

# A Madness Most Discreet

*by Rose of the West*

"Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs; Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes; Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears. What is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking all, and a preserving sweet." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene 1)

## A Smoke Raised with the Fume of Sighs

*Chapter 1 of 7*

"Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs; Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes; Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears. What is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking all, and a preserving sweet." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene 1)

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"Piss off, Tonks!"

"Come on, love, it's just a sandwich and a butterbeer."

"I don't date Mudbloods."

"Is there anything you'll do with one?"

His eyes looked at her so intently that she was reminded of the first time she'd seen him at the beginning of this school year.

*She was patrolling the lower levels of the school when a voice behind her said, "All right with Slytherin, then?"*

*She turned and beheld someone who was not the pudgy boy she'd known since first year. Ted Tonks was suddenly a man who'd grown taller, whose shoulders had filled out while his middle had gotten slimmer, and a man whose face held an indefinable something that told the world he knew what he was about.*

*Andromeda dropped her wand in confusion and then tripped while trying to find it. A statue was in serious danger until Tonks put his hands on her shoulders and helped her up. Then he Summoned her wand and held it out for her. As he did, there was a look in his eye that seemed to contain the entire world and all of time. The wand and the statue were in danger again until he gave her a smile that was full of cheer and mischief. "If everything is fine, then I'll be off to Hufflepuff."*

Right now he had that same look in his eye, that told her he would do anything she wanted. Just for that moment, she wanted to do anything he asked, too. She felt warm, she could feel her skin flushing, and she suddenly felt entirely overdressed. Fortunately, he flashed that mischievous smile at her.

"Come on, Dromeda. Don't you really want to, deep down inside?"

She shook off the...whatever that was. "How many times do I have to say 'no,' Mudblood? Don't you know what 'no' means? Do they use that word where you come from?"

"Of course we Muggleborns do, love. As in, there's no way you can refuse me forever."

Andromeda Black stamped her foot and tried to turn away from the boy who wouldn't leave her alone. The problem was that a higher number of seventh-years than usual were taking Potions this year and they were squeezed into the space. If she leaned too far away from Ted Tonks and the Veritas serum he was making, she would be leaning up against Fabian Prewett and his Amortentia.

Her own Felix Felicis was coming along nicely. If it was accepted by Professor Slughorn, he would surely write her a letter of recommendation for the Healer program at St. Mungo's. She believed he would write it anyway, but she wanted any extra luck the potion would bring her...and the pun was fully intended. Tonks was making the Veritas serum as part of his application to Auror training. Why Prewett happened upon Amortentia was anyone's guess. Perhaps he simply got stuck with the last potion on Slughorn's list that wasn't already being made by someone else, but then again, he liked to make interesting potions just for the fun of it.

Tonks leaned over the work surface, getting entirely too close to her. It wasn't necessarily an unpleasant experience. As one of the Hufflepuff beaters, Ted was somewhat big and muscular in that way that girls might find attractive, if they liked boys who were strong and protective. If Andromeda was completely honest, she would admit that she often wished his shoulders onto the Nott and Avery boys her parents wanted her to consider. Fortunately, as a Slytherin, she was perfectly comfortable being less than honest.

"Come on, Dromeda, it's just one lunch on Saturday at that new tea room. I hear all the girls love it."

She didn't turn toward him and only spoke through her teeth. "If I have to tell you one more time not to call me that, Mudblood..."

"Will you come out with me if I call you my love?"

"There's not a term in the lexicon that would induce me to go out with you."

"I love your impressive vocabulary."

Andromeda turned and looked at him for a heartbeat through narrow eyes. Then she turned back to her cauldron.

"Why do you have to be so cold, love?"

"I can't date you. You're..."

"I'm a Mudblood. I believe we've covered that part of the discussion rather thoroughly," he said in a tone that was over-patient but perhaps a little testy. "I'm also head over heels gone for you, Andromeda Black. I look at you and I see my whole life in front of me." His voice came close to her ear. "It's glorious, if you're interested."

Something turned within her, and she looked at him. He was serious. How many times would she wonder why, when she longed for a tall, dark, pureblood prince, she only seemed to inspire this sort of passion in a Muggle-born? On the other hand, why was it that the only time she felt this odd pitter-pat in her chest, it was when his kind eyes seemed to bore into her soul?

She shook her head. "It would never work," she said absently.

"Why?"

"You know why. My family is 'Toujours Pur.' You're a Mud...that is, Muggle-born." He deserved the polite term this once.

"There are a great many successful marriages between purebloods and Muggleborns."

"Not in my family."

"Are you so sure?"

She thought for a moment about the family tree at Aunt Walburga's house, where a Great-Aunt Cedrella had been blasted away for marrying a Weasley. Most of the Weasleys were pureblood, but that one had a questionable mother, or perhaps was a squib. She shook her head to clear it. All of that was beside the point. Andromeda couldn't allow herself to be blasted from the family tree for any Mudblood, even an amazingly fit one.

Where had *that* thought come from? She glanced at Tonks through her lashes. He wasn't particularly tall, and although he was muscular now, it might be the sort of thing that turned to chubbiness later. His hair was a nondescript sandy color and his features were friendly and engaging but not particularly handsome. Yet there was something about him that was incredibly sexy. All the 'Puff witches were gone over him, swooning every time he walked past.

Piffle. They could afford to like him. He wasn't a plague to *them*.

"What does our blood status have to do with what we feel for each other?"

"I don't feel anything for you."

"You're a bad liar."

She shook her head and tipped over a jar of lacewings. "I mean, it wouldn't matter if I felt something."

"Plenty of couples make it work. If there was enough love, we could make it work. We're both very determined people."

"Sure, Mudblood, you're determined to make me like you, and I'm determined that I won't."

