood traitor slut you would just continue. I was taken in by all that sweetness and helpfulness. Do you know what you have done? I wanted you to provide him a haven to recuperate in. I expected you to help heal him. I expected you to send him back to the world where he could take his place among those who will govern. I didn't ever dream that my impressionable son would come home and ask me when *you and Severus became a couple!*"

"We're not...there was nothing..."

"Did my son not find you naked in Severus's bed this morning?"

Andromeda started to shake her head but suddenly went white with awareness. "I had no idea that he saw..."

"Oh, he indeed saw, big sister. He saw enough to assume quite a bit more."

Andromeda felt as though she couldn't breathe. "It was last night... the one time... I don't know what came over me. I know it can't last..." In that moment she knew she had to end it. After her sister left, she would have to simply pass his door and go into her own room, although everything within her yearned for...

"Word of this better not get out."

"I'm too ashamed; I couldn't tell..." It was whispered in mortification.

"Let's hope Miss Granger doesn't learn of this. One of the reasons I encouraged sending him to you was that I never dreamed you would...or *could*..." She twisted and looked her sister in the eye. "How *did* you manage it?"

"I don't think I did anything. I've tried to help, but he just started touching and then kissing me... Cissy, he's been relentless, and I've been so lonely. Couldn't we tell him about Miss Granger's interest?"

"Not him. He's so contrary that he probably seduced you just because I admired the way you and the Minister danced together. If you were truly reticent, it probably just drew him in."

"Oh," said Andromeda. It did make a certain amount of sense, but it stung.

"He's so contrary," Cissy continued as she paced in the room, "that if he knew she was interested, he would shag every woman ~~except~~ Miss Granger. He just needs to be left alone, and her youthful freshness and hero-worship will do the rest." Narcissa calmed down and looked at the face in front of her. It was turning green. "Are you all right, Andie?"

"It was just comfort," she whispered with a lost look in her eyes. "I miss Ted so very much, and Severus has been mourning someone, too. Oh, Cissy, he was so kind, and I miss my husband... but now I've lost Ted even more because of it. You can't possibly punish me more than... I deserve to be punished..." Andromeda slipped from her chair to the floor and buried her face in its cushions, sobbing.

The blond witch was almost at a loss for how to deal with this sort of passionate crying. She had experienced it one other time, when Bella had first escaped from Azkaban. She knelt beside her sister and smoothed her hair, speaking quietly.

"I'm sorry, Andie. With everything going on, Lucius and I will still at least have each other when he's released from Azkaban. You're still young... It would be good for you to have a wizard of your own. I'll keep looking; I'll help you find someone suitable. Just... please not Severus."

"And why not Severus?" The wizard in question was standing in the doorway.

Andromeda looked up in distress as Narcissa looked up with guilty awareness. "How long have you been standing there?"

He walked into the room and lifted Andromeda to her feet. "Since you told her she could have anyone but me." He put his hand under her chin and examined the red mark on the side of her face. "Did you hit her, Narcissa?"

She shrugged and squirmed under his glare. "So help me..." he growled. "If you ever raise your hand to her again..."

He pulled Andromeda close, and she struggled to get away. When he whispered, "Hush, my dove; trust me," she stopped moving. He looked at Narcissa and said, "Let me make myself clear. I don't know what game you're playing at, Narcissa, but it's destroying your sister. If we choose to become intimate, I don't see that it's any business of yours."

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to my sister?" Narcissa was red-faced.

"She wasn't crying before you got here, and this isn't my handprint on her face."

"You don't understand, Sev..."

"No, *you* don't understand. I've done enough of what everyone else wants. Twenty years it's been since I took the Dark Mark and gave control of my life away. That's all over. Now I will do what *I* want."

Narcissa looked for anything to raise his ire, to provoke him to let go of Andromeda. "I just got my sister back from the Mudblood, and now you want to ruin her further."

Severus was going to respond, but he felt Andromeda trembling in his arms after that comment. Clearly this was taking a toll on her. "Do you have anything further you'd like to say to your sister?" he asked softly of the witch in his arms. She shook her head. "Well, then, Mrs. Malfoy, I believe it's time for you to go."

As he watched, Narcissa suddenly became a different creature. She wrung her hands and said, with a catch in her voice, "You know that everything is for the sake of my family, Severus."

"Nice try, but it won't work on me the way it did two years ago."

She hissed and all but spat, "It only worked then because it was already part of the old man's scheme."

Andromeda tried to free herself. She wanted to know about this, but Severus ran a hand down her spine in a way that made her go still again.

"I had my reasons, Narcissa. Soothing your motherly worries didn't cost me anything and eased your mind. If I have plans of my own that I wish to pursue now, I don't see that it's anyone's business but my own... and Andromeda's."

What about Miss Granger? Andromeda wanted to ask.

"I'll ask you again, Mrs. Malfoy, to leave this house. You won't get a third chance." Andromeda became aware that his wand was in the hand hovering over the small of her back, and there was tension in that arm that she hadn't noticed before.

"You don't have the authority to send me out of here. Andie!"

Severus let her pull away to face her sister. "You've said everything you wanted to say, Cissy. There's really nothing else, is there?"

Narcissa sighed ungracefully as she walked toward the door. "Don't say I didn't warn you, Andie," she called. Then she was gone.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same thing," she replied. "What happened two years ago?"

He tipped her chin up again and whispered a charm to soothe away the damage her sister left. "Andromeda, why doesn't your sister want us together?"

"Are we really together?"

"For the purposes of this conversation, we are."

She turned away. "Cissy believes that you should make a choice from the younger witches that are available." It wasn't a lie.

He could tell that she wasn't telling everything. She seemed so fragile at the moment that he chose not to pursue it. "I've made my choice."

Her heart beat faster but then she remembered. "For now, that is," she said.

"Why don't we see where it takes us?" He pulled her close again and whispered into her ear. "I believe where it was taking us was to the bedroom where I plan to make slow, deliberate love to you this afternoon."

"Did you..." She couldn't ask.

He tipped her head back so that he could look her in the eye. "After all we've become to each other, you can ask me anything."

She turned away. She couldn't ask this question if she looked at him. "Narcissa says you just wanted me to spite her, because she admired how I looked with the Minister at the ball."

"Did my pursuit of you begin that night?"

She turned and looked at him as she realized that her sister was wrong. "Oh, Severus." All thoughts of denying him or herself followed her sister out the door. Her pulse quickened just from the sound of his voice. She knew it would be a long time before she denied him again. At some point during the conversation with her sister, perhaps when she had settled into his arms, she had stepped off the edge and was falling through an abyss. When she landed, she knew she would shatter completely, but for now she would surrender to his kisses and touches.

When the door of the bedroom shut behind her, Andromeda was suddenly unsure of what came next. Last night had simply happened, but today was deliberate. When she and Ted had first...but then, Severus was a completely different sort of wizard... and a very different man as well. He had seduced her slowly over the past months, and he would treasure her if only because of the effort it had cost him.

He saw her worried confusion and remarked upon it. "Don't fret, my dove." He stood near her and bent to whisper into an ear. "Will you join me on the bed? I would like to touch you and learn about you."

She reached behind herself to unfasten her dress, but she was trembling too hard and fumbled. He motioned her over and turned her to unfasten the buttons in a matter-of-fact way that set her at ease. "Don't ever fear me, Andromeda," he said caressingly against her now bare shoulder. "Others need to fear me from time to time. Some need

to fear me always, but you need never fear me."

"I don't fear you," she said, and it was true. What she feared most was his absence.

The night before had been a trysting of two grieving hearts. This afternoon, he used the light that came into the room to explore, first with his delicate fingertips and then with his lips. When she sighed that it wasn't fair, he lay quietly as she touched him. No woman had ever traced the hairs on his chest before nor kissed along the lines of his shoulder-blades. No woman had ever made him feel so wanted. She gently pushed him to the point of desperation, and he shifted their positions so that he was kneeling above her.

"I've made my choice. I want to share a bed with you every night. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes," she whispered, helpless to refuse him anything in that moment. She reached up to push his hair back from his face so that she could see his eyes. He closed the space between them and kissed her. Kisses turned into caresses, which led to ever closer contact. Their bodies trembled and strained together until they were both exhausted.

"You're an incredible woman," he whispered into her ear a while later. "You meant it, didn't you? You'll share my bed from now on?"

"I meant it," she said, quietly. She held his head where he had placed it on her shoulder. She didn't want him to see the sadness she knew was in her eyes. As much as possible, she would hide her worry. She would enjoy the time she had with him and wouldn't begrudge the future he would have with a younger woman. She stifled a sigh and slid away from him. She rolled closer to the edge of the bed and sat up.

"Are you tired, my dove?"

"I suppose I am, a little."

"Why don't you sleep, then?"

She glanced at a clock. "I need to see to my grandson. Surely he wants to end his nap and play with his new toys."

"Why don't I join you?"

"You should rest. In a couple of hours, there will be dinner, and then..."

"Afters." The look in his eyes gave no doubt of his meaning.

She smiled at that. "Yes, you have much to rest for."

She was just about dressed at this point and slipped out of the room, leaning weakly against the door after she shut it. *I'm in for it now*, she thought. *Damn it, Ted, why did you have to teach me how to love? I've lost my sister again and for what? Something that can't possibly last?* She made her way up to the nursery and cared for the child. She summoned the house-elf and went over the dinner arrangements, taking the opportunity to praise Birdie for having everything just exactly to plan. Finally she was alone with the infant and his bottle, and she let her tears fall.

If she checked, she would have discovered that Severus wasn't resting, after all. He sat down at a writing desk and penned two notes. After rolling them up, he opened the window and called to an owl that nested in a nearby tree. The owl accepted the notes and flew away. Instead of lying down on the bed, Severus watched out the window with a smile on his face. When he could no longer see the owl, he sat near the fireplace and waited for it to return.

Andromeda couldn't help herself; she felt her heart making a space to include him. His hands were too knowledgeable about her body. The quiet whispers of compliments along with her name and endearments did their work too well. Forever after this night, she knew he wouldn't need to do anything other than look at her or perhaps whisper her name to get her blood racing and cause her legs to quiver.

He owned her, and she could see in his eyes that he knew it. Those eyes were full of victory as he claimed her mouth. His kisses were full of assurance as his hands explored. She hated that she didn't care. She hated that he made her gasp out a long, squeaky sigh while he brought bliss to her body.

She couldn't hate the look in his face as he grunted out his own pleasure. She didn't hate the infinite tenderness with which he held her face when he kissed her in grateful affection after the act that made her his alone. She positively loved the way he held her in the afterglow of their passion. He was so surprisingly dear, and he made her feel beautiful, wanted. He had a way of making her feel cherished in those moments when they murmured little comments to each other with no real words.

Just then she thought he might have feelings for her, but she didn't dare believe his feelings extended outside the bedroom or beyond some date when he might begin his future. What did she know? Perhaps he treated every woman this dearly.

She lay in his arms as his breathing became even. She stared at the ceiling of the bedroom her uncle had used and tried to think through the next weeks and months. Miss Granger would take her N.E.W.T.s. in the spring, and she would be received into some professional program at that time. Surely Severus wouldn't wait much longer to treat the girl as a woman; he would pursue her so that he could start his permanent life.

There would be several months of this, then. It would have to be enough to make a lifetime's worth of memories. She told herself that it was good that she had this time. She'd never had a time like this to prepare for Ted's eventual loss. She would have to make the best of this precious chance. Narcissa's efforts to the contrary, there was no reason to believe that there could possibly be a third man whom she could love as she had loved Ted and now Severus.

She couldn't sleep like this. Her thoughts chased her around the room. She slowly and carefully slid out of the bed, softly kissing and murmuring to him when he reached for her. She made her way to the bed she had shared with the man she had married and cried herself to sleep.

A/N: Thank you so very much to those of you who have stayed with the story and especially to those of you who have commented upon it. A very special thanks goes to Trickie Woo. Parts of this chapter have been in at least half a dozen different iterations of this story, and she's read every one of them, helping me to decide which was finally the right version.

Finally, I don't think we thank the staff enough. You are tireless and underpaid, and we couldn't do this without you.

Displacement

"I know exactly what I'm getting from this."

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She woke to silence the next morning. When she became fully aware, she realized the sun was high indeed, and she had not heard Teddy yet. She got up and ran to the nursery, sure something was wrong. He was gone. She ran down the stairs, through the house, and hard into a masculine form in the kitchen. She backed up and looked into Severus's face.

"Teddy is gone! Someone has taken him."

"Hush, it's okay," he said. His arms went around her and pulled her close. "I missed you after you left." He tilted his head to kiss her ear. "We'll have to learn how to spend the whole night together."

"Severus, he's my grandson, all I have left of my daughter..." She tried to keep control over her voice.

He put his fingertip on her lips. "Molly Weasley has him. Yesterday I wrote and asked her to watch him for the day. I saw that you were sleeping this morning, and I took him over there."

She stood in her kitchen, crisis ended, and caught her breath. "You did that, without asking me?"

"I was hoping to take you on a couple of errands with me today. The first one is at the Ministry, and then I thought we could spend some time together on Diagon Alley." His eyes captured hers. "It's of the utmost importance to me."

Her look of loss and confusion became a blush and a smile. "If you would like me."

"That's why I asked." He looked at her with a smirk. "Of course, you may wish to change your attire. Lovely as you look, I'm not sure you want to show what I've seen to other wizards."

All she had on was her dressing gown. She had hastily pulled it around herself as she had run through the house. She hadn't even tied it, holding it together as she ran. She gasped and looked up shyly. "I'll need a few minutes."

He took her to the Ministry of Magic Registry Office.

"Andromeda," he said, "I want you to understand how much this means to me and how much I admire you. I brought you here so we could exchange vows. I know you're troubled by our relationship, and I don't want you to think I don't respect you. This isn't some casual affair for me; I want to get married."

She was unprepared for the rush of emotions that would come to her at such a declaration. There were joy and pleasure... and dismay. "I don't think it's the best idea," she said.

His hand went to her chin, and he tipped her face up to meet his eyes. "It's what I want."

"But how will it fit in with the plans for your future?"

"It fits them perfectly." She was positive that he knew all he had to do was look at her with *those* eyes glowing in *that* way to get anything he wanted.

"If you're absolutely sure," she answered uncertainly. "This is really something you want?"

"I have the contract ready." He handed it to her.