Tonks chuckled. Frank Longbottom walked by, brushing up against Fabian, who in turn bumped Andromeda into Tonks. "This is more like it," he said. He held Andromeda close to steady her on her feet, but then held her a few seconds too long. She likewise waited too long to move away. He made her feel safe and comfortable. She found herself sniffing his robe and stifled the desire to burrow into his warm chest.

"Ah, love, this is what I had in mind."

She took a step backwards, a little step because things were so cramped, and pulled herself decidedly away from him. She straightened her robe and looked at her potion, comparing it to her notes. It was perfect. She reached for a vial and filled it for Professor Slughorn's approval. If she could just get to the teacher's desk, she would find a little air that wasn't so full of *him*.

It was the luckiest thing she ever did in a Potions class. She would never know where Prewett had got to, but as Andromeda stepped around the table to walk to Slughorn's desk, Longbottom walked past again, carrying a stack of cauldrons. Between the two of them, she lost her balance, and Longbottom lost his grip on the cauldrons. They landed on the edge of the table, catapulting three potion-filled cauldrons into the air.

"Andromeda!"

When she realized what was happening, Andromeda discovered that she was underneath a very strong and protective body. Tonks had saved her from being pelted by not only the three cauldrons on the work surface, but the stack that Longbottom had been carrying, too. Based on the way Tonks was wincing, he had saved her from some

nasty bruises. What Andromeda had not been saved from was being covered by the contents of the three cauldrons. She and Ted were soaking wet.

"Well, that was something," he said as he helped her to her feet. He took out his wand and cleared away the potion residue on her hair, face and shoulders, but stopped short just below her neckline. "Erm, I think I'll let you handle the rest," he said with a very red face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andromeda was able to turn in the potion and received the marks she needed, so she all but forgot about the uncomfortable incident that ended with entirely too close contact with the Mudblood. Her education was drawing to a close, and she was reluctant and ill at ease to see it end. She found herself treasuring every moment of it.

She developed a habit of sitting near the common room fireplace when she did her homework. It was a warm and comfortable spot, but now it was always a homey spot to her, too. She'd never noticed it before, but when she sat there to do her homework, somehow the answers came easier. Whenever she stumbled upon the answer to a problem, it was as if another voice in the back of her mind recalled it for her.

Sometimes she found herself woolgathering a little bit. She would go back over some bit of homework she'd already done and then wonder if she'd gotten some problems correct. After reviewing them in her mind, she usually found she had. She invariably got the impression of warm eyes smiling at her and had to stifle the urge to smile back in her mind. Sometimes, she let herself go. Who would know that she entertained warm thoughts about Tonks? What could it hurt if she admitted, only to herself, that she might feel more for him than any pureblood witch ought to feel for a Mudblood?

There was a Quidditch match between Slytherin and Hufflepuff on Friday. Andromeda sat in the stands and cheered for her team, but for some reason she couldn't take her eyes off one of the beaters wearing yellow. Up on a broom, swinging his club, Tonks looked almost graceful in a way that he wasn't on the ground. There was a reason why the other girls were so silly over him. During a break in the game, he stopped and looked straight at her. Somehow she knew he was aware that she had been watching him and was glad. He wasn't impossible about it, either. He just smiled happily and nodded in her direction.

A sense of rightness came over her as they gazed at each other. Andromeda felt warm and relaxed. Tonks suddenly turned and flew away after the bludger. She felt a bit bereft, as if something belonging to her had been snatched away. The part of her mind that she was usually good at avoiding pointed out that it was the way she had felt all week, except at meals when she could catch glimpses of the Mudblood.

Suddenly the game was over. Andromeda wasn't sure who won, and based upon the way Cissy's blond idol was stomping off the field, it could have been either house. Lucius Malfoy had a tendency of being as sore a winner as a loser when he wasn't the star of the game. Tonks's demeanor wasn't any help either. He was looking straight at *her*, as if the outcome of the game was unimportant.

Andromeda sat where she could watch Tonks eat his dinner. As she had noticed during the Quidditch match, she just felt better when she could see him and make occasional eye contact. It wasn't anything special, of course. He had several girls around him. He talked animatedly to them all, putting an arm around one or another as they slid close to him.

Maybe whatever he claimed to feel in Potions class was a passing fancy. He must have been bored. He could have his pick among girls who were blonder, cuter, and had more...Andromeda crossed her arms. It didn't matter. She didn't want the Mudblood. She just didn't like that someone who claimed to be fond of her was so easily distracted.

It took her by surprise when he looked at her. The reassuring smile he gave her was for her alone. The other girls might sit near him, and he might joke and laugh with them, but his gaze said that he was only interested in her. He looked longingly into her face, indicating that he was fonder of it than the other girls' blonde cuteness. Then he glanced down with a sort of desirous smile that said he found nothing lacking about the state of affairs under her crossed arms. Her chest started that pitter-pat again.

Andromeda had to get up. There was quite a bit of studying she wanted to do this weekend, and tomorrow would be a waste. She had to watch over Cissy, who wanted to follow every footstep of that Malfoy fop. She had better do her revising tonight, just in case there was something she wanted to ask the professors during Sunday office hours. Then she went to bed early.

*She was completely naked, but her body was a shadowy blur. Hands touched her eagerly, exploring and searching. She felt her back arch and then became aware of an intense ache. Then she was rubbing, up and against...something blurry. The ache grew stronger and harder, and there was bucking and thrusting. Finally there was relief... and an intense pleasure. Andromeda lay weakly back, aware only of the pleasure... until she noticed the wet sticky sensation on her middle.*

She sat up, feeling her night gown and the sheets. She was perfectly dry, but her body was completely taut and eager, but for what she did not know. She couldn't get back to sleep for the rest of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was tired and a little nauseated the next morning. Eating breakfast did little to help her. Her eyes strayed to the Hufflepuff table, but the person she told herself she wasn't looking for was not there. After pushing porridge around a bowl for a while, Cissy was ready to go. Andromeda had to go with her, although she would have preferred to stay behind and rest. Perhaps the walk to and from Hogsmeade would have the same effect.

As she walked out of the Great Hall, she bumped into someone and felt a tingle of calm. "Good morning," she said out of instinctive courtesy. Looking up, she saw that it was Tonks.

"Good morning," he answered, looking away. He seemed to be feeling uneasy about something. He seemed almost embarrassed. That was surprising, since Andromeda was of the opinion the wizard had no shame at all.

Cissy tugged on Andromeda's arm and they were off to Hogsmeade. The walk was torture, making Andromeda feel more and more ill the further they got from Hogwarts. Cissy clearly didn't care. She was chattering about the plans she hoped to fulfill when she met Lucius. He had condescended to agree to meet her, and Cissy was hoping to spend several hours in his company. She confided that she even hoped to receive her first kiss that afternoon. If anything, the conversation only served to increase Andromeda's discomfort.

She sat on a bench outside the Hog's Head and tried to sort out her feelings. Nothing she had done that day had eased the nausea. She felt on edge and frustrated by something. It wasn't clear what was troubling her; she just knew that she wanted to go back to the way things were before... when?

Lucius arrived and offered Cissy his arm. The two wandered away, toward some tea shop or lunch room somewhere. Andromeda decided to stay where she was, hoping she would feel no worse when it was time to go back to Hogwarts. She tried to will herself to feel better, but so far it wasn't working.

Some sort of breeze drifted through, and she felt an easing of her symptoms. It seemed to be coming from a street just on the other side of the book shop. Andromeda decided it was worth getting up to see if anything could help her. Something in the air in that street was refreshing. She felt better with every step she took, walking carefully as the street became an alley and the shadows grew deeper. A part of her was sternly telling herself not to enter this maze from which she might never return, but she couldn't deviate from her path. A sort of desire had filled her, and instead of feeling ill at ease, she felt content and safe.

Suddenly she walked into a body. Instead of being flooded with embarrassment and explanations, she felt full of reassurance. The arms that moved around her exuded comfort. She felt so much better that she didn't notice the hand that cupped her face. Instead, she unknowingly obeyed the nudge that tilted her lips up to accept his kiss.

Whatever Narcissa might have hoped for today, this was *Andromeda's* first kiss. Others had pushed her into corners and placed their hands and lips on her, but this was a real kiss, full of affection and soft promises. If only it could last forever. Andromeda would often look back at that incident as one of the perfect moments of her life, the way they simply fit together that morning. It was her dream prince, here to rescue her from... whatever it was she needed to be rescued from.

"Ah, Dromeda," he whispered as he let her up for a breath and kissed her again.

It was pure magic, the tingle of his lips against hers. His mouth was gentle but firm, just like the arms that encircled her. She realized that this was the body that had been pressed against her in her dream, and that the gentle way their bodies were swaying against each other was reminiscent of the way they had been moving in the dream.

Wait... *Dromeda?*

She pulled away, even as her whole body screamed in complaint. "Mudblood!"

"Yes."

"How...why...what are you doing here in this alleyway?" She couldn't decide whether to slide her body against his again, or stay at arm's length, where the nausea threatened.

"It was a short cut to the book shop I wanted to go to." He lit his wand and held it between them. "Have you been feeling sick?"

She nodded. "I noticed it this morning."

"It's been growing since those potions spilled on us," he said. "I think the combination has affected us."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? What were the three potions, again?"

"Amortentia, Veritaserum, and Felix Felicis."

"Love, truth, and luck."

She looked at him, her mind racing wildly. "So what, you're supposed to be my true love?"

"You are for me. You always have been."

Typical. She rolled her eyes. "And I suppose you expect to get lucky."

His hand slid along the side of her face again. "I couldn't stand to dishonor you that way. The only luck I want is the chance to marry you."

Something far deeper than nausea drifted down and settled at the very pit of her stomach. "I've told you, Mudblood, it's impossible."

"Then I'm going to have to get used to feeling sick for the rest of my life," he said. "It's a shame, because I think we'd be amazing together."

"I have to marry someone else," she said, annoyed with herself for making it sound like an apology.

"Then what? You'll be forced to lie under someone like Avery while he grunts on top of you, so you can be a baby factory for the rest of your life?"

"That's all I know. It's what I'm supposed to be!"

"Then why are you working so hard to get into the Healer program?"

"Because..." She looked up at him. How could she explain it?

"It's because you're *not* supposed to be a baby factory, and you know it."

"Now you're going to tell me you actually want a wife who's a Healer."

"If that's what makes you happy, it's what I want."

She turned away from him, noticing that every movement away from him was difficult.

"What would make me happy is to make the effects of these potions go away."

"I know one way to do that, at least for a while," he said. He turned her back into his arms and lowered his face to hers.

Her traitorous body nestled into his as she kissed him back, at first tentatively but then with greater intensity. It was all wrong, but it felt wonderful. This was better than anything she'd ever experienced in her life.

Later on, Andromeda poked at her dinner, now sure it would make her sick all night. She didn't watch Ted Tonks through the meal at all. She told herself that she didn't notice the look he gave her from time to time, and she told herself the pang of disappointment when she never looked back was just indigestion.

*A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for beta reading, and the whole TPP chat group for help with troubleshooting and cheerleading!*

## A Fire Sparkling in Lovers' Eyes

*Chapter 2 of 7*

Andromeda learns to deal with the ramifications of the Potions accident.

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*Tonight there were kisses as he pulled her close. Her body was still shadowy, but it felt more solid this time as her breasts pressed against his firm chest. There were kisses and an undulation that Andromeda copied instinctively. They moved together, clinging to each other in desperation, until everything was wet and sticky...*

Andromeda sat up in her dry bed yet again.

*What is happening to me?* she thought to herself.