She read through it, looking for specific items. Then she reached for a quill and crossed out sections. "I don't need these assurances from you," she said with a sad smile.

He looked through the parchment and saw that she had removed clauses designed to make marriage difficult to dissolve. "Are you sure you trust me so much?"

She looked at the artificial window. "I know exactly what I'm getting from this."

He would ponder what she meant by that later. He set the documents aside and reached into a pocket. "I don't know how my mother happened to have them, but these are my grandparents' rings. Do you mind using them?"

They were the same except in size. Both rings were made to look like intertwining snakes in yellow gold and rose gold. "They're beautiful."

"There wasn't time to purchase anything new, but we can if you prefer."

"Oh, no, somehow these are perfect." There was something suitable in rings that would remind her that she and he were both Slytherins. Each would have an agenda within this marriage.

Yet somehow, as he slid the smaller ring on her finger, whispering, "I plight my heart, my hands, and my wand to thee," there was something in his eye that made her wonder. What if this was real? Of course it was real, at least for the moment. What if the passion in his eyes was forever? Her own voice was hoarse and her eyes filled with emotion as she repeated the vow and placed the ring on his finger. His hand trembled within hers; what was going through his mind and heart?

When the officiator pronounced them married, Severus did not wait for permission. His hands tilted her head toward his, and he kissed her tenderly but eagerly. The bursts of magical sparks and lights startled them, and she broke away. It hadn't been like that with Ted. They watched in awe as the magic took several minutes to dissipate.

The officiator smiled kindly. "I haven't seen quite that reaction to the Nuptial Charm in a long while. Most couples who come to me are not entirely pleased to get married. I can tell that you two will be happy together for years."

Andromeda looked at Severus with troubled eyes. He pulled her close and laughed delightedly, kissing her again. In the face of his happiness, she allowed herself to relax and smile, too.

From that moment, the day was enchanted for him. He had his own bride, who looked at him as though he'd hung the moon. The quiet dinner he had arranged in Diagon Alley went pleasantly, and the afternoon and night promised to be nothing short of magical. He smiled and laughed as again and again he reached to kiss her hand or her cheek. Andromeda looked up at him and couldn't keep from smiling back.

When they returned to the cottage, Severus led her to the bedroom he had been using. As the door shut, he looked at her in question. "Is this acceptable? I want you to enjoy this, too." He had swept her along with the energy of the day. Was he wrong to do so?

This was the moment when Andromeda should turn away. She had changed the contract, but perhaps she should have the marriage undone now. She should stop everything and start the life of loneliness she would eventually have.

It wasn't a serious consideration. Since the officiator had said the charm over them, her whole body had yearned for him. "Yes, Severus." She raised herself up on tiptoe and offered him her lips. "I'm yours for as long as you want me."

Groaning, he pulled her close and started kissing her. He undressed her and started caressing her with delicate touches. He kissed her more until she was whimpering with desire. She didn't know how it was possible, but there was a new tenderness to his lovemaking that made her want to weep. Afterward they lay together in the soft afternoon light and looked at each other. She pressed her hand to the side of his face. "I'm afraid of this... it's so beautiful."

"Don't be afraid." He took her hand and kissed it fervently. "This is what I always knew we could have between us, my dove."

"I don't know if you realize what you've become to me, just since the other night. Now, with what we've done today..."

"It's marriage, Andromeda. Call it what it is. My dove has become my wife." There was an actual note of laughter in his voice.

"Do you even know what that means? You seem so cheerful, so playful."

"Why shouldn't I be happy? Something precious, something I dearly wanted, has become mine. Do you have any idea what my life was like? Always watching the others, always wishing that I could have what they had? Can you imagine what it was like to live in a family where I was never sure whether my parents would curse me or ignore me? How I longed for Hogwarts all through my childhood, only for that to be a place where I didn't belong, either? How I wished for adulthood, only to fall into a sort of insanity and discover when I awoke from it that I'd sold my life to a madman and a manipulative old fool?"

He looked seriously at her now, and she couldn't answer him as he described his childhood. She saw the agony of his youth when the only thing that had kept him from succumbing to despair was the green-eyed girl he'd adored. She learned how, after a time of desperation due to Lily's death, he'd worked with redoubled effort. Tears came to her eyes as she understood how little he had expected to benefit from his own sacrifices.

"You can't imagine, my dove, what it was like to wake in this house, to have a pure-blood witch take my hand and treat me kindly. I was already smitten with you because of our experiences working together. How could I fail to desire you last summer, after you came to my side and held my hand, when you did everything in your power to soothe and comfort me, when you smiled and treated me like a treasured family member?"

She felt guilty, humbled even. "So it's an accident of proximity that puts me here with you? I can't imagine why you would choose to marry *me* under the circumstances."

"Who else would have cared for me so tirelessly?"

"A great many, I think, especially if they knew marriage, even the sort of marriage this will be, would result. Have you stopped to count up the various women who worked to save you, find you, and bring you here? What about all the women who danced with you at the ball? Don't pretend that I haven't seen the owls you receive at least a few times a week, too."

He rolled on to his stomach and used a lock of her hair to trace circles on her shoulder as he looked into her eyes. "Then you know I chose you. Perhaps any one of those other witches might have done for me what you have done, but none of them did. As far as I know, none of them offered. I want you, my dove, and I count every day I've been here with you as the best of my life so far. You're the witch who has cared for me, you're the witch who has welcomed me into her life, and you're the witch who fills my dreams."

He returned to his back and pulled her close. It would be so easy to feel secure, she thought. She could see herself lying within his embrace for as long as she lived, but she knew better than to assume it was permanent in his mind. Suddenly she realized what it must have been like for Ted, knowing that he loved more than she did. Could she love so completely? It was how Ted had loved her. Could she make Severus feel as untroubled and at home as she had once felt? That part should be easy. He must realize how much she adored him. They lay together a little longer, and after a time it was Andromeda who rolled up over Severus and started kissing him.

They lost track of the hours during the afternoon and evening. They wandered to the kitchen long enough to put together a small meal, but returned to the bedroom where the effects of the nuptial charm seemed to still be in effect. What else could infuse such joy into the situation, Andromeda wondered. She wished this night would never end and lay contentedly in Severus's arms long after his breathing was slow and even.

The next morning, Severus woke before the woman beside him did. He had to think for a minute as he recalled the events of the last days. He paused to wonder if it was all a dream, but there was evidence in his face. He gently combed through her hair until it was more or less out of the way and searched for her left hand. Finding his grandmother's ring, he kissed it. He couldn't resist the urge to kiss her face and leaned over her to do that, too.

Her eyes opened, and she looked up at him and smiled. "Good morning," she said.

He smiled back and resolved that this was how he would wake every morning for the rest of his life. "And so it is," he responded.

She rolled away just long enough to stretch. "That was the best night I've had in many months."

"It may be the best night of my life, following the best day." He started kissing her shoulder, and whispered, "I have hopes that today might even be better."

Her arm came around him as she rolled closer. "I am eager to indulge those hopes."

They didn't rush, and after a while they made their way downstairs, where a glowing house-elf had prepared their favorite breakfast items. Andromeda clucked at all the work involved and praised Birdie, whose eyes looked between the witch and wizard happily.

They ate their breakfast quietly. As she reached for her guest's hand...her husband's, she remembered with a blush...Andromeda looked at the ring on her finger. "What did you tell Molly?"

"Nothing that wasn't true. I said that you hadn't gotten very much rest and that it would be good if you didn't have your grandson for a day or so. I also told her that I might encourage you to leave the house and enjoy a little time to yourself." He frowned at his eggs. "I worried that you might say no."

"I don't think I can refuse you anything," she replied. She looked at the ring again. "I'm not sure we should tell anyone about our new... relationship, for lack of a better word."

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "There are some things I should discuss with Hermione before it becomes common knowledge."

Andromeda looked at the tea pot uncertainly. "Yes, I'm sure, and Narcissa would probably Cruciate me if we tell her before Hermione understands everything."

He reached for her hand this time in concern. "Is it not acceptable?"

"Oh, no," she quickly replied. "I just wish things could be different. I love my family, but I don't think they'll ever understand me. I also worry about the future."

"Andromeda," he said, a bit sternly, "I would like to enjoy the present, the most enjoyable present of my life, before worrying about that."

She was a trifle ashamed and looked at him for a moment before nodding. "Of course, you're right. I want to enjoy every moment I have with you."

His eyes glowed in *that* way again, and breakfast was essentially over.

"When does Teddy come back?" asked Andromeda.

"Molly is going to bring him right after lunch."

"That gives us all morning."

"It certainly does." His voice went straight down her back. She stood and took his hand, leading him from the kitchen to the stairs. He followed her, bemused, until she stopped at her own bedroom door.

"Andromeda, are you sure?"

She looked up at him and nodded.

"Because I remember what you said to me."

"If you remember then you'll realize why it's all different now." She brought his hand around her back and leaned into him. "I belong to you."

He couldn't resist the lips that were tilted toward him, just right. He bent down and kissed her. She kissed him back so hard that he couldn't resist crushing her to himself, lifting her feet from the ground. Severus carried her in this fashion the few steps to the bed.

A/N: Special thanks to go to Trickle Woo for beta reading this. Thank you also to the lovely readers who send me reviews. They make my day!

Special Relativity

Chapter 14 of 24

"They're my family. There was a time when we were actually... affectionate to each other."

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Andromeda saw the next week or two as a sort of honeymoon. She and Severus enjoyed their new experiences together and made the most of every moment when the baby took naps or slept through the night. She refused to think of the future except to consider that she would need to remember every moment in Severus's embrace, every feeling as he brought her ecstasy, and every intonation as they discussed ordinary things. She especially didn't think about Hermione Granger, nor the testing that would change this beautiful present into an all-too-certain future.

She had more practical experience in the bedroom than Severus, having been married for so long. However, she discovered that he was quite well-read on the subject and had a number of things he wished to try. As he made her writhe in ways she never thought possible or sigh with joys she had never imagined, she asked herself how she had merited such a considerate and inventive lover. Only once did the thought bring her sorrow; only once did she realize that what he did with her would simply give him practice for a lifetime of such pleasures with another woman.

He found her one morning, huddled over a tea cup and a hot-water bottle. "Are you ill, my dove?"

She shook her head. "No."

"But you clearly don't feel well." He sat next to her and would have gone through a list of possible ailments. She decided to cut the examination short. He needed to know, anyway.

She shrugged. "I seem to recall telling you that I'm essentially barren. Nature hasn't seen fit to take the curse from me, just the blessing. We won't be able to do all of the...everything...tonight."

She could never get enough of his kind smile, because it was such a surprise when it flashed across his face. "We can work around the situation," he answered. His fingertips traced her face. "I'm sorry if it makes you unhappy."

She shrugged. "It would have been nice to have another child to comfort me when Ted left," she reflected. "If my hands had been full, perhaps my heart would not have ached so much." She sighed. "I do have Teddy, though."

As if on cue, the baby began to fuss.

"He'll be wanting a clean diaper and a bit of play, I'll wager." She made to get up, but he patted her hand.

"Let me do it."

As she watched him play with the child, she reflected that it would be good for him to have a younger witch in his future. A younger witch would provide him with his own children. How much more would he love to crawl on a floor, pretending to chase them and smiling in spite of himself when the little one shrieked with glee? She smiled while watching him even as the view in front of her went in and out of focus.

"Are you crying, my dove?"

She realized that there were tears on her cheeks. "I don't know if you realize how wonderful you look with him. I think you might well be one of Teddy's favorite people, Severus."

Later that evening, Severus tenderly put his arms around her. "I've never spent as much time with a witch as I have with you, so this is outside of my experience, but there's a charm we might try, if you're willing."

"Was that in one of your books as well?" she asked with a smile.

"If you're too tired or feel too poorly, I wouldn't mind holding you in my arms as we rest."

"I'm actually feeling better," she admitted.

"Than shall I?"

"Certainly." She closed the space between them and put her arms around his neck. "Unless you're too tired after your play with Teddy, that is."

He leaned down and kissed her until she couldn't stand. Then he ran his hands down her sides until they were resting on her hips. He whispered a charm, and she felt a warming sensation. He whispered another charm, and the covers on the bed drew back.

He made her forget the ache of the morning. His hands kneaded sore muscles and caressed her into a fever that he delighted in relieving. He continued to caress her as they cooled. "Your body is so different tonight," he mused. "Your skin glows... and somehow you seem ready to burst with life. Are you sure you're unable?"

What was he thinking, to speak as if it would be a desirable thing in this marriage? She mustn't cry, but the thought that screamed into her ear was that he must be imagining a different witch, a younger witch, who desired him as much as Andromeda did. Her hand trembled as she pushed the hair back from his face. "I'm sorry, I'm sure I cannot. I've done nothing to prevent conception for years. It's probably your charm that makes me appear different." He would have the younger witch soon enough and would live out this fantasy.

He shook his head. "Don't be sorry. I've had as much experience with children as I really want, anyway. I'm content to play with your grandson."

She kissed him one last time before he went to sleep. One more day of their precious time was over. He would be moving on to another witch and the possibility of his own children soon enough. She brooded over it until the moon set that night.

New Years was an ordeal for the inhabitants of the cottage. Narcissa invited herself and Draco to dinner on New Years Eve. Andromeda decided not to fight against it and prepared herself for the worst. While discussing her finances with a solicitor, she discovered a few truths that she wouldn't mind telling to her dear sister.

Severus was quite supportive of her. He considered that it would be easier to face Narcissa head on than to let her chip away at the pleasant world Andromeda ruled. If it were up to him, his wife's younger sister would never darken the door again, but for some reason, Andromeda craved Narcissa's approval. He considered his own familial relationships and kept silent.

He wore his dress robes and watched in open admiration as she prepared for the evening. "I've always thought the various paraphernalia women owned was useless. Now as I watch you, I see that you have a use for everything."

"I don't have as much as some women, I suppose, just my few little vanities."

"I can't argue against them, since I'm captivated by the results they achieve."

He offered to help with her lingerie and then sighed in disappointment when she lifted her robe over her head to settle it down around her. "I hate to see that disappear."

"You'll see it again soon enough." She turned around and smoothed the lapels of his dinner jacket. "Listen," she said with a serious look on her face, "I can't wear this tonight." She held up her left hand and indicated the ring he had placed there. "We can't let anyone know we're married."

"Not even your sister?"

"Especially not her. One way or another, she would find a way to ruin me. Do you want Hermione to know about us?"

"Not until I tell her, but I want my wife to wear my ring. What would I do in the mornings if it wasn't there?" He referred to his habit of kissing the ring on her finger as he woke every morning, and he was so emphatic that it seemed almost real. She wanted to sit down and cry at how much she loved him right then and there.

"Of course I'll wear it. I couldn't bear not to," she assured him. She reached behind her, and a golden chain slid across her dressing table and into her hand. It was fine but sturdy. She put it through the ring and then around her neck. She dropped the ring down the collar of her robe and patted it as it came to rest. "I'll have it just over my heart the entire time."

"It would be churlish to argue with that, wouldn't it?"

"I don't want to waste a single precious moment of our time together by arguing."

"Nor do I." He cupped her face in his hands. "Besides, kissing it there opens up a wealth of possibilities. Will I do irreparable damage to your toilette, my dove, if I kiss you now?"

"I'm sure I can repair it." She raised herself on tiptoe.

He kissed her sweetly but in a way designed to show her how much he desired her. By the time they finished, she needed to straighten not just her makeup but most of her clothing as well. He smiled contentedly at her as he refastened his trousers and tugged his jacket back into place. When they finally arrived downstairs, they discovered that Draco had already acted as host to not one female guest, but two.

"Why, Mother! I wasn't expecting you!" Andromeda mentally calculated the changes she would need to make to the dinner she and Birdie had prepared.

"Narcissa assured me that you're always prepared for any ruffian or Mudblood to show up for dinner. I thought to myself, 'Well, why not her own mother?' Surely you wouldn't want me to be alone on New Year's Eve?"

"Of course, not, Mother. You're quite welcome. I just hope my simple table is satisfactory."

"I don't need anything particularly fancy, child. I can make do with anything, you know."

Andromeda excused herself to check on things in the kitchen. Narcissa followed her. "Has it happened again?"

The elder sister looked the younger one in the eye and said, as evenly as she could, "It's none of your business."

Cissy grabbed Andie's arm. An instant later Andie's wand was in her face. The younger sister let go and hissed at the elder, "It's entirely my business and you know it." She looked her sister up and down and pondered the way Severus and Andromeda had come down the stairs... together. There was nothing improper about the way he held her hand in his arm, but the little looks were so intimate... "You've been at it the whole time, haven't you?"

"Again, it's none of your business."

"It's everyone's business if that Mudblood decides to cause us trouble."

"What can she possibly do?"

"She's extremely clever. I don't want to find out, especially not the hard way. Now, Andie, are you ruining the plan?"

She pulled away from her younger sister and looked out the window. "I've watched them for six months. He singles her out and devotes his days to her scoring well on the

N.E.W.T.s. It's obvious she's special to him. What else could it be?"

Narcissa came and stood near her. "Then what is he doing with you?" she asked in a stern undertone.

"I'm a diversion while he's waiting... or maybe practice... *I think* he's trying to maintain a professional level of decorum with her while he's playing a pedagogical role. Just as soon as the N.E.W.T.s are over, he'll make his move... and I'll... just be a memory... I hope it will be a pleasant one..." Andromeda hated the way the tears welled up just from talking about it. She hated that her younger sister was there to witness it.

Narcissa came and stood next to her. "We'll take care of you, Andie. There's got to be someone better than a half-blood Mudblood-lover for you."

She had been a Mudblood-lover for over twenty years, but she supposed Cissy wouldn't care about that. Suddenly she couldn't stand the presence of her sister in her kitchen. She summoned a stern voice of her own and was almost surprised that she was able to use it. "Dinner is ready, Cissy. Why don't you return to the sitting room and ask everyone to sit down? I'll be along after I've spoken with Birdie."

Andromeda arrived in the dining room to discover her mother sitting in her seat at the end of the table, across from Severus at the other end. Narcissa was at Severus's right hand while Draco was at Mother's right. With a snap of her fingers, she Summoned a place setting to the space between her mother and sister.

Dinner progressed in a way that might be predicted. Draco sat and enjoyed his dinner. Aunt Andie gave a guy plenty of filling food to eat. The adult conversation was fascinating in that it was interesting to see Mother's and Grandmother's constant meddling directed at someone else. For once he could relax and enjoy a meal without worrying about what would be said to him.

Druella Black was initially complimentary about dinner. It was amazing that one of her own daughters had learned to cook, although it wasn't anything compared to what the elves were preparing at her house for the next day. That meal, to which only true pure-bloods were invited, was to be a quite elegant affair. From there on the conversation went down hill.

"By the way, Andie, I'm negotiating with Mr. Fudge right now, although Narcissa has encouraged me to wait until that Stanley Roberts comes back from his home in the United States. I'm sure they both would like to meet with you privately. They both want to see your financial statements, of course. Then you may choose."

"Isn't that a brilliant plan?" put in Narcissa.

"Your sister has done such hard work on this. I'm sure she will be gratified to have it all come out at the end."

"No," said Severus, "it's not a good plan at all."

Druella laughed cruelly. "I don't see why your opinion should matter."

Narcissa flashed a furious glare at her sister. "He thinks he has a say just because he's shagged her."

"Why should he care? Aren't you arranging..."

"It doesn't matter what anyone is arranging," said Severus in a quiet voice that Draco and his aunt recognized as highly dangerous. "Perhaps you should know. Just the other day, Andromeda and I..."

She couldn't let them find out now, not like this. Narcissa was liable to pull out her wand and start spouting Unforgivables. She cleared her throat and cut him off. "We discovered that you can't make a contract in my name, Mother. You may make any arrangements you like, but they have no force unless I sign them, myself."

"But my solicitor said an unmarried daughter..."

"She's *not* unmarried."

Andromeda looked at him in warning. "I was married twenty-five years ago to Ted. As soon as the marriage was consummated, I gained control of my own life. The solicitor I spoke with was quite clear on the matter."

"The Mudblood died."

"Yes, but I was married and that gave me emancipation from your schemes."

"A Mudblood hardly counts."

Severus couldn't keep from speaking. "What about..." Andromeda stopped him.

"I appreciate what you've tried to do for me." She turned and spoke specifically to Narcissa. "I appreciate what you've *both* done, but I don't need you to help me in that capacity. I can sort out my own affairs."

"Well that's most ungracious," said Druella.

"You'll end up with nothing," put in Narcissa.

"Truly, I thank you, but I can't do what you're asking of me. I wasn't able to do it twenty-five years ago, either."

"No, you had to run off and ruin yourself. I couldn't look Mary Alice Lestrange in the face until the day she died. What did this family get from that? Your father and uncle killed..."

Andromeda jumped to her feet. "That was their own fault. They shouldn't have been running around, killing perfectly innocent people in the dead of night."

Druella stood, too. "Innocent, were they? Their disgusting son stole and ruined our daughter. I don't even know you anymore, the child I carried for nine torturous months. They should have known better than to mix with the likes of us. Bellatrix was the firebrand and Narcissa was spoiled, but you were the good one. Then you were tainted by that Mudblood, and it tore our family apart."

It was all she could take. She sank into her chair in sadness. "I'm ruined, then? I don't know why you bothered to come, Mother. You should know, that whatever Ted was or wasn't, he was a good man, full of courage, honor, and loyalty. I'm sorry you never appreciated him."

Severus couldn't stand another minute and went to her side. "If you ladies have said all you plan to say, perhaps we should wish you a Happy New Year?" It wasn't a mere suggestion. Andromeda's hands fluttered to where his rested on her shoulders. Narcissa didn't miss the implication.

"You're going to keep mucking about in my sister's knickers, then?"

He chuckled softly. "No, I intend to make love to my..." He felt her stiffen under his hands and understood her concern. "I've been making love to the incredible woman she is."

Narcissa's face reddened. Andromeda saw something there that she hadn't noticed before, and she turned to look at Severus, whose face was impassive. Finally the

blonde-haired witch found her voice. "I think all we can expect tonight is disgusting behavior between these two, Mother. Draco, it's time to go home. Andie, don't forget."

The three left in a flurry, and the two who remained stared at each other. "I'm sorry," said Andromeda. "They shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

"You aren't to apologize for them." He pulled her in his arms. "I don't know why you let them in, why you let them do that to you."

"They're my family. There was a time when we were actually... affectionate to each other."

He pulled her close. "I'd like to think that I'm your family, now."

"For as long as you are here, anyhow."

"It's nothing for you to consider," he said sternly. "I'm not going anywhere for a long, long time." He tipped her chin and started kissing her. He waited until she started to become quiescent in his arms and smiled into her eyes. "Why did we have your sister and your mother over, anyway?"

"Narcissa's been pestering me to come over for part of the Holidays." It reminded her of something. "What has your relationship been with Narcissa?"

He burst out laughing. "What would bring that on?"

She stepped away and looked seriously up at him. "There was something in her eyes tonight; I never saw it before. She's angry at me because she worries that I'll ruin her plans, but she's furious specifically because of you."

He waved a hand. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Severus, it's not nothing."

He sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "She was at her wits' end when Lucius was sent to Azkaban. The Ministry was applying certain pressures, and the Dark Lord was entirely too interested in Draco. She came to me for help, and then she came again for comfort."

"So you've been my sister's lover?" Andromeda wasn't sure how she felt about that.

He shook his head. "I'm no home-wrecker. There are rules about that sort of thing, and although I'll freely admit to desiring her at one time, her neediness caused the appeal to wane. I had no idea how to comfort her, either. I didn't understand comfort until you showed it to me last summer."

"I see." She felt a little silly. Narcissa's rage lay in the fact that Andromeda had, at least temporarily, something that the younger sister wanted but had never attained. The comment about neediness was not lost on her. She should be careful not to show her feelings too strongly.

He broke into her thoughts by tugging at hair pins and whispering into her ears. "You promised that I could see all of that delightful satin again. Shall we head upstairs?"

"Oh, yes," she replied.

They rang in the New Year with groans of passion and sighs of contentment.

A/N: Thank you to those who've kept with this story, especially beta reader Trickie Woo.

Torque

Chapter 15 of 24

The relationship between Severus and Andromeda switches around.

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Severus opened his eyes to full morning light, or as light as it would be on a rainy morning. The first thing he noticed was the way his black hair mixed with her brown on the pillow they shared. He pondered the various urges he felt right at that moment and decided to stretch his hand out and brush her hair away from her face, back toward her ear. He located the wedding ring and kissed it along with the soft flesh underneath it. Then he continued brushing her hair back.

When he uncovered her mouth, he couldn't resist kissing it, or her eyes and cheeks. His hand, having uncovered her face, started dipping under the sheets. His fingertips grazed over her shoulder and back and his hand finally settled lightly over her hip. She was starting to stir and respond, so he moved closer.

"Happy New Year," he whispered.

She tilted her head just perfectly to touch her lips to his. "Happy New Year to you as well," she responded.

"So far it's the best year of my life." They kissed again, and then they were celebrating the new year with their bodies.

He had become a compulsion to her in just a week. Looking back, she couldn't understand why she had waited so long, other than there was always a crisis to deal with for the kids. Her world contained just him right now, his body pressed to hers and the rhythmic tapping she heard. He groaned into her ear and pulled her closer. She lost the breath she didn't realize she was holding and with it all control over the feelings that came upon her. "Oh, Severus..." She adored this man.

"My dove..."

Most of the sounds in her ears quieted, but the tapping did not. "Blasted owls," he muttered. He leaned up and aimed his wand at the window. A few minutes later, the witch and the wizard each held official-looking scrolls. The owls, hooting in annoyance, flew away, singed tail feathers still smoking.

Severus looked his over and then glanced at her. "It's from the Department of Taxes and Revenue," she whispered. "They want an account of all my assets at an appointment tomorrow."

"You'll be fine; you planned for this, and the goblins have put your portfolio together nicely."

She nodded, but she still looked nervous. "What's yours, if I may ask?"

He kissed the pucker in her forehead. "You may ask. It's a summons from Hogwarts. They want me to consult for them as they prepare the O.W.L.s and the N.E.W.T.s."

"Will there be a conflict of interest since you've been teaching the children here?"

"Everyone knows about it, so I gather they don't see one. I'll know more after I go."

"Ah, Mrs. Tonks, I'm glad you could make it to our meeting." Andromeda groaned as she walked into a room containing Dolores Umbridge.

"Good morning, Dolores." Andromeda sat in the indicated seat.

"The letter requested an accounting of your finances. Do you have that?"

Andromeda handed over several scrolls, and Dolores hummed delightedly. A second witch entered the room and went over the parchments quickly, making calculations. Dolores ran a finger down a list of numbers and tutted.

"But, Andromeda...I may call you Andromeda, mayn't I?...this isn't what I was told your trust fund is worth."

Yesterday had been tense, and last night was sleepless despite Severus's best efforts at calming her. So much hinged upon this one moment. Everything she and Ted had worked for, much of what Uncle Alphard had done, and even what she and Severus would work for during the next months was at stake. She cleared her throat nervously. "I...it was hit by some bad investments a few years back. If it weren't for Ted's income..." She let it rest. It was true enough that they had been living on Ted's income for the most part, only using the trust fund for special purposes. It was also true that the investments hadn't done as well as in previous years. Voldemort's activities took a toll on commerce. Yet the investments had actually continued to profit, and most of the profits had actually rolled back into the principle that was now safely tucked away in Switzerland. Andromeda simply withheld that bit of information.

"Well, that's a shame, because with the assets you show, it appears..." There was a murmur from the other witch, and Dolores passed that witch a glare before speaking sweetly. "Ah, yes, Candace, I did forget to explain the tax structure." She cleared her throat and handed Andromeda a pamphlet.

"Due to the nature of the recent troubles, the Ministry must go to a great deal of expense to rebuild some things that were destroyed by You-know-who and his supporters. Since those with a certain blood status benefited the most from his work, this year's taxes have a structure based upon blood status. As you see on this pamphlet, those who have been granted the status of 'war hero' are exempt from taxes. Then the actual taxes are based upon the number of magical grandparents a person has. It ranges from twelve percent for a person with one magical grandparent, up to fifty percent for those with four magical grandparents."

Andromeda was floored, but Severus's foresight had indeed saved them. "Of my income from last year?" She knew the truth very well, but asked anyway. It was a question designed to make Dolores feel superior, and of course it worked.

Dolores chuckled and wriggled delightedly in her seat. "Oh no, it will be fifty percent of your total assets."

"I see." Andromeda bit her lip. "That won't leave much."