*You can't have...* Somewhere in the ether was a sense of embarrassed dismay.

Understanding dawned upon her. That was *Tonks*? She had somehow been pulled into his dream? She'd been pulled into a dream where he imagined and then his body... *ieew, gross.*

*You seemed to be participating.*

*That's the worst part.* Andromeda got out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown. She walked to the common room, choosing that spot because every footstep seemed to make her feel better.

She ended pressed against the wall next to the fireplace. In this spot she felt almost good. If she thought hard, she could picture him pressed against the wall next to another fireplace. She imagined only a wall of stones between them, and her body calmed.

*Why do I feel this way? I can't live like this.*

*We have to obey the potions,* came the answer.

*What must we do?*

*Based upon what splashed on us, I think the potions are trying to force us to consummate true love.*

*I don't have a true love.*

*I do.*

Andromeda stepped away from the wall in the same way she had waked from the dream. It couldn't be real. Ted Tonks wasn't on the other side of the wall. Slytherin's and Hufflepuff's common rooms couldn't back up to each other like that, could they? More to the point, that wasn't the Mudblood whispering into her mind, telling her...what?

*I do love you, Dromeda.*

Why did it twist her insides to know he felt that way? Maybe he was just hoping to have sex with her. Isn't that what all the groping boys in her own house wanted ~~to~~ *this all to get a quick shag, then?*

The stab of pain in response to that thought twisted her insides even more. *I don't want a quick shag. I don't want to be merely lovers. I want to marry you and make love to you with honor and respect.*

*I can't marry a Mudblood. I'll have to marry one of the others.*

*Who?*

She recalled the way Avery forcibly took her elbow the last time they were getting off the Hogwarts Express. She remembered Nott pressing up against her in a dark corridor of her aunt's house at a party over the Christmas Holiday. Worst of all, she recalled the Dark Lord sliding up behind her at the same party, putting his hand over her stomach and saying, "You will produce great offspring, Miss Black. I'll have to watch you."

A sense of disgust came to her. *I won't let them touch you like that again.*

*How will you ever prevent it?*

*I can take care of myself, and I will take care of you, if you'll let me.*

*Why?*

*Because a man takes care of the things that are precious to him.*

Andromeda didn't know how to respond. *I don't...Mudblood, I'm not worthy of that kind of love.*

There was no answer. She moved a chair close to the wall and curled up in it, determined to get some sleep without feeling ill.

After that, he rarely spoke aloud to her, except to ask that she pass something down the table in Potions class. He left her alone most of the time. She watched him flirt and laugh with other girls, determined to ignore it as much as possible.

Her dreams became more erotic. Every night their bodies became more solid in dreams she now knew were shared. She realized he was following her thoughts in the shower. Now that she was newly aware of her body, she confessed to herself that she was lingering more over her breasts and the backs of her legs as she washed.

She was more aware of his body, too. Somehow at odd moments she was stopped in the middle of studying transfiguration late at night or just before dawn so that she could feel the ripple of muscle on his chest or his incredibly... scrumptious... arse... and even other things. *What do you think?* he asked her one morning as he lathered himself. She had immediately gotten out of bed and started reciting runes to herself in order to clear her mind. Yet twenty minutes later when she was in the shower, she couldn't seem to help exploring her own body, trying to judge if what she had seen in her mind would fit.

She could barely look at him without blushing any more. She spent the day feeling horribly sick until she sat down at dinner and saw that he was there, too. They never opened their mouths, except to eat, and barely looked at each other, but his thoughts were all toward her. And hers were directed at him.

*Will sex fix it? Should we just find someplace and get this over?*

*I want to marry you so we can do this right. I want to be with you forever.*

*I have to marry a pureblood wizard.*

*Are you prepared to feel this way for our entire lives?*

She did look at him, then. He was some Hufflepuff Mudblood who could never travel in her family's circle. Yet when had her whole existence started to revolve around him? She shut her mind to any answer that might be forthcoming.

*He caressed her breasts until she felt that she couldn't stand the pleasure of it. She gasped for more, begging for release. His kisses were magical, making her feel safe and warm, but also passionate and gasping for more. She felt him move within her, touching her and sliding, in and out. They both moved with abandon, pushing together until he groaned loudly and Andromeda felt the usual wet stickiness, but it extended to her fingers. This time, she discovered that her nightie had been pushed up and she had been touching herself. Her cheeks flamed in embarrassment.*

*I'm content to do this every night for the rest of my life if it's all we'll have* was his cheerful thought.

Food had ceased to have meaning, since she often felt sick. Darla Bulstrode asked if she was up the spout only to have Heather Parkinson point out that Andromeda was likely to die a virgin. As they discussed her potential sex-life in front of her, Andromeda's cheeks flamed red at the thought of her anything-but-virginal dreams. Something better happen soon to remove the magic of the potions affecting her and Tonks.

She read about the three potions and their possible antidotes. She was willing to learn any new technique or buy any expensive ingredient to sort it all out. Her research was disappointing. The few antidotes that existed for the Amortentia worked in ways that were completely counter to the antidotes for Veritaserum. It seemed that love and truth were difficult bedfellows, but once brought together, they were even more difficult to separate. The physical solution was becoming obvious as the best choice.

She sought him out one night when they were both patrolling the corridors.

"May I help you?" he asked.

She couldn't speak, but simply beckoned. There was an unused office in the dungeons, since Slughorn preferred to have his upstairs. She brought him there, where she had laid a warm fire and transfigured the teacher's desk into a comfortable couch. The living quarters were just beyond.

"I think we should...you know...get it over with."

He looked hurt, but how he felt was worse. She felt his sadness wash through her. "Am I really nothing more to you than a means to feel better? Do you want *anything* more than my body?"

"It's not like that, Ted." She reached for him. "I just can't live like this."

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself if we did that."

"Then what am I to do?"

"Say you'll marry me."

"You know I can't." She looked up at him in dismay. "Is it really going to be like this forever?"

He traced her cheek. "I wish I could fix this for you if not for me. I'd like to send you off to a happy life away from me. You're not going to be happy with the result. I'm beginning to think you wouldn't have been even if this never happened."

"I would..." she started to say, but she knew it wasn't true. Her life was never intended to include happiness. She looked up at Tonks. Life with him promised contentment if not outright happiness. Life with her other options promised pain and misery if not outright horror.

When he hugged her, she felt as though she were encased in a protective cloak of warmth that nothing evil could penetrate. "I'm sorry, love, but we have to face the facts. I'm in love with you, and I think you feel something for me, too."

"It's just the potions."

"Is it?"

She thought of the way she had always stopped short of being actually cruel to the Mudblood, because although he was...what he was...he was nevertheless *likeable*. Some law deeper than that of blood would have been violated if she had gone out of her way to hurt him. And she had been aware of him all year, she admitted to herself. Not aware, as one would realize the presence of any other person in class or the hallways, but *aware*, as a woman assesses a potential mate. A potential mate who caused her to picture cottages with kitchens, and flower gardens, and... bedrooms.

"It's just the potion that makes me want to..." What was the word?

"To make love to me now and for the rest of your life?"

"That's not it."

But wasn't that exactly it? Thanks to the dreams they shared almost every night, she could almost tell what it would be like, sometimes shagging each other madly, sometimes holding each other tenderly. If she had to pick one single way of doing things for their one moment together, she would miss the rest of the experience.

He kissed her, and it was as wonderful as the time he did in Hogsmeade. Andromeda felt many things racing through her. Foremost in her mind was a desire to press as close to him as possible. He held her so tight, but in a nice way, not like the others who tried to grope her. His arms were bliss, and his body promised hers a passion beyond her imagination.

He stopped kissing her and pressed his forehead to hers. She looked up at him, hoping with all her heart that he would say yes. She needed release from the potions, and her body wanted release as well. Suddenly he pulled away and shook his head.

"I can't do it."

"But we have to! You said so!"

"Not like this, Dromeda, *never* like this. You want a meaningless shag. You want the effects of the potions to go away and to go on with your life like a woman who doesn't care who she's with. I don't want to be some meaningless moment in your life."

"You can't possibly leave me like this. You need it as much as I do."

"I've taught myself to wait, Andromeda. I want everything, and I may not get it, but I won't settle for what you're offering." He kissed her forehead as if she was a disobedient child and left.

She sat by herself as the fire in that office burned down to nothing. Her mind reached for his, but he somehow ignored her. She had offended him. She didn't understand how she could feel so hurt by it. Bellatrix could curse, insult, or slap people without feeling the least remorse. Andromeda felt as though she had done something that jabbed tiny pins into her own heart.

*"I can't stop myself," he said as he started kissing her. The kisses seemed particularly wet until she realized he was crying. "I'm so sorry," she said, tears springing into her own eyes. She kissed him back, hoping that he would understand that she would rather do anything than hurt him. She rubbed his shoulders and held him tight, trying to find some way to comfort him. As always happened in these dreams, their clothing melted away. Their bodies merged as never before. "I love you, Dromeda," he said as*

*warmth spread everywhere through her body. "I love you too," was in her mind as he pulled away.*

Then she was all alone again, and the wetness was on her own cheeks.

A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for their help beta reading!

## A Madness Most Discreet

*Chapter 3 of 7*

Andromeda is caught in a rain storm and a moment she never imagined.

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

*Please note: Usually the stories I write would be probably be rated "R-lite". This one is fully R-rated, as part of the fest it was originally written for. For those who are used to a particular sort of love scene in my stories, you will find this a bit more explicit.*

The April Hogsmeade Weekend arrived, and it would be the last of Andromeda's career at Hogwarts. She decided to enjoy the spring day and go into town to pick up a book she wanted for her Arithmancy N.E.W.T. Sidestepping packs of third years and paired-off fifth years, she arrived at her destination and made her purchase.

After wandering through town, she realized there was nothing else she wanted to do. The world had become quite centered upon one single wizard whom she couldn't marry, regardless of her feelings. She shrugged and started on her solitary way back to the school.

A sudden squall took her by surprise and she moaned with dismay as her clothing quickly became soaked.

"Quick, over here," a voice said into her ear. She realized that she'd been covered over by someone's cloak and that he was leading her off the path. "There's an abandoned cottage just beyond those trees."

She allowed herself to be led, knowing that it was Tonks. They hadn't been this physically close in a couple of weeks, but it was as if she'd never been anywhere else. "I need to get back to the school."

"I'm afraid it will be hours before this blows over."

He managed the latch on the door and guided her into the cottage. After casting a dusting spell at the one chair in the room, he lit a fire in the fireplace and smiled ruefully at her. "I guess we'll have to hope it's not full of birds' nests and things." He conjured a chair for himself and sat close to her, but shifted so that he could look at her.

Perhaps the cottage was enchanted, or perhaps they were lucky. The chimney drew the smoke and the fire was quite comfortable. Nevertheless, Andromeda started to shiver. Ted came over and stood her up. "We need to get this robe dry." He unfastened it and worked it down over the wet sleeves of her blouse.

"It's no use," she responded, "it's all soaked through."

"I'm afraid I can't stand the sight of you wearing nothing, Andromeda," he replied. "I'm liable to lose all my self control."

"Why don't we?" she asked. "We've both researched it thoroughly. The most likely remedy is for us to have sex."

"No, Dromeda, it's for us to consummate true love."

"Mudblood, I'll never have that, but I suspect this is the closest thing I ever will have."

His eyes became moist. "My poor love, are you so sure it's really like that?"

"I told you, my whole life is the sum of my children. If I don't produce magical pureblood children, my life will be a failure. Love doesn't enter into it."