"No, I can see that it won't. In fact, it appears that your home comprises almost half of your assets and your trust fund is the rest." Dolores chuckled yet some more. "We have two different forms here; will you be transferring the money from your Gringotts vault or will you be transferring the property?"

Andromeda gaped at the bald way the question was asked.

"We'll give you a month to find new premises and vacate, if that's your choice." After decades of watching this witch get everything she wanted, Dolores was delighted to take something from her.

Dolores watched and enjoyed the agony on Andromeda's face for a moment. While they waited for her to respond, a space opened in the door and a paper airplane flew through the aperture. The witch named Candace took the memo and read it, then showed it to Dolores.

"Ah, yes. Have him sent in."

Candace made a note on the memo, and the airplane went back through the door. A moment later Severus was shown in by a staff assistant. A chair appeared next to Andromeda, and Dolores smiled sickeningly at both of them. "Now we're here all nice and cozy, aren't we?"

Severus reached a hand out to Andromeda and squeezed it in greeting. He smiled blandly. "Good afternoon, Miss Umbridge."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Snape. I thought it might be best to go over your situation as we finish that of your...*companion*?"

Severus looked down his nose at Dolores. "She's been my hostess during my recovery."

"She's a great deal more than that," said Dolores brightly. "We've discussed her taxes, which leave her with very little assets. Should we discover that she has other assets, we would have to recalculate her taxes. Unfortunately, she has no means of income that we can ascertain other than her war widow stipend."

It wasn't a problem. Andromeda could live for years using that stipend, and when the laws were different, she would be able to reclaim her trust fund. If she wasn't allowed to draw from the interest, it would simply revert to principle. Although the money in Switzerland was never acknowledged, Umbridge seemed to know all about it and to be following her line of thought. She smiled in that unpleasant way she had of indicating that she was enjoying herself. "And now it's my duty to tell you that your war-widow stipend has been cut off."

Andromeda and Severus looked at each other. This was something they had not accounted for. Dolores was still talking.

"It seems that Mrs. Tonks is no longer Mrs. Tonks. Nor is she a widow these days." She smiled brightly at the pair across the table. "I would offer you congratulations, but since you seem to be keeping your marriage secret, perhaps you don't want them?"

They glanced at each other again, but said nothing. Dolores cleared her throat and started again.

"That being the case, your stipend has been cut off, which leaves you with no visible means of income."

"I have a stipend of my own." Severus reached for his wife's hand. "We'll be comfortable enough."

"Hmm, hmm. Yes, well, we were coming to that, Severus. Do you mind if I call you Severus? The situation is that since you fought against He-who-must-not-be-named, you qualify for a veteran's stipend, but since you were also a Death Eater, you do not. The Wizengamot will take up the issue at such time as they've finished with fines for the lesser Death Eaters and their sympathizers. For now, that stipend has been discontinued. It was decided that we didn't want you to have to give a significant amount of money back, should it turn out that you were improperly paid."

"How kind," murmured Andromeda ironically.

"I still have some savings," he said blandly.

She simpered back. "Oh, yes, of course you do. You probably should pay...do you go by Mrs. Tonks or Mrs. Snape now? You should pay her for all of the nursing care you've received prior to your marriage. The Wizengamot may reimburse you for costs associated with that injury. Mind that you give a *detailed* description of each and every cost. Of course, there are some... *therapies*... that aren't sanctioned by the Hospital." She paused as if a new thought occurred to her. "Is that why you married? Were you forced into it by... *circumstances*?" Her glance strayed to Andromeda's middle before she smiled again into their faces. "It's a shame that a potential source of income was cut off this way..."

Severus growled low in his throat but said nothing. He had experience in dealing with Madam Umbridge in the past and knew that for today the only victory lay within getting out of the Ministry with as little damage as possible. He looked at his wife and willed her to relax. It wasn't as bad as the toad-woman made it sound. He would take her home and explain things. He would show her that they had everything they needed, and perhaps a little more, too.

Andromeda felt the world turning gray. The house was safe, and there were sufficient groceries and other materials to get by for at least a month, but what then? She had to think of something else. *Teddy*. Nymphadora and Remus's combined estate were saved. Teddy would have his inheritance. Yes, Teddy would be fine. Somehow they would get around this, and in any case Teddy was going to be fine. His education would be covered, and he would be safe.

Tim would be fine, too. The funds he had inherited from Ted were untouchable under the tax structure, which didn't apply to Squibs at all. Somehow Andromeda would find an income source, and things would work out, just like everything else would work out.

The gray came back. As the summer approached, Severus would leave, and he couldn't be expected to support her, except that their marriage contract required it. She looked at him in horror, thinking of how she had compromised his life. Of course this would impact him.

He had changed the contract so that he had no claim on her assets, but he hadn't changed it so that she would have no claim on his. He would therefore be expected to provide for her even after they were no longer together. She wouldn't let that happen. Somehow, she would manage to affect his life as little as possible. It would be late spring, perhaps summer by the time he left. The garden and orchard would produce vegetables and fruit after that. In any case, she forced herself to set it aside for now. She stared determinedly at Dolores.

When Severus saw Andromeda's placid smile and the set of her shoulders, his heart nearly burst. She didn't shriek against the unfairness of it, and she didn't fall to pieces. He enjoyed the thought of one of her sisters blasting a hole through the middle of the witch while the other went into vapors. Andromeda simply nodded that she understood it all and reached for the paperwork. "Which of these forms was for the transfer of cash assets, Dolores?"

As he watched, she read through the documents and asked for clarification a few times. The name "Andromeda Snape" was applied in her economical script on several copies of different forms. She might be hiding their marriage from their friends, but her signature on these official documents boldly stated that she was his. He nearly reached for her, but then he remembered their audience. When Candace declared that they were finished, she arose from her seat with a wry look on her face. Severus took her arm and steered her to the lift where he kissed her to within an inch of propriety.

"I'm so proud and impressed. You were so poised and calm, and you used *my* name because you're *my* wife."

"It's my name now, too. Dolores knew all about it and seemed to expect it..." She smiled but then shook her head. "I very nearly fainted...Severus, how am I to manage?"

He smiled and kissed the side of her head. "The consulting job will be just what we need. Everything will be fine. We can discuss it at home... Mrs. Snape."

If he was expecting delighted conversation while ensconced in their bed, he didn't get it. Andromeda started speaking in the kitchen, and he had to follow her to the sitting room. She was already talking and thinking aloud.

"How did she manage to keep her job, anyway? She led the raid on our house, looking for Ted and Tim, and I know she was behind the operation that killed him. At the very least, she was complicit with the Death Eaters."

He was quiet for a moment. "She's a brilliant middle-manager. She ingratiate herself to those who lead, and manages to look unimportant enough that the highest levels at the Ministry don't pay any attention to her."

"I felt naked when she mentioned our marriage."

"The Ministry Privacy Charm will prevent her discussing our situation with anyone else."

She nodded. "Financially, we should be fine for at least a month. We'll have to economize, but I think we can manage, unless they levy the same taxes again next year. Then I'll have a choice between admitting how much money I really have and losing the house."

"We're better off than that. I've been hired as a consultant, not just for the testing, but as they rebuild the entire curriculum. Dumbledore's plans were necessary for fighting against the Dark Lord, but now they want something new. I shall have an income regardless. I can support us."

His kindness always caught her off guard. She had known many witches and wizards who had laughed that he was stingy, but with her he was always generous. "Thank you. I'm sure that if you can do a little for the household, here, we'll do fine for the rest of the winter. After that the garden can be made to bear. I shouldn't need much from you in the future..."

"I forbid you to speak of the future."

It was harsher than he intended, and she looked uncertain. He tried to understand what she must be thinking, and he wanted her to understand him. "Andromeda, my dove, whatever the future holds, we'll face it, and I'll make sure you want for nothing. Please realize that I intend to care of you."

She slid her hand up along the side of his face. "You've fooled them all into thinking you're angry and selfish, but I see what you're really like, Severus Snape. I don't know how I deserved to be here with you, or why I'm the recipient of your generosity, but I'll do everything I can to make you happy while it lies within my power. You'll never regret our time together if I can prevent it, and somehow I'll make sure it doesn't cost you that much."

"Haven't I told you not to worry about it?" He slid his hand into his pocket and placed a small object into her hand.

Andromeda couldn't quite focus on what she was looking at, but of course it was what it looked like. "I should have realized you would have one of these," she said, "but you know we couldn't use it. They would notice."

He put his arm around her. "The consulting work will cover almost everything, and we'll just use this if we really need it. Andromeda, I can take care of you even if you never get the money back from Switzerland." He turned her head to make sure she was looking at him. "Please, my dove, the only thing you've never given me is your full trust."

"I never thought..." She relaxed against him, then, and rested her head on his chest. After placing the stone in his hand, she said, "It's a hard thing to put myself in your hands... in anyone's hands. I've never really been able to trust my family, Ted was only able to do so much for so long, and lately I've had to rely upon myself more than I thought I ever could."

"Things are different now."

"Yes." She closed her eyes for a minute and allowed herself to feel his strength. She looked up into his face and realized that he needed her to rely upon him as much as she needed his help. It was a further step over the abyss she sensed, but it was suddenly the right step. The future didn't matter. For their marriage to work at all, she had to allow it to be an actual marriage. Whatever would come later, he would take care of her.

"I do trust you, Severus. I know you will fulfill the terms of our marriage contract, and I also know that, whatever may or may not happen between us, you will look after the interests of me and those who depend upon me. I do trust you."

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. He turned his face and captured her lips. She fit herself into his body and kissed him back. The afternoon was finally going in the direction he wanted. Severus took her hand with a smile and led her up to the bedroom. Harry had taken Teddy for the entire day, in case the meetings went late. Their impromptu school would be back in session soon, and he didn't want to waste any time he had alone with the witch before then.

They lay together as the twilight worked its way into the corners of the room. Rather, Andromeda lay on her stomach as Severus rubbed her shoulders. His hands were strong yet nimble enough that she could feel each knot releasing. "I'm going to miss this when you're gone," she said with a groan.

His hands went still as she gasped in annoyance with herself for saying it aloud. "Are you planning to send me away?" he asked.

She was frightened at having brought up the question that haunted her. There was nothing to do now but face it. She rolled on to her side so that she could face him. She looked into his eyes and then closed her own. "I will never send you away, Severus. I told you what would happen after we started... well, all of this. When you leave, I won't just miss your incredible hands or even what we share in this bed. An enormous piece of me will leave with you."

He reached to touch her, but she shied away. She looked at him and smiled sadly. "I accept it, Severus. I know that for whatever reason, this is part of your recovery and part of something that has been lacking your whole life. When you're ready, though... when all the scars have healed, and when your heart is rested... Well, I accept that you will leave me. It's only natural that you will want to move on."

He closed his eyes as he processed what she said. Was she somehow punishing herself for everything that had happened to him in his life? He really looked at her then, taking in the timid expression she had worn since Christmas Day. He held her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. "Do you think I somehow don't want to be your husband forever? Is that why you changed the contract?"

"I wanted to make it easy for you..."

"I don't want easy, Andromeda. You're my wife, with all the honors, rights, and privileges thereunto appertaining."

She smiled but shook her head. "I fully understand that there will be someone else. I won't stand in the way of your happiness."

He sighed and got out of the bed. "Damn, Andromeda, I didn't expect *you*, of all people, to behave like this, treating me as if I don't know my own mind. When will you realize that I know what I want?" He looked around for his trousers and shirt.

"I just want your happiness, Severus." She looked up at him, all pulled up against the pillows with the sheet under her chin.

He sat on the bed next to her and ran his hand along her face. "I think the best happiness for both of us lies in being together, my dove. With your kindness and generosity, you fill the spots that I'm lacking. I believe that I'm shrewd enough to look after your interests in ways you do not. We're good together, and I think that will only improve."

"If you're sure, then?"

He hooked his hand around her neck and brought her close for a kiss. "I'm very sure. This is what I want for always. I know we didn't do everything the way it's usually done, but it doesn't make this any less real to me. You've become the most important person in my world."

"That's what you are to me, too."

"Then trust it. Trust us."

The edge of safety and sanity was far behind her. The only thing to do was to keep stepping forward. "I do. I will."

He moved close and put his arms around her. "That's all I ask."

A/N: I guess this story went upon a sort of hiatus while it had an identity crisis of sorts. Thank you for your patience. Trickle Woo was kind enough to beta read this for me.

General Relativity

Chapter 16 of 24

Hermione returns and Severus chooses between discretion and valor. Meanwhile, Andromeda deals with choices that aren't as pleasant.

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During the next week, Andromeda was taking down laundry in the back garden as Severus went over the lesson plans he intended for his Slytherin students. There was a crack of Apparition and she looked over her shoulder expectantly. She didn't wait long. Hermione bounded across the lawn and hugged Andromeda tightly.

"I had a wonderful time! My parents were wonderful, and their friends were very kind. I had a great deal of fun exploring Australia, but I'm glad to be back." It all came out in an excited woosh that left Andromeda breathless even if Hermione was unaffected. She let go and stepped back. "Tell me, how is Severus?"

Andromeda barely caught her breath from the hug before she was expected to answer. She managed a laugh. "You'll have to see for yourself, but I don't think you'll be disappointed. He was in the still room when I came out here."

Hermione ran toward the house, and Andromeda sighed. Her time alone with Severus was over, and now a new phase of their relationship would begin. Tonight would tell how he planned to develop his various relationships. In the meanwhile, the laundry needed to be done, and Teddy had torn yet another hole in the knees of a pair of trousers as he crawled through the house.

In the kitchen, Hermione exchanged a word or two of greeting with Tim, who was working at mathematical equations in a notebook. Teddy was in a sort of playpen near the table, stacking blocks. She continued on to the hallway and peeked into the parlor. Severus wasn't there, but two other wizards were. They sat in chairs opposite each other, silent but glaring. She backtracked to the kitchen.

"What's going on in the parlor?" she whispered.

Tim dropped his pencil and glared at his notebook. He looked up at Hermione and shrugged. "It's extremely old-fashioned, but obviously it still happens. Both of those wizards want to marry Mum, and they're determined to wait each other out."

"Wait each other out?"

"One will leave before the other, and by leaving will essentially leave the field open. In theory, she will supposedly marry whoever is left."

"How draconian!"

"It gets better. She lost all her savings to the taxes this year and they both want to save her."

"Why did her savings go to her taxes?"

"They're blaming the pure-bloods for the war."

"But she has income."

"Yes, there's something she's not telling me, but she says there's enough income to run the house." Tim frowned at his calculations and tapped his notebook. He shook his head, frowned again, and then erased something. After that, he put in some more terms and worked for a minute or two. He nodded and then set his pencil down. He folded his arms and frowned down at what he had written.

"So is she going to marry one of them?"

Tim shrugged and looked at his notebook. "One of *them*? I don't think so. I hope not. Dear Aunt Cissy and Grandmother Druella want it, so who knows what Mum will actually do when it comes down to it."

Hermione tried to absorb it all. "I came to see Severus. I guess I should go find him." She went into the hallway and right past the parlor this time.

"Severus," Hermione called from the door of the still room.

He turned his head and smirked. "Come in, come in! I can't leave this right now, so you'll have to wait for further gestures."

"What are you working on?"

There was a sort of shrug. "It's just a concoction for Andromeda's medicine cabinet, for mending scraped knees and that sort of thing. Her grandson is starting to pull himself up on the furniture."

Hermione looked at the directions on the countertop. As he had said, it was a simple enough concoction. It just needed his constant attention just then. She turned to one of the issues at hand. "Do you think Andromeda will marry one of those wizards in the parlor?"

"Absolutely not," he answered vehemently. There was a dark look in Severus's eye that Hermione didn't understand.

"Tim said they can help her financially."

"Oh, yes, Narcissa made sure we knew all about that. One has pull at the Ministry and might help her get her taxes reduced, and the other claims he has a large family estate here in England somewhere."

"Wouldn't it be good for her, then?"

"Neither is completely able to help her, and...have you seen those wizards? Would you want to be married to either of them?"

Hermione shrugged. "I didn't think they were so very awful... for an older witch."

Severus snorted. "The one is twice her age, and the other is simply unthinkable."

Hermione looked at him for a moment. "Do you think his being twice her age is a drawback, then?"

He shook his head. "If there were any reason to think she loved him, I would advise her to marry him." Severus's voice sounded a little strange, and Hermione stopped to look at him. She didn't see anything in his face and simply looked at the rest of him.

Something she saw stopped her in her tracks. Her eyes were stuck on the third finger of his left hand. "What is *that*?" she asked, pointing.

He looked down and saw what disturbed her. Did he wince? He did shrug. "It was my grandfather's wedding ring. I've been wearing it..."

She made a great show of sighing with relief. "That's good. For a second I thought you must have gotten married while I was gone."

His face set in its expression, and he asked quietly, "Would that have been a problem?"

"Don't even joke about it. I would have to kill the witch." He knew better than to look into her eyes. He wasn't sure why, but he suddenly knew that upon this subject she would be particularly serious.

As she continued describing the complete unsuitability of his getting married, Severus reflected that it was good that he and Andromeda had not announced their marriage. Hermione seemed a bit unstable on the subject. They could wait until after she took her N.E.W.T.s. Then he would manage whatever fallout there was when it wouldn't impact her future.

"Tell me about Australia," he said, "and grab an apron. You may as well be useful. You may start by chopping those leaves."

Andromeda brought the laundry back inside and smiled at her son in the kitchen. "How are your calculations coming?"

He hastily closed his notebook. "They worked out just fine, Mum."

"Are you doing Statistics or Arithmancy today? Shall I look it over?"

He swept his notebook into his bag. "Professor Snape helped me get started, and the rest almost did itself."

"That's good then, isn't it? I should have realized you would have an aptitude there years ago."

Tim waved dismissively. "It's not like it matters. No one wants an Arithmancer who's a Squib otherwise." He cleared his throat. "Mum, when's he leaving?"

Tim watched his mother carefully as she dropped the basket and fussed about picking everything up. "Mum?" He hadn't seen fingers so shaky since Nym had that crush on her werewolf.

"He's staying as long as he likes, Tim."

"Is that wise?"

She was kneeling on the floor to retrieve the basket. Her hands fluttered over the laundry, which hadn't fallen out. "He's staying every single minute that he likes."

"But, Mum..."

Barnaby Fudge burst into the kitchen. "Mrs. Tonks, I'll take my leave of you, now."

"All right, Mr. Fudge, if that's what you wish."

"I don't wish it, but I find that I must. Please tell your mother that I've decided to cancel our negotiation."

"If you think that's best, Mr. Fudge." She walked him toward the front door.

"I wouldn't, if I thought you cared. Is there any way to change your mind, Mrs. Tonks?"

Her smile was dreamy as she shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"I'll take my leave then."

"Farewell, Mr. Fudge."

The wizard muttered as he went down the path. She returned to her kitchen and the laundry. "I see you're capable of getting rid of some wizards," said Tim.

"Watch your cheek or you'll see how well I get rid of bad-mannered sons, too," she answered with a smile. She sighed as she remembered the other visitor in her parlor. "I suppose I'd better see whether Mr. Roberts needs anything."

Andromeda went to the parlor and saw Mr. Roberts looking at some family portraits and smiling. "Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Roberts?"

The door behind her clicked shut. "You can agree to marry me at once, Andromeda. We'll start our family and as soon as I get a child on you, I can sort out the paperwork and claim my family estate."

"I'm not sure I follow your line of reasoning, but I'm fairly sure that I can't...Mr. Roberts!" This was said as the wizard came and pulled her into his arms.

"We can start now, Andromeda." He pulled her tighter than before and lowered his head.

"No," she whispered, turning her head away.

"You're right. Why waste valuable time?" His hands started working at the zipper of her dress.

"Stop, please..."

"It pleases me to do this," he replied.

The doorknob rattled. "Mum? Are you in there?"

"Tim! Help!"

The door rattled again but did not open. Andromeda heard footsteps down the hall. The wizard held her tight, and she despaired of getting away. He tried to kiss her again and she shrank away from him. He held her at arm's length and shook her. "Here, now! That's not how a proper wife acts."

"I'm not your wife!"

"You will be."

She couldn't let this go on. She felt sick and angry all at once. She could feel magic growing within her, gaining focus.

"Ouch!" She fell to the floor as he dropped her. He clasped his hands together as though they hurt. Suddenly the door opened and Severus stood there, Hermione and Tim standing right behind. Stanley Roberts pointed at her. "The bitch hexed me!"

"That would appear to be your cue to leave," said Severus.

"I believe I shall. Snape, explain to your hostess that she needs to play nice if she doesn't want to lose everything." With that, Roberts went out the door. Severus followed him to make sure he really left.

"Mum, are you all right?" Tim helped her back onto her feet.

"Yes, I'm fine. It will take more than the likes of that to hurt me," she answered. "Let's get dinner." Severus returned from the door and looked at her. She shrugged and smiled. "It's over. I'm free of my mother's and sister's meddling in my life, now."

Severus looked at her relief. Then he looked at the two younger ones standing with her. It wasn't the proper time to worry about the threat Roberts had just made. He would discuss it with her later as he took steps to ensure the wizard stayed away from the house.

Hermione and Tim stayed through dinner, and Andromeda never said a word more than "Dinner is ready," or "Leave room for pudding." She watched Severus's eyes glow as he looked at the girl. Once he looked up at her and right into her eyes. He had never looked happier to her. She quietly shoed them back to his room and took care of the dishes with Tim.

"Mum, what is going on here?"

"I'm not going to answer that question right now, Tim."

"Please tell me that I'm reaching certain conclusions with Arithmancy because I'm a Squib."

"I don't know what those conclusions are, Tim, so I can't answer honestly."

He was reluctant to put his suspicions into words, so he helped her finish the dishes and then prepared to leave. "I hope you know what you're doing. I worry about you."

"You should worry more about yourself, dear. How is Sophy?"

He smiled in a way that reassured his mother that all was well. He gave his mother a big kiss and whispered a special hope. Andromeda smiled and encouraged him in pursuing that hope. Then he stepped into the fireplace and was gone.

As she bathed Teddy and put him to bed, Andromeda wondered if she should be quite so hasty in eliminating suitors. The problem was that the two that visited today would be simply impossible, even if she had never met Severus. Having been his wife, she knew that there was no way she could possibly let those men touch her.

She undressed and brushed out her hair as she tried to puzzle it out. Was there a man who wanted to take on her household? Was there such a man whom she could love, or at least enjoy being with? She slid between the sheets, unable to answer the question, and was essentially asleep by the time Severus came up to bed. "I didn't realize how much I missed her," he said. "Isn't it wonderful to have her home?"

"Hum," she said, waking up, "I'm sure you must have been happy to see her."

"It seems as though I have everything I could possibly want around me right now," he exulted. "Speaking of which..."

His hands slid around her and started caressing. He kissed her neck, and she responded eagerly. It was just the two of them in their bed together tonight and every night, whatever might happen downstairs. "My dove," he hissed as her fingertips touched and explored.

When it was over they lay quietly together, sharing little moments from their day as they relaxed. He reached for the ring that hung around her neck on that chain. "We can't announce our marriage yet."

"I didn't expect to."

"I forgot that I've been wearing my ring, and Hermione was very upset to see it."

"What did you tell her?"

"I got as far as saying that it had been my grandfather's ring, and she accepted it. However, she started raving about the unsuitability of my getting married. I don't think I can tell her about the marriage until after she's taken the exams."

Andromeda nodded. "You can't risk ruining her grades. It would be a shame to compromise her future."

"You understand." He sounded a little too relieved, but she let it pass. "It's not that we have any reason to be ashamed. My dove, what we share is..." He couldn't find the word.

"I know," she said quietly. "I'm not sure I'm ready for everything that will happen when they all know, either. Tim's been asking questions in a way that implies disapproval."

He pressed his lips to the side of her head and whispered. "I don't know what I've done to deserve a wife who's so understanding."

She turned her head to press her lips to his. "You deserve every good thing that comes to you, Severus Snape. After everything you've been through, after everything you've done, you deserve the best of everything."

He lifted his head to look into her eyes. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"I do."

He smiled, because it reminded him of their wedding vows. "I'm going to hold you to that."

He went to sleep and she held him for a while longer, grateful that she wouldn't have to face Hermione or Narcissa any time soon. She wondered why he kept acting as though he didn't deserve good things. She would be grateful for the fact that he valued her.

"I do believe it," she whispered, knowing he wasn't listening, "and you're going to get every good thing I can arrange, even if a time comes when what you want isn't me anymore."

A/N: I realize something else was expected here, but as you can see, Severus chickened out. He's not good at interpersonal things, yet, and he's afraid of ruining some things. Thank you for your patience! Thank you also to Trickie Woo, whose red quill occasionally works overtime.

Dynamics

Chapter 17 of 24

Andromeda fights for what belongs to her.

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Andromeda had long since regretted the kind urge that had suggested that Hermione spend so much time in the kitchen. It was *good* for the younger witch to practice the household spells that were so foreign to her. It was good for her to learn how to manage a house and prepare a good meal. The difficulty was in watching the younger witch gain confidence and beauty. Severus had been very definite about the terms of their marriage, but in the presence of a smarter and younger witch, Andromeda knew moments of worry.

As Valentine's Day approached, the girl went too far. She was naturally eager and excited, but her questions and the advice she requested were things Andromeda had been uncomfortable discussing with her own daughter. Hermione, however, never seemed to understand that some topics were inappropriate.

"It's got to happen soon," she said. "He's got to start thinking about romance."

"I'm sure that..." Andromeda had nothing to offer. More to the point, she could admit, to herself at least, that she wanted all of Severus's thoughts of romance centered wholly upon herself. She wasn't sure how to respond to Hermione's comments, but it didn't matter, since the girl simply made her own observations.

"I'm going to dress for Valentine's Day so that he'll make his move. I'll wear something snug and revealing. Something red, of course."

Andromeda had tried to be a good sport. She had avoided interrupting their private conversations, thinking that she should allow them to make their future plans. She had tiptoed past his room during the evenings, not wanting to trouble them. Suddenly something, some jealous monster perhaps, raised its head and rebelled. She wouldn't let Severus go without a fight. She certainly wouldn't let the future impinge upon the present. He hadn't even kissed the girl yet; well and good. Somehow Andromeda would make sure he wouldn't do so until the proper time came.

She considered her options as her husband lay sprawled across her body. While he slept in her arms, she stroked his hair and thought about how best to wage her small battle. Narcissa or not, Hermione or not, he was Andromeda's husband right now. Whatever they managed to arrange for the future, this was Andromeda's time and, by Psyche, Andromeda would have every second of it.

On the morning of Valentine's Day, she stilled her trembling breath and went to London. She started on Diagon Alley but walked into the Leaky Cauldron and through a door she had only heard of before. Ten minutes after throwing Floo Powder into her own kitchen fireplace, she found herself staring at Muggle Charing Cross Road.

Squaring her shoulders, because she was a Black after all, she followed carefully written directions and made her way to the underground trains and a shopping district in a trendy part of town. Eventually she reached a boutique Nymphadora had once laughingly mentioned. She watched the door for a few minutes. She couldn't be too careful. Knowing her daughter, the place might have been one where tarts acquired their professional materials or something like that. The clientele seemed well-mannered and elegantly dressed. That was a relief.

She finally took a step through the door. One of the sales clerks came to welcome her. She led the prospective customer to a counter where there was some sort of catalogue. Andromeda had been given a strange card with fancy numbers on it by the goblins. It would somehow enable her to draw from her Swiss account at Muggle stores without the Ministry knowing. She placed it on the counter top and said, "Make me irresistible."

The sales clerk looked at the card and smiled brightly. Then she looked Andromeda up and down, walking around her. She nodded to a co-worker, and together the two started measuring. After that they started pulling garments from racks and cupboards. Finally they sent their customer through a door that had the label "SPA" on it. Minutes later, Andromeda couldn't decide whether she felt more violated or pampered, but she set her chin and submitted to the treatments. She wanted a night that neither Severus nor she would ever forget.

She arrived back home to find a squalling baby in the kitchen with the house-elf. "Little Master is hard to comfort, Mistress."

"I thought Severus would play with him, at least for a little while."

"Master takes good care of Little Master, but then Missy comes and makes Master shut door. Master never shuts door, before." Based on Hermione's determination, it was clear what was probably happening. Andromeda sat down heavily into a chair. The elf rushed over and patted her hand. "Is Mistress sick? Her face is white."

Andromeda roused herself to reassure the house-elf. "Oh, no, Birdie, I'm fine. I'll take Teddy now. I'm sure that if I take him upstairs with a bottle, he'll feel better."