"What about your parents?"

"Contracted. How they managed the three of us I'll never know, because they are indifferent to each other at best. I suspect the three sets of matched jewels my mother owns have something to do with it."

"I believe you love me."

"That's impossible. It's just the Amortentia making me feel like this toward you. Once we've done it, it will be all over. Then I can go on with my Healer training and..." She didn't know what happened after that. How would she fill her life without Ted in her dreams?

"You know how it's working in this case."

"It can induce romance between any two people."

"This Amortentia was mixed with Veritaserum. That changes everything."

"Please, Mudblood, I *can't* love you!" She was starting to feel nervous.

He pulled her close and held her tight. "All right, love. I believe you."

"I can't love you, and I can't go on like this. I need to study and to prepare for my Healer training. I need to be free of this, and you say only you can help me."

"What will your pureblood husband think when he realizes you're not a virgin?"

"He'll probably bed me before the wedding himself and suppose that I'm not a virgin because I've been testing other men. More likely he'll think other men have been testing me. It doesn't matter, Mudblood. I know you want some lovely life where we can live happily ever after, and you don't want to think of me as some sort of tart, but

that's all I am. You're the only one who doesn't see me that way. You're my only chance to do this without it being a business deal."

He pulled her close again, tight to his body. Breathing deeply, he murmured to himself. "This will be as much like a wedding night as I can manage, then."

He knelt before her and took her hands within his. "Andromeda Black, I swear to you before any entities that might be listening that I will love you until the day I die. You alone will be the only woman I consider as a wife, and you alone will be the only woman to share my bed. I pledge to protect and care for you in any way that you need, from this moment on."

Andromeda stood there for a moment, feeling foolish. "Mudblood, I..."

He stood up and patted her hand sadly. "I know, Dromeda. You don't think you can love a Mudblood."

She bit her lip, ready to cry with frustration. "It's not exactly like that. Other men may have my body, and I may be forced to bear children for someone, but, Theodore Tonks, you'll always be dear to me, and to me you'll always be the one who really and truly cares, because no one else ever has..." She bit her lip again, ready to cry for real. "I'll never forget you."

"It's not a wedding vow, but it's the best we'll have for now." He pulled her close and kissed her. "There, there, now. No more tears. That's no way to act on our wedding night."

"In a dirty cottage?" she said, regaining her dignity.

"It's not so bad," he said as a shimmer of magic worked through, and the entire room was transformed from messy to clean. What had been small piles of litter turned into flowers or candles. Andromeda spun around on her foot until she saw the bed, which looked remarkably like the four-posters at Hogwarts, complete with heavy drapes.

"You've thought of everything," she said.

"If I had, there would have been an officiator here with a marriage license," he said.

"Well, you have everything else."

"Dromeda, I love you so much." He lowered his face to hers, and she gave herself to his kiss in a new and complete way, knowing that unlike the previous kisses, this time she would hold nothing back. Want flooded through her, familiar and yet different, comfortable and yet so very exciting.

She shivered and realized she was still cold. "Will you mind if I get out of these wet things?" she asked.

He shook his head silently and she undressed by her chair, hanging the various clothing on the back of it. As she reached her bra and knickers, she looked at him in concern. "I guess you've seen it all when you've seen my thoughts," she said.

"Never like this," he responded. "It's always been through your mirror or while bathing."

"You're not helping."

"Why don't you look at me?" She looked into his eyes...they were such warm, friendly eyes...and then allowed her vision to stray down to where he was now naked except for his briefs, which stuck out funny in the front.

"Is it always like that?"

"It is since I started desiring you, love, but no, not really."

As she watched, he slid his hands under the waistband of his underpants. An instant later, the undergarment joined the clothing hung on his chair and he stood before her, completely naked.

There was nothing left to do but reach behind herself for the hooks of her bra. It slid down her arms in a way that made him groan. Then he whispered, "Beautiful." That emboldened her to slide her panties down and place them on the chair. He groaned even more loudly, and she realized that his arousal had become more pronounced. Her previous observations and explorations were now all to the point.

There was no time to worry about it. He stepped toward her and leaned to pick her up. It was only a few steps to the bed, but he carried her. He set her down and sat next to her. Then he suddenly seemed a bit nervous. "This is like a dream come true, but I'm a little worried, Andromeda. I have so much desire for you that I want to just shag you senseless."

"Isn't that the point?"

He shook his head. "No, I want this to be something we both treasure. If it's the only time I ever make love to a woman, I don't want to waste it. Worse yet, if I'm not very careful, I'll hurt you badly."

"I don't think you could ever hurt me." She looked down, and wasn't sure. "I mean, it's supposed to fit, right? Plus, I trust you more than anyone I know. You won't hurt me any more than it has to."

He gathered her close and held her. "Thank you for that." He kissed her, and the sensation of bare skin was wonderful. Andromeda thought she could get very used to it if she had the chance.

"Ah, love," he whispered, "do you mind if I touch you?"

"Oh, please do," she responded. Somehow her body was twisting around to where his hands were cupping her breasts. He kissed her lips, and the reality of what they were doing destroyed the images from their dreams. She sighed. "Oh, please... more..." His mouth lowered to replace one of his hands and Andromeda felt herself growing faint. She was moaning and sighing something. Was it the Mudblood's name? It didn't matter. This was what she knew she would feel with him, but the dreams were no preparation for this.

His mouth was everywhere, following his hands. Her own hands, unsure what to do, chose to explore what they could. They rubbed those shoulders she'd admired all year, and then she ran her hands through his hair, admiring the way the sandy blond strands felt between her fingers.

At some point, his lips returned to hers and their bodies started to align together. She slid a leg around his hip and wrapped her knees around him, pressing up against him. After the way they had moved together for weeks in their dreams, it came naturally to her. Something heavenly started to move through her, but it wasn't quite enough.