"Thank you, Mistress. Birdie looks after dinner."

"It's just the things we discussed this morning, no more. Thank you, Birdie." Teddy stopped fussing so loudly when his grandmother took him, but he still sniffled and whimpered all the way down the hall. As she passed the door to Severus's room, it opened and Severus himself stood there. He looked at her, and it was almost as though he had been waiting for her.

"I thought I'd heard you come in," he said. "I'm sorry that I couldn't take care of him."

"He's probably a bit spoiled by all our attention most of the time. I'm sure he'll be fine this once." She couldn't help glancing past his still perfectly-dressed form at the room behind. Hermione stood there in a red dress that was far too short, but was impeccably fastened. Nothing had happened. She allowed herself a small smile for the triumph.

"You look different." Severus hadn't taken his eyes from her.

She smiled a little self-consciously, and her free hand patted her head. "Oh, I had my hair done."

He looked her up and down, letting her know that he noticed more than her hair. "It's quite attractive," he answered. He glanced back down from her elegant upsweep to the wrap dress that hugged the very curves he had often told her he admired. "Very attractive."

"Thank you," she said.

"I'll be right up," he leaned down and whispered into her ear.

"I need to see to Teddy," she answered, "but Birdie is seeing to dinner."

His next whisper was almost inaudible. "Then I shall be seeing to you."

The sensation that she was in control was heady. She couldn't resist the opportunity to rub her victory into the face of the witch who didn't know there was a competition. "Good evening, Hermione," she said, knowing that it was anything but good for the younger woman. She didn't wait for a response but rather looked the wizard in the eye as she moved to the stairs.

Severus couldn't understand what had gotten into Hermione. First she had insisted upon shutting the door, although he preferred to keep it open, just to protect everyone's reputation. Then she had drawn attention to her dress, asking if he liked it. When he had observed, "I'm sure whichever Gryffindor for whom you wore it will admire it greatly," she seemed miffed.

Her behavior on her studies had been distracted, and he was grateful when Andromeda came home. It was as though a breath of normalcy had come through the house. Much as he liked the girl, he couldn't wait for her to leave so that he could find out what Andromeda had done today besides visit the hairdresser and purchase that incredibly distracting dress.

He saw the girl to the Floo and then took the tray the elf handed him. As he went up the stairs, he discovered that he was walking through flower petals on a path outlined by candles. When he arrived in the bedroom, he found a witch waiting for him, a witch who had gone to a great deal of effort just for him. There were more candles, and the flower petals were swirled around the room along the floor, over the bed, and on the love seat where she was sitting.

"Happy Valentine's," she said.

He moved across the room quickly. He wanted to put the tray on the coffee table and take Andromeda into his arms. Once accomplished, he crushed her close. "My dove," was all he could say.

"You like it, then?"

He groaned into her shoulder. "I can't decide whether to ravish you as you are or to undress you and go from there."

"We have all night and plenty of food," she murmured.

He lifted his head and looked around. "That's right. We're married, and we're in our own bedroom." He sat on the loveseat and pulled her down onto his lap. He fumbled in his eagerness, and Andromeda, who had never before understood sexual power, put her arms around her husband's neck and over the next several minutes brought them both complete enjoyment.

His face pressed to her bosom as they caught their breath afterward. "What's gotten into you?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered, "but I'm determined to enjoy every minute with you that I have."

He kissed a bit of skin visible above the neck of her dress. "Would it be all right to eat, now?"

"Oh, yes," she answered.

He ate quickly and urged her to do the same. "You're so different tonight," he observed. "Did you really do all of this for me?"

"I just wanted you to know how important you are to me, how much I've come to enjoy having you here." She was careful not to say anything that might be interpreted as needy. She didn't want him to feel that she was clinging to him.

"You know I've enjoyed every minute I've spent in your home. *Every* minute, even two years ago, when I believed you were unattainable." He leaned toward her and fingered the ties of her dress. "May I?"

She smiled. "Of course."

The dress was held together with a tie on the outside over one hip and another tie on the inside over the other hip. He found both ties and unfastened them and then held the dress open. He lost his breath looking at her. He had never seen so much black lace in his life.

"For me?" He leaned back helplessly. Sensing that she needed to take the initiative, she stood. Lifting her hands, she slid the collar of the dress over her shoulders. Then she shrugged and let it fall to the floor. He moaned weakly. She reached up and removed the pins from her hair, letting it tumble around her shoulders and down her back.

"My dove..."

She reached for his hand. "Come."

He followed her to the bed. She knelt upon it and leaned toward him, kissing him as he stood there. He simply sampled her mouth and enjoyed the taste of it. There were some flavors that were from the dinner they had just shared, and others that were simply Andromeda to him.

She pulled free of his lips and started kissing his chest. He hadn't realized until then how quickly she had undressed him. He wasn't sure what she wanted him to do with his hands, so he let them trail down her back. When he moved lower, he discovered a suspender and sucked in his breath. He followed the elastic down to where a silk stocking was held in place. He groaned, and his other hand moved to do what the first was doing.

He wasn't sure if he could wait. Now he took the initiative and gently pressed her back among the pillows. He had to explore and experiment, but he figured out how to remove her delectable undergarments, kissing and touching the whole time. Her gasps and shrieks drove him mad. Finally they were alone on the bed save for the flower petals. He leaned up over her and kissed her as the toes of one pedicured foot traced the back of his leg.

He wished he could tell the witch how he felt about her. He was sure she knew, and he entertained hopes that she felt the same way. He whispered that he found her beautiful and desirable. She sighed in response, and he told her of the pleasure she brought him. A moment passed in which neither was capable of coherent thought.

When he was able to speak again, he brushed her hair out of the way and whispered. "I wish I could explain how much I feel for you, how important you've become to me and how much I admire and esteem you." He couldn't resist kissing her once more.

When she could speak again, she said, "Severus, I love you."

He was very quiet. He was facing a different direction, and she couldn't see his eyes. She had no idea what he was thinking and suddenly started to panic. It had just come out...she hadn't meant to say anything so needy or clingy.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "That just came out; I don't mean to make you uncom..."

His mouth covered hers, and it seemed that his face might be damp. "Don't be sorry; I was hoping you felt the same way I do." He whispered a Summoning spell and a box came out of his robe. "This is for you. I've felt since we married that you should have a proper diamond ring." He slid the ring on her finger and then removed the wedding band from the chain around her neck to place it on her hand as well. "I look forward to the day we announce our marriage to the whole world," he said.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading!

Event Horizon

Chapter 18 of 24

The school year draws close to an end, and Andromeda is sure she knows what that means.

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Hermione came to the Tonks home in an elated mood. She had just received her N.E.W.T.s grades and another special piece of mail that morning. She was received into the fellowship program she had been hoping to get. After sharing it in delight with Ron and Harry over breakfast, there was one person she had to share it with.

When she arrived at the cottage, she went through the kitchen. She discovered Tim sitting at the table, working on a math problem. As she got closer, she discovered it was actually Arithmancy.

"Can you *do* that?"

"Mother discovered at some point that I actually have some magical skill in this area, and she encouraged me to study it. I've always been really good in mathematics."

Hermione looked over his shoulder. "Wow. That's way higher level than I'm used to doing, at least yet. I just got a fellowship. Part of it will include work in Arithmancy."

Their eyes met and they smiled at each other for just a moment. Then Tim scowled and looked down again at his paper. Hermione leaned over it again.

"Wow! Does this refer to Sophy?" she asked, pointing to a combination of characters.

He looked at the term she indicated, started, and then shook his head. "Oh, no. This is something I got out of one of Professor Snape's books. He's been helping me further my study." He frowned at the expressions on the paper. "I can't seem to make them come out right."

"I'm sure you'll get it. You're really quite clever." Ted rolled his eyes at her patronizing tone of voice, but she couldn't notice something like that in this mood. "At any rate, I'm here to speak with Severus. Do you know where he is?"

"He and Mum are out in the back garden. They were going into ecstasies over nasturtiums or something."

"All right then. Thanks!" She went to the mud room and Tim frowned some more over his equations. Then he made an exclamation, jumped up, and followed the witch.

Andromeda was glad for a chance to work in the garden. Outside of the bedroom, it was where Severus was the most comfortable with her. They were both at ease in the still room, brewing, but somehow the garden felt more natural. They worked cheerfully, although the sense that her doom must fall soon never left her. In the garden he smiled and teased her in a way that was fun and fresh. They filled a basket with early herbs and Severus went up the walk to take them inside. They would sort them later.

Andromeda watched the younger witch come out the door and wave a sheet of parchment. She could only guess at the news it must carry. Severus's reaction was unmistakable. He picked up the young woman and swung her around in an exuberant hug. Andromeda told herself that it was good news. Certainly it was good news for Severus and Hermione. The present was over; the future had come.

Suddenly Andromeda's head ached. Her heart started to beat wildly and her face felt as though it were on fire. Maybe she was having a reaction to the sunshine. She needed to get to the house and sit down. The pruning shears fell from her hands as she took a step or two. She suddenly couldn't breathe although her chest seemed to be pounding. There was an outcry from behind the celebrating couple, but she couldn't tell what. The colors around her bled from their outlines of trees, house and sky, and then they turned black. She was at the bottom of the abyss.

"Mum!" shouted Tim. He brushed by Severus and Hermione to run to his mother's side and lift her up. An instant later he was joined by the wizard. "I don't think we need you," said the younger man.

"Yet since I'm here, you can use my assistance," answered the wizard. He picked Andromeda up and carried her toward the door. "Hermione, would it be possible for you to fetch Madam Pomfrey on your way to the Burrow?"

Her eyes were wide and she nodded. As the group made its way through the kitchen, the young witch used the Floo.

Tim ran up the stairs to open the door to the bedroom ahead of Snape. He looked around the room, seeing the obvious signs that the room was occupied regularly by two people. He turned and looked at the older man, who was cradling his mother in his arms and murmuring softly to her. Tim's anger rose as he watched Snape lower the witch into the bed and then kiss her face fervently.

"You've done this to her."

"I've done what?"

"Do the math, Professor."

"Severus..."

Both were drawn to the bed. "Mum?" Tim took her hand. "Are you all right?"

"Just overheated, I'm sure."

"Shall we loosen your robe, my dove?"

"You've done quite enough, I think," said the young man.

"Please... Tim... I know you're disappointed in me, and I know you don't understand, but please give me some time with Severus."

Tim glowered at the two, as furious with Snape as he was worried about his mother. He opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't when he looked again at his mother's face. She clearly couldn't handle any more dissension, so he turned on his heel and left the room.

Severus sat next to the witch and gently pulled her into his arms. "Andromeda, what happened?"

"I saw the future, and I don't belong in it. I've feared it all along, Severus, but I'll be brave. I promise."

He was immediately alarmed. "What are you saying? Are you sick, my dove? We'll find a cure..."

She reached to pat his hand. "Oh, no, it's nothing like that. But I want you to know that if it's time for you to move into your future... without me... I understand." He looked into her eyes, saw her try to be brave.

"What are you talking about? We settled all that at Christmas."

"It was settled, but I always understood...you will move on without me at some point."

"Andromeda? I hear you're ill." A new voice came from the doorway.

"I just got overtired, Poppy. We'd been working in the garden all morning."

"We'll see. Severus, why don't you wait downstairs?"

He looked at Andromeda. She seemed so small on the bed right then, but there was nothing to do but obey the mediwitch. He kissed the cheek of the witch in the bed and left the room.

The Squib was waiting for him in the kitchen. "What do you think you're doing?" asked Tim. "Are you after her money, the pureness of her blood, what? What could you possibly want from her that you can't get elsewhere?"

The professor's eyes were unreadable. An eyebrow raised and his lips barely parted as he said, "Do you really want to know?"

"I already know, thank you."

"Then you know that I simply need her. Not the money, not the prestige, but the essence of her... the way she soothes me when I'm sick, the way she smiles every morning when she brings my coffee, the way I feel when she lets me hold her in my arms." He was smiling without realizing it. He turned back to the younger man and looked sternly at him. "I only want to share some happiness with her."

"She's not happy, she's miserable. I suspect that she's even more miserable now than when Dad died. I hear she collapsed that day, too, and didn't leave her bed until Teddy was born."

"I won't let that happen again."

"How will you prevent it?"

Severus opened his mouth and realized that while Tim was right about Andromeda's increasing misery of late, and that he had no idea how to cure it. "I'll find out what troubles her, and then I will move heaven and earth to make it right."

"Maybe she's just realized that you plan to sponge off her."

Snape reached into a pocket of his robe. Thinking he would bring out his wand, Tim ducked, but instead a thumbnail-sized stone skidded across the kitchen table. Tim picked it up and held it to the light. "Is this...?"

"It's not the Philosopher's Stone."

"It looks very like the picture of the one they tried to hide all those years ago."

"Well, it is a philosopher's stone, but not of the same caliber of the one destroyed by Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel."

"How did you get it?"

"Nicolas was my master when I trained as a journeyman in Potions. He showed me how to develop it. With this stone I can make an elixir that will cure many things although not all illnesses and injuries and certainly not old age. I can make a fair amount of money but not the endless wealth of the stone Nicolas had. The third effect is reduced, too, but I think it would work for you."

"The third effect?" Tim's heart beat faster. "I'd heard there was a third effect, but I considered it to be too fantastic."

"Oh, it was real. Nicolas granted full magical power with his stone to several promising people. The Ministry cited the Statute of Secrecy when they stepped in and stopped him a century and a half ago."

"So you're giving this to me why?"

"I've seen you over the past months. It's my professional opinion, as an educator of magical folk, that you might have more latent magic than you or your family gave you credit for."

Tim sighed. "I've been all through this with my parents and Dumbledore. I'm a natural at math and Arithmancy, and I can be helpful with Mum's simple potions. I have never had any sort of ability with a wand, however. No sparks, steam, flowers, or anything. Just a swish and a flick and nothing."

"Given that you have a fair amount of ability but it's lop-sided, my stone might help you."

A wistful look crossed Tim's face before he turned red. He looked up in anger. "Do you think I would allow my wish to be magical to color my judgment where my mother is concerned? Am I supposed to accept this... payment... from you and ignore the fact that you've...Am I supposed to pander to the highest bidder in order to have a life I've learned to do without? Do you expect me to sell my mother...my father's wife...so cheaply?"