"Mudblood, more!"

"Ah, love, we need to take our time, but Merlin, I think you might be ready for me." She felt fingers, gentle yet inquisitive, probing. Her body threatened to go wild, but then he moved away and she felt something new rubbing against her, giving her a heady feeling. He moved gently as she moved with decreasing control.

One of them moved farther than before, and then there was a new sensation *within* her. She opened her eyes and looked at him in delight. "Is this how it is? It's amazing."

His face was full of strain. "Not exactly. Are you absolutely *positively* sure?"



"Oh, yes," she breathed out, more sure of this than anything in her life. This was magic, more than anything she could do with a wand. Somehow, she had known from the beginning of this insanity that he would make it perfect.

He groaned loudly, and suddenly there was a stinging pain that made her cry out. Everything stopped as he hugged her tight and whispered, "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

"No, it's...it's..." And suddenly it was fine, because his hands were touching her, rousing her again. "Please," she whispered, moving her body against his.

"I won't be able to stop," he groaned, moving within her, faster and more intently. She regained the rhythm and matched him, grinding against him as that wild, heady feeling crept back upon her.

"Oh, I love you," he whispered as he suddenly thrust deeply within her, his body shaking for a moment. He pulled back and thrust within her again, shaking again. Andromeda felt her own body shivering as the feeling of wild excitement receded. He collapsed upon her, and she lay beneath him, wondering if anything could be so wonderful ever again.

A moment later, he leaned up and looked at her. "It's better than I dreamed," he said, kissing her face in a way that made her feel... she didn't know the word, but it was a lovely feeling. "If you don't mind waiting a couple of minutes, we'll try to do it so that you'll enjoy it better."

"I don't see how it could be better. It was...I didn't know my body could do that."

He rolled to her side and put an arm around her. He kissed and caressed her softly for a few minutes as that lovely feeling continued. They could hear the eaves drip with the rain, and a stray gust of wind rattled the windows. "I've pictured us like this for a long time," he said. "Long lie-ins while storms rage outside, but us snug and perfect together."

"Just like this?" It felt so normal to cuddle up to him.

"Yes, I could do this for the rest of my life."

"I wish my life had room for something like this."

I wish you'd believe that we can be like this forever. There's always a way. Tell me why you think it wouldn't work."

She looked up at him and considered the situation. They lay together skin to skin, and his hand was caressing her shoulder and back. What could she withhold from him now?

"If they knew you existed, they would find a way to kill you. Then they would force me to do what they want, and it will be worse than if I just do it to begin with." She thought of the marriage her parents were arranging for her. "I'm already afraid of the wizards they want me to marry."

"You're afraid of Avery? I knock him over every time we play Quidditch."

"Yes, I know. It infuriates him, just as everything infuriates him. When he gets particularly mad, he slaps around one of the third-years. I suspect he's been... abusing... Maureen Smith. The girls say things about him... I don't want him to do the things they talk about to me."

"Tell your parents you don't want to marry him."

"They might chose Nott."

"He's all right."

"Not the Nott a few years ahead of us, but the father. His wife died in childbirth, and now he's told my parents he wants me. For the past five years, he's been coming to me in hallways and pushing me into corners where congratulates himself that I'm young and nubile."

"That you are," he said, "but no man of that age has any business noticing."

She shuddered. "He says his wife was too old and that she wasn't able to do the things he wanted. I don't want to know what those things are. Still, the worst of all is the Dark Lord." She buried her face in his chest. He hugged her tight and kissed her forehead. Something within her relaxed and she curled right into him. He made her feel safe.

He chuckled. "You're like a kitten. Are you so starved for affection?" He spent several minutes holding her and caressing her. "So... Voldemort.... They might contract you to him?"

"It would be quite a coup for the Blacks to marry into the Heir of Slytherin's line. For some reason he hasn't taken Bellatrix yet. My parents have said that he might want me instead. I don't know what I'll do if it happens. He has these long, skinny fingers. They're not delicate, beautiful hands, and nothing like your nice strong hands." She reached for his hand and kissed it. "His are like the legs of a spider. When he touches me, I always think I'll die."

She felt herself being pulled close and her hairline was kissed. "My love, I won't let that happen. I'll be there, whenever you need me. I'll rescue you."

Her eyes pricked at this declaration of his devotion. "You can't. I'm sure they'll kill you if you try, but I can't tell you what it means to know that someone feels this way."

During the conversation, he had caressed her in a way that was relaxing, but now she was starting to be aroused by him. She wriggled a little so that her breast was in his hand and sighed softly. "Please, Mudblood, make love to me again."

They did everything they did before, except this time, he encouraged her to touch him more. She smoothed the hairs on his chest, tasted him, and traced the muscles of his shoulders and belly. Sliding her hand even further down, she discovered that he was once again aroused. She traced and massaged his velvet skin, feeling more and more excited herself every time he sighed or groaned.

Finally, he rolled flat on his back and pulled her over him. With his hands over her hips, he gently guided her body down over his. "Oh, Merlin," he hissed.

Andromeda went very still, unsure exactly what she was feeling. She'd never felt particularly empty or lacking before, but this sensation, of him deep within her, made her understand what she had never missed before but always would in the future. She moved up and then down, feeling her insides quake as she did so. She repeated the process and received a whispered, "Ah, love..."

She rose above him and lowered herself several times, feeling more and more excited. Ted picked up the rhythm, holding her hips and guiding her. Andromeda didn't need any further help to understand what she was doing. With every move of her body over his, she could feel greater and more intense passion. Suddenly she couldn't move anymore. She collapsed over Ted as everything seemed to fly apart into a million specks of light. Ted was grasping her hips and moving up into her, once, twice, and with a loud groan a third time.

He pulled her close and kissed her face again, whispering, "Oh, my sweet love."

"I had no idea. I thought the other time..."