Snape's own eyes flashed with anger, finally. "Think what you want, boy. I wanted to reassure you that she has nothing material that I want, and I thought I could help. Accept the gift or not, it's free and clear. What lies between your mother and myself is entirely our affair. She doesn't need you to..."

There was the sound of a throat clearing and Severus turned to see Poppy standing in the middle of the room. "She would like to see Tim, now, and Severus later."

Severus had to ask. "Poppy, what happened?"

"It was just as she guessed, she was simply overheated and very tired. I think after a long nap this afternoon and a good dinner she'll be perfectly fine. She may need to rest more over the next few days, that's all"

"I understand, Poppy, but what caused..."

There was a snort from the younger man. "Like I said, Professor," said Tim, "do the math." He tossed the stone to Snape and walked out of the kitchen.

Supernova

Chapter 19 of 24

When the pressure is too great, the stars explode.

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"As long as you take it easy for a day or two, Andromeda, you'll be fine."

"Thank you, Poppy."

Andromeda looked at the blanket as Poppy left the room. She could feel Severus's anger toward her and reached for a way to diffuse it. "Severus..." She was lost.

"Look at me."

She turned and watched his adam's apple work as he decided what to say. "I know it looks..." She broke off because she realized that she had no idea how it looked to him.

"All winter I've wondered, and just now I was brought to task by your son, and I have no idea." He said it quietly, and she felt the heat of his anger shift to something cold. "What on earth have you been thinking of me? Why does your family treat me as they do?"

"It's ok. Even with everything, you can still go. I won't hold you--"

"Andromeda," she heard him swallow, "are you saying you want me to leave?"

"No!" It came out as a moan. She saw the way his eyes glittered and realized that this time, at least, she owed him the truth. "I don't want you to pity or regret me, but the idea of you leaving is killing me. I don't know I'll manage when you leave. I roamed the house feeling sick half the time when you went for the N.E.W.T. testing. I can only imagine what I will be when you're gone for good."

"If you want me to stay, then why are you pushing me to go?"

"Narcissa says..."

"Narcissa!"

His eyes bored into her, and she nodded. "So all of this matchmaking with all the eligible pure-blood bachelors is to get you out of my life?"

She nodded again, timidly because she could see he was getting angry again.

"And you think so little of me that you went along with it?"

Andromeda didn't know how to answer. She'd never seen it that way. "No. I love you so much that..."

"So you don't believe me when I tell you I love you? You expect me to lie?"

"It's not like that! I can't explain, but it's not like that at all. I believe you, but I also know that you're young, and I'm older, and you've said yourself you finally get a chance to have a say in your future while I'm stuck with the past. How can I dream of tying you to me forever?"

He summoned a chair from across the room and sat down heavily. "Of all people, I thought you trusted me."

"It's not like that. I swear." Andromeda had known all along that she'd have to have this conversation, but now in the middle of it, she was starting to feel panicky. "It has nothing to do with you."

He snorted. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I didn't mean it like that. I don't know if I can explain it."

He moved to sit next to her on the bed. He patted her hand. "Narcissa and your mother have done a number on you, haven't they?"

"They just told me what I should have seen for myself."

He sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Narcissa can go hang. Why do *you* expect me to leave?"

"Because you're in love with someone else."

"Why would you think that?" Before she could answer, he nodded and said it with her. "Because Narcissa says. Has she picked my love for me?"

"You do show her preference, and she's clearly special to you. I can't think of another reason..."

"Who is it?"

"One of the students."

"Oh, and now I'm some sort of predator who can't find a student promising without wanting to have sex with her?"

"Oh! No!"

He sighed and said it with her. "It's not like that."

"It's that... Well, now that she's taken her N.E.W.T.s, she's not your student any more, is she? Now she's just a witch you think is bright and attractive."

He glowered, but nodded his head, finally. "All right then, Andromeda. Suppose you tell me who she is. *Is* she?"

By this point, something in Andromeda's mind that was trying to be logical pointed out that if he was about to leave her, he ought to know who with, so it was with wrinkles in her forehead that she whispered the answer, "Hermione."

"*Hermione?*" he shouted loud enough for it to be heard downstairs. All Andromeda could do was nod.

"Of all the hairbrained ideas--" Severus got up, turned his chair to look out a window, and sat for several moments. Andromeda played with her blanket again and tried not to snifle. She'd imagined all sorts of terrible things for the day they had this conversation, but this was beyond horrible. Deciding that she had to at least do something, she swung her legs out of the bed and stood up.

"Get back in bed, Andromeda," he said tiredly but without turning. "You heard what Poppy said."

"I should pack your things for you. I want to--I need to feel like I'm your wife this last little bit."

"So I can go be happy with Hermione?"

There, he'd said it. Her heart missed a beat, but she bit her lip and walked toward the foot of the bed. He still wasn't looking at her, so she had to answer aloud. "Yes."

"I'm not leaving you for Hermione." It was said definitively, but he still didn't look at her. Not knowing how to respond, her heart sank a little.

"Then because you're so angry with me that we can't--"

Now he stood up and shook his head. "I'm furious, Andromeda. I'm so angry that if Potter were here, I'd hex him." His fists were balled up at his sides, and now she saw that he was indeed shaking with rage. "Get back in the bed, Andromeda, before I put you in it. If you don't care what Poppy said, I do."

Her eyes became enormous as she sat down on the bed and pulled her legs up under the sheet. He pulled the covers back over her and sat back down on the bed. "You and your sister--" he started. He looked at the ceiling and swallowed hard. He tried to continue-- "After everything I told you about wanting to choose my own life and make my own choices... For her to decide who I need to marry, and then plot to make it happen is such a sneaky, Slytherin stunt. But for you to go along with it, especially when

you feel as you claim you do is worse. I expected you of all people to understand. There a certain amount of betrayal in it."

She nodded. "I do understand. You won't be able to forgive me." She was back to pulling on the blanket and folding it between her fingers. "I can't forgive myself. I don't blame you for leaving me."

Suddenly he sighed and laughed a hollow laugh. "You don't understand a thing, my beautiful idiot, my dear wife who's older than me but plenty young, as it happens. You will, though."

She looked up in confusion.

"First of all, I'm not leaving you. I have a family here."

She shrugged. "A rather odd one, and I'm not going to hold you against your will just over that."

"I believe you, but if you expect me to leave just because we've had a disagreement, you're an idiot."

"But you said I've betrayed you."

"Do you expect me to give you up just over that? Don't you understand how I've come to depend on you? Don't you realize how lost I was without you during the week at Hogwarts, even in the place that was home to me for almost thirty years?"

"So you're staying?"

"Of course." He tilted his head and slid his hands up around her neck. Andromeda wasn't sure what he was doing, but an instant later he leaned back, holding the chain she'd been wearing. "You may have tinkered with the contract, but I meant the vows. I mean them for as long as we're both on this side of the veil." He slid her rings from the chain and held them to his lips.

"Oh." Suddenly, Andromeda was filled with hope, and the feeling of love that was returned. She could tell that he was still angry, but they would work through it. She slid her hand along the blanket to touch his, and he took it. He placed the rings on her hand and held it up to his face. She looked and realized that his ring was already on his hand.

"The thing is," he said while looking thoughtful, "that I haven't been utterly honest with you, either. It's past time for me to explain a few things, myself."

Big Bang

Chapter 20 of 24

The truth comes out.

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Hermione could tell that Severus had something he wanted to discuss with her soon. She was sure she knew what it was. There was a tense day or two when Mrs. Tonks was sick, and the only contact from Severus was a terse owl to stay away from the cottage. The note told her that he would send for her in a few days when he could arrange time for them to talk without interruption.

Ron glowered when she mentioned Severus at Grimmauld Place, while Harry sighed and looked bored. It didn't matter. They were just her childhood friends anyway. If they couldn't be happy for her, she would simply have to make new friends... or do without. Severus was the important thing.

After four days of waiting an owl came. She read the note and crowed to Harry and Ron. "See? He wants to see me today. There are important things he wants to discuss, he says. It's all going to happen!"

She looked up to see Ron walking down the hallway toward the stairs.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"What do you think?" rejoined Harry. "He loves you, Hermione. He can't turn it on and off like you apparently can."

"I thought he would be happy for me."

"He wants to be happy for you, Hermione, but the way you've flaunted this thing around... you've crushed his heart. It's a little hard to take." Harry got up and left the kitchen table. "For that matter, it's a little hard to watch, too."

It didn't matter. She could be happy without Ron or even Harry in her life if need be. She got up and put her dishes in the sink and went up to her bedroom. On the way she almost knocked on the door of Ron's bedroom, but she heard something suspiciously like a snuffle and whatever it was stopped her.

Andromeda was bustling around her kitchen as usual. Hermione came through and smiled at little Teddy, who sat on a rug and banged an old cauldron with a wooden spoon. The mistress of the house looked up from hands buried in bread dough and smiled. "Hermione, you look lovely in that frock."

"Severus said he wanted to see me," Hermione said importantly.

"Yes," said Andromeda, "he told me you would be coming. He's out in the grove near the pond. I made you a bit of a lunch," she added, nodding toward a tray on the kitchen table. "Why don't you take it out there and enjoy it while you talk?"

Hermione's heart burst with this kindness. At least one person understood how perfect this moment should be. She impulsively hugged the shorter witch. "Oh, thank you! I hope we'll always be friends."

Andromeda looked at her a little oddly. "I hope that too, dear."

Smiling brightly, she walked out the door and around the pond until she found him. He was sitting on a blanket under an apple tree, which was just starting to bud. "You wanted to see me?" she asked, setting the tray down. She busied herself with sandwiches and napkins.

"Yes, I wanted to talk to you. There are a few things we need to discuss." She was kneeling on the blanket he sat on, and now she stopped moving. Her hands were folded in her lap as she looked at him in anticipation.

"Oh?"

He waved to the food. "Eat first, serious conversations later. Have you ever seen a prettier spring day?"

She looked around the garden, trying to see what he saw. The herb garden was in pristine condition. She knew that both he and Andromeda enjoyed keeping it neat. The flowering trees were all in some stage of bloom. The sky was bright for once and the grass was soft and green. "It is lovely," she admitted.

"I don't think I've ever seen a better spring. Part of it has to be the end of the war, but I think part of it is Andromeda's work."

She looked around again. "Yes, Mrs. Tonks seems very efficient. I think she was making bread when I came through the house. This home is lovely, and I hope we shall visit often."

"She's done a very good job at tending to me this past year. I might have recovered anywhere, but she made sure I would thrive. She did what was necessary to heal my injuries, and she provided the means to heal my other hurts as well."

Hermione smiled. "We owe a great deal to her."

"She also did much to help me re-enter the world around us. She was the first friend of my new life and she re-introduced me to everyone else. I can't help noticing that she has been good for her nephew, and even for you."

"I quite look upon her as another mother."

"I'm glad to hear that." He smiled fondly. Then he frowned and took a deep breath. "Perhaps I should have been more clear about the true state of things for a while, now." He put down his half-eaten sandwich and touched her hand. *Here it comes, she thought, I think I'm going to die of happiness.* "Hermione, I'm not visiting here. I'm going to live here from now on." He looked around himself. "And I'm going to *live*," he added under his breath.

She looked at him and kept chewing, sure that she simply didn't understand what he was saying. Nevertheless, a gulp of lemonade might keep the chicken salad from becoming sawdust. Surely the next sentence would explain it all. Her mind raced through possibilities. Mrs. Tonks *had* been sick lately. Maybe it was something life threatening. Maybe he was going to stay until she was truly better.

"Andromeda is pregnant, Hermione..."

She forced herself to swallow, although the muscles in her throat wanted to do something else. There was a definite implication, but a small window of possibility that he was just staying here to help Andromeda through what must surely be a difficult time. Her mind quickly decided that Severus was just being nice to a friend. Yes, that must be it. Mrs. Tonks had helped him get better and now he would help Mrs. Tonks. He was discussing it with her as his future—

She was so busy inventing a different meaning from the one she feared that she almost didn't hear him finish: "...with your half brother or sister."

Inflation

Chapter 21 of 24

Severus explains the surprising news he just gave to Hermione.

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Superinflation

Chapter 22 of 24

The circle of information grows.

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Hermione couldn't say any more and rushed away. She walked around the house even though she was desperate for a warm hug, for someone to tell her it would all work

out. Andromeda was the one person Hermione knew would give her comfort, and yet she was the one person she couldn't stand the thought of. She couldn't face the woman who was now... *her stepmother*... or that woman's kindnesses. Severus had been dishonest and Mrs. Malfoy had manipulated her, yet the focus of her rage now centered on the one person who had been invariably kind.

What a lie it all seemed now. She got to the spot on the crest of the hill where people usually Apparated or Disapparated and couldn't decide. Where could she go, what could she do, to cope with this disappointment and anguish? She realized that there was someone who might know exactly how she felt just then, who would feel the same sense of betrayal.

During a great show of clemency, several Death Eaters were released from Azkaban on the anniversary of their Master's downfall. In the short time after that, the Malfoy family had developed a habit of spending the afternoons together in the drawing room, chatting or simply sitting together quietly, reluctant to be apart. It was into this domestic scene that Hermione Granger burst.

"Mrs, Malfoy, your *sister* has ruined *everything*!"

Narcissa quickly rose from the couch beside her husband and steered the girl toward the door. "Perhaps we should discuss this in the room where I write my letters."

Father and son looked at each other. Lucius was the first to speak. "What do you suppose Andromeda has done, and why is the Mudblood speaking so emphatically?"

Draco looked up with ill-concealed laughter in his face. "If I had to, I would guess that Granger has discovered that Aunt Andie and Severus are shagging each other senseless."

"Indeed?"

"He can barely keep his hands off her during the day, and at night there's no telling what a person might stumble across."

The elder Malfoy's eyebrows shot up. "Why does the Mudblood care?"

"She thought Severus fancied her."

"Ah." There was a grunt of laughter. "I see the humor in the situation. Why does your mother care?"

"She seems to think there's some social or economic advantage to promoting the match between Granger and Snape. When I mentioned finding Aunt Andie in Severus's room on Christmas morning, she slapped me and told me to take it back."

"Which you couldn't do."

"Not if I told the truth."

"What did your mother do after that?"

"She went to see Aunt Andie and came back fuming. The next time I went to Aunt Andie's cottage, Severus had essentially moved into her bedroom. He's been using his other bedroom as a study, and Granger's thought he was still sleeping there."

The elder chuckled again. "What do you suppose they're discussing, now?"

"I can't imagine."

"Why don't we listen in, then?" Lucius led his son to a corner of the room, where he slid back a painting, showing a space in the wall and the back of another painting.

Hermione was talking. "He told me everything. They've been doing it since Christmas! Oh!" she said as a new thought burst upon her. "I very nearly walked in on them at least once! If I had gotten there just a bit earlier, I would have seen them..." There was a flurry of tears.

"This could get tedious quickly," Lucius observed quietly to his son, who nodded his agreement.

Narcissa was pacing the floor. "I'll kill her. We'll stop this, one way or another. It's just a setback, Hermione, we'll get back to plan."

"Never mind. They're married."

"What?" screamed a newly enraged Narcissa as her son whispered, "Cool, that makes him my uncle."

His mother was still talking. "Don't worry, Hermione, we'll get it annulled or divorced. They won't get around me like that."

"There's more," moaned the girl.

"Don't tell me—"

"—up the duff," mused Lucius quietly as his wife shrieked vile invective. "I wouldn't have thought Severus had it in him, and I pictured Andie as some sort of dried-up stick."

"Oh, no," answered his son. "Much curvier, and Sev—Uncle Severus—is a little different since almost losing his life. He's less like a walking cadaver."

"I'm trying to picture her. Does she still look like Bella?"

Draco made a face. "Speaking as a nephew of course, she's way better, and she's nice, too. I can't believe it... a cousin!"

Narcissa's voice broke into their quiet conversation. Her voice was quiet and controlled, now. "Even that is not an impediment, Hermione. There are potions, and they don't even need to know, if you're pouring the tea..."

Draco swore he could hear Hermione's hair crackle from her head shaking so hard. "No, it won't help," she said, her tears giving way to resignation. "He's never going to leave her. He loves her, and it wouldn't work anyway." She breathed deeply enough for them to hear in the other room and delivered the most important fact: "He's my biological father."

"Godric's flaming sword!" ejaculated Lucius.

Entropy

Chapter 23 of 24

Chaos erupts.

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After Lucius's stunned comment, it was clear to the witches that the wizards had been listening to their conversation. Hermione looked at the portrait of Cygnus and Druella Black in horror. "Have they heard everything?"

Draco could barely contain his laughter, while Lucius answered with a twinkle in his eye. "You've caught us, ladies."

Hermione was spluttering, so Narcissa said, from between her teeth, "Come in here, Draco and Lucius."

Once the four were in the same room, Narcissa opened her mouth in what was likely to be a long scolding. Lucius decided to take matters in hand. "Before you utter anything else, my dear, perhaps it's time to stop trying to manage things at your sister's house. She seems to be managing much better than you."

"Lucius..."

"Draco, would it be too much to ask you to escort Miss Granger back to her own home? I think she might be grateful for a guiding hand this evening, and I find that there are important matters to discuss with your mother."

Draco looked at Hermione and stifled his laughter. "Yes, Father."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed that her authority was being taken from her and watched in angry silence as her son and the young witch left. She turned on her husband. "We need to find a way to recover from this. If that girl—"

"If that girl does anything to endanger our family or its holdings, I'll be surprised." Narcissa wasn't listening and started moving toward the door as though to catch the pair who had just left. Lucius was faster than she was. Quick as a cat, he swept his arm around her hips and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Lucius, stop! Lucius, put me down! I have to deal with this." She pounded his shoulders with her fists. His response was a painless but attention-catching thwack on her behind.

"Why did you do that?" she shrieked.

He shrugged. "You hit me first."

He carried her up to their bedroom and lowered her to the bed, more gently than she expected. She looked up a little warily as her husband leered down at her. Her attitude took new interest as he lazily shed his robe and boots.

"Madam Malfoy, it seems as though someone who lives at this house has idle hands."

She changed tactics. "I missed you, Lucius."

"I gather that, too." He leaned down and carefully plucked the fastenings of her robe open.

"I was so lonely..."

"Lonely enough to fill your time by trying to meddle in your sister's affairs?" He leaned her up to push the robe from her shoulders and unzip her dress.

"Mother wanted to see her properly settled, and I was just—"

"Cissa..." he hissed as her pearly skin and underclothes became visible. Her eyes turned a smoky gray as he traced her bra strap. "Why don't we restore order to our home and let the Snapes—yes, we may as well acknowledge her married name—take care of their own home?"

"What did you intend?"

He ran his hand along her stomach. "Do you really have to ask?"

"Wait," she said, struggling to sit up, "my potion is just over there."

"Let's not," he answered. She looked up at him uncertainly. "If Snape can get your sister pregnant, surely I can do the same by you. Wouldn't your hands would welcome something to do, and wouldn't our house be less gloomy? Let's forget order and introduce a little disorder to it. Draco seemed pleased by the idea of a baby cousin, and he seems to enjoy playing with the Lupin whelp." He had slid her dress down her legs and now moved back up to press his lips to the inside of her knee before looking intently into her eyes. "Please say yes, Cissa."

How many years had she begged for this very thing? There had been many good reasons to keep Draco an only child, especially the Dark Lord. When Lucius had pointed them out over the years, she had agreed. The new light in his eyes told her that was all over. "Oh, yes, Lucius, yes..."

She continued to say it as his hands and then his body moved over her.

"I can't believe you knew all along," Hermione muttered into her glass.

"They weren't as discreet as they thought they were."

"They hid it pretty well from me." Hermione signalled for another glass. She frowned at the copy of *The Daily Prophet* left on the table by its prior inhabitants. "I still can't believe it. Andromeda and Severus as lovers all winter and spring. I *trusted* her. I told her to keep the Slytherin girls away."

Over her shoulder, Draco saw a face that looked somewhat familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. It wouldn't have bothered him, but once Hermione had mentioned Andromeda's name, the wizard started staring at Hermione.

Hermione took her drink and started her complaints again. "So typical of a Slytherin, to promise she wouldn't let the other girls flirt with him. Of course not. She wanted him all to herself. And all this time, she pretended to be my friend, encouraging me to just wait until he was ready to move on with his life."

By the third or fourth iteration, Draco was starting to find this conversation tedious, and that wizard was starting to bother him. "Hermione, do you suppose it's time to go home?"

"I can't go home." She winced. "Oh, Merlin, I have to tell all this to Harry. What will he think about it?" She slurped down the last of her drink. "And I can't face Ron. He'll be entirely too delighted, if he doesn't stop being my friend altogether because of my father." She made a sound halfway between a hiccup and a sob.

"There must be someplace I can take you..."

Hermione leaned up and looked with renewed interest at the paper. She looked at Draco and pointed at a picture. "Can you get me into this hotel?"

Draco looked at the picture and sighed. "Yes, the concierge owes me a few favors. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Hermione sat up straight and nodded her wobbling head. "Of course I do. Besides, it's not as if my *family* will care what I do."

Draco supported his step-cousin and knocked on the door to the penthouse suite. Fortunately, the person Hermione had hoped to see opened the door. He and Draco sized each other up.

"She's part of my family now," said Draco, "and I can promise that you will pay if you don't treat her properly. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

Draco turned back to Hermione. "Are you absolutely sure?"

She smiled and walked into the suite, leaning up into the other wizard, who gently supported her. Then the door shut and Draco was free to go back home.

Enthalpy

Chapter 24 of 24

Something new enters the mix.

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It was midmorning when the doorbell rang. Severus answered, since Andromeda was in the garden hanging out the laundry. He wasn't surprised to see Draco, but he didn't expect Draco's father. "Lucius! This is a surprise."

Lucius held out a cigar. "Congratulations on the birth of your daughter."

Severus sniffed it before sliding into his robe's inside pocket. "I take it that Hermione has visited you since she left here, yesterday?" He led Lucius and Draco into the lounge.

"Ah yes. She told Narcissa quite a tale. You've been a busy man since the Dark Lord fell, Severus."

"You're jealous." Severus smiled. "I didn't have to spend five years worrying about whether Cygnus Black was willing to part with one of his pampered darlings. I fell in love with my witch and let her decide, despite Druella's worst yowling. And now I'm to be a father."

Another cigar was handed over. "Yes, Miss Granger-or is it to be Miss Snape-told us all about it. Congratulations, again."

"Is that from you or from all the Malfoys?"

"I am delighted, Uncle Sev." said Draco.

Severus's mouth twisted. "You haven't been back that long, Lucius, and he's already speaking like you, again. Very well, thank you, Draco, and how did the chatelaine of Malfoy Manor take the news? Where is she, anyway? I would have expected her to come with you."

"Mum did her nut, yesterday," said Draco, "and she's in the garden with Aunt Andie, now."

"Narcissa saw that Andromeda was in the back and walked around the house to congratulate her," said Lucius.

Severus got up and walked quickly to the door to the kitchen. "That was imprudent of you, Lucius. Narcissa can't be trusted around Andromeda."

When they got to the back garden, they saw that Narcissa was lying at Andromeda's feet. Andromeda had her wand drawn and was breathing heavily. She saw them coming and turned to face them. There was a very clear, very bright pink handprint on her cheek. "She called me a common whore and then hit me. I didn't mean to hex her... it did itself."

Severus pulled his wife close. "I warned her, Lucius. I told her never to raise her hand against Andromeda." He kissed her forehead and whispered, "Are you all right, my dove?" He pulled away to look more closely at her face.

"I'm just angry. Why can't she let me be happy?"

"You weren't supposed to get involved," hissed Narcissa.

"It doesn't matter. What you wanted can't happen," Andromeda shot back.

"It doesn't mean you can have Severus! Mother and I had so many suitable husbands lined up for you."

"Severus is suitable!"

"He's half-blood!"

"You idiot! That's all done now. I don't care about that sort of thing."

By now, Lucius had picked his wife up off the ground and was backing her away. "You were correct, Severus. It was most imprudent. I shall bring her back when she's in a better frame of mind." Narcissa was trying to aim her wand at Andromeda over her husband's shoulder, but Lucius finally took it away.

Severus guided Andromeda toward the house. "Let the laundry dry. Draco and I will entertain Teddy, and you can rest a while."

Hermione woke early in the morning under the body of the person she'd asked Draco to help her find. She eased her way out from under him, kissing his nose when he murmured and reached for her. Sitting up carefully, she massaged her temples and glanced around for restorative potions. She found a bottle that looked likely on the kitchenette counter, sniffed it, and took a dose.

After a minute, she felt better, so she started to look for her clothes. The wizard had been sweet. He'd realized that it was her first time, and he'd been gentle, until he couldn't help himself. By then she hadn't been able to help herself either. She'd chosen him because he had a passing likeness to Severus, but they had discussed things, renewing an acquaintance they'd once had. Over the course of the night came to decide she actually liked him, too.

Which is why she had to be gone before he woke. This was destined to be a single night, and she wouldn't be able to stand it if the goodbyes were ugly. It would be too much after everything that had happened yesterday. She found her clothes and put them all back on. Then she leaned over and kissed him one last time.

"Look me up, sometime," she whispered. "Maybe, if we started actually dating like real people..."

She slipped out the door.

Harry and Ron were sitting at the kitchen table when she returned to Grimmauld Place. "Thank Merlin!" said Harry, "we were trying to decide if we should look for you."

Hermione shook her head. "No. I just need to get to bed."

Ron shrugged and swallowed hard. "Is everything all set between you, then? Should we congratulate you?" He was blinking.

She shook her head again. "No. It turns out I had it all wrong. Everything is all set, but not between us." Ron looked hopeful, and she couldn't face it, not now. "I'm sorry, I'll explain it all later."

She went to bed and slept until the afternoon. After a shower and some tea, she felt more herself and sat down to think. Getting drunk and losing control like that wasn't the best idea. There was also another consideration she should have realized before going out the night before. Her eyes grew wide when she saw it. She'd been very foolish yesterday.

A clock tolled the hour; Harry and Ron would be home soon. Hermione decided not to be home when they got there. She'd explain it all to them eventually, just not now. For now she'd go out to some Muggle places she'd always heard about and wanted to visit. She'd take some potions to keep herself from having too much, and she had a portkey that would get her out of any difficult situations. As for the other thing, it was unlikely, and she'd know for sure within a week or so.

Days later, Hermione sat down with Ron and Harry to explain it. She'd finally reached the point where she could be rational and explain everything without crying. Even so, she was shaking by the time she finished her story.

"So all this time, Snape's been your dad and you've been my sister?" Harry seemed a bit incredulous.

"I've checked it out. It's true. I was born at a hospital near where Lily and Petunia Evans grew up. Then I was placed for adoption."

Harry was frowning at some sort of strange magical device on a shelf. "So you got to grow up with loving parents."

"I got thrown away!"

"She found you people who would love you and raise you as their daughter."

"She *wanted* you!"

"It didn't work out any better for me, though did it? If I'd been raised by parents like you had-"

Ron held up his hand. When the two were finally silent, he shook his head, as if it clear it. "Hermione, you know we love you. Whatever the situation is, it's going to take us a while to figure out what it means, but we love you."

He looked so dear that she wanted to hug him, but she didn't. Somehow, just as with Andromeda, his kindness was too much. Instead, she summoned a decanter and some glasses.

"It's going to take a while to get to the bottom of it," she said. "We may as well get comfortable in the process."

She woke to banging on the door of 12 Grimmauld Place. Clearly her housemates were either away from home or more groggy than she was from the events of the previous night. She threw a robe around herself and went to answer it.

"Can I use the Floo from here?" It was Tim.

She folded her arms and glared. "Good morning, Hermione, I wonder if I might ask a favor. Sure thing, Tim, what can I do for you? Well first off, Hermione, why don't I tell you what the hell is going on?!"

Tim ran his fingers through his hair. "It's that guy who says he's from the US..."

She knew whom he meant instantly and changed her stance. "The one who gives everyone the creeps?"

"He's been taking a potion or charming himself or something, but he's really Rabastan Lestrangle."

Hermione shuddered. She'd met Rabastan. "How do you know?"

"I found another Arithmancy problem in Snape's book. He's going to try to get revenge. It's not just Mum, Hermione. It's my brother or sister. I've already lost Nym..."

She reached for being the voice of reason. "How do you know you're right about Lestrangle? And that he's got Andromeda?"

"Was I wrong about the pregnancy?"

She didn't want to think about that, and what a fool she'd made of herself. "All right, then, just wait long enough for me to get dressed."

"What? Why?"

She sighed. "It's my sibling, too."