"I think there's a lot we can learn together."

She woke a little while later to discover that he had a bucket of water. "I thought you might want it, and I suspect you'll want this." He handed her a vial with a small amount of red fluid that must be her virgin blood.

"Mudblood..."

"I couldn't get it all. I'm afraid we should have gotten it the first time."

He probably knew as well as she did that leaving it in the sheets was, so the old wives claimed, a way to ensure everlasting love and fidelity. By essentially rubbing themselves in the residue of their passion, they had invoked magic that would bind them together more surely than the potion accident had.

Nevertheless, Andromeda welcomed the chance to clean herself, and she looked for the loo.

"It's over there," he said, pointing toward a door.

Andromeda finished her business and went to the chair with her clothes on it. "It looks less rainy now; I think I should go."

He came and took her hand. "Wait a while, love. It will stop entirely soon, and I wish to hold you in my arms again. I told you there will never be anyone for me but you. So if I'm never to know this in my life after today, I'd like to experience it one more time."

She couldn't refuse, not when his voice made her tingle between her legs. She knelt on the bed near where he sat, and he reached over and held her face, pulling her close for a fierce kiss. "This is what we are," he said, almost more to himself than to her. He caressed her with great tenderness, careful of all the places on her body where he had been over-eager before. Yet she knew that he was just as eager, now. She kissed and touched him as much as she could, but he was clearly making love to her as he had envisioned it.

He placed a hand on her knee, running a thumb up her thigh, and she felt her legs move in response. His body slid up against hers, and then he was within her again. It was like home for both of them, she realized. His eyes shone with that look he gave her from time to time that promised forever. Something within her accepted it and offered everything within herself in return. His hands reached alongside her body to clasp hers, and he kissed her tenderly as he moved with utmost gentleness within her.

Andromeda didn't know where her hand ended and his began, just that whenever either felt their passion intensifying, they clasped tighter. She wasn't sure exactly where his chest and hers melted together, just that her heart was beating against his as though they were merged. She met his gaze, unsure if her soul was still her own, when he pushed more deeply than ever within her. She felt herself trembling as her body accepted his and she felt the bliss work its way through her. She thought she would scream at the feeling tearing through her body, but instead she could only let out a loud, whimpering sigh just at the same moment he groaned her name and shuddered within her. She had never clenched anything as tightly as she did his hands within her own while her body reacted to the intensity of their passion.

She lay among the pillows, and as he began to move away, she pulled his head to her. She laid it on her breasts and whispered, "Now you tell me," as she started to smooth her hands through his hair.

He told her of being the odd one in his family, a sensation she understood. He whispered of coming to Hogwarts, where everyone was supposed to be the same, but where he discovered the little tortures reserved for the Muggle-born, particularly for little boys who couldn't seem to grow out of their chubbiness. Tears sprang to her eyes as he described the loneliness of going home on the Hogwarts Express and watching all the kids who were greeted by their parents while knowing his own were held back on the other side of the barricade.

"But then there was you, my Dromeda. You were like an angel to me, so pretty..."

She harrumphed at that. "You know my sisters are both prettier."

He reached up to push the hair out of her face. "Never to me. I've never seen anything remotely like you."

She couldn't say anything to respond, but instead started stroking his head again. "So you stayed at Hogwarts because of me? I don't believe that."

"Not exactly," he admitted. His hand caressed her for a moment. "When I became aware of you, I realized I would never see a prettier witch. When we started working together as Prefects, you were all business, but you didn't really bully or abuse me. Somehow, even the word 'Mudblood' takes on a teasing lilt in your mouth, as if you're trying to remind yourself rather than me that we come from different worlds."

He had her dead to rights. She could only drop a kiss on his head and whisper, "Continue," with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Whenever I look at you, I can imagine a life in the Wizarding World. I picture myself with a wizard's career, with a witch for a wife, and I imagine myself as the father letting his kids off and meeting them at the train. Only now I've been caught up in my own fantasy. None of it works without you."

"Mudblood," she said tentatively, "I don't know if I can be the basis for another person's life like that. Even if I were free to marry whomever I wanted, I don't know if I'm strong enough."

"That's not the sort of marriage I want. I don't want you to serve nor take care of me, and I don't wish to serve nor take care of you. I want to travel through life hand-in-hand with someone who understands me. I want to help each other over the adversities, little and big. And, I do want as much of this as I can get." He leaned up and kissed her again.

*A/N: Thank you to Pennfana and Kyria of Delphi for beta reading!*

## A Choking Gall

*Chapter 4 of 7*

Andromeda tries to get on with her life.

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Andromeda dressed and left the cottage while Ted was napping. She watched him as she dressed, wishing she could stay in the bed with him. She knew if she didn't leave

soon, it would destroy her when she finally did. Following some inner voice, she kissed his cheek one last time before she left. Walking back to Hogwarts was torture, but the nausea was gone, and somehow she knew her mind was her own again.

He sought her out while they were patrolling that night. "You didn't say goodbye."

She looked away. "I could barely stand to leave you."

"Then why did you? Just because of your family? I'm sure we can figure something out."

"What would it get for us?"

"A lifetime of what we shared today."

"They'll kill you, and then I'll have that on my conscience forever."

He looked hurt. "Do you really think so little of me that it would come to that?"

"I'm sure that you're as capable as you are good at... other things, but my family... they're..."

"I think it's worth trying. *You're* worth the risk to me."

"But they'll..." It would be horrible, she knew.

His hurt look intensified. "You mean I'm not worth the risk to you. Thank you for your time, Miss Black."

He turned and walked back toward the Hufflepuff areas. A moment later she was alone with her own inhibitions and longing. "Ted," she whispered to the stone walls.

They never once spoke during a month of revisions and two weeks of N.E.W.T.s. They still sat where they could see each other, and the Hufflepuff girls still sat too close to him. She knew, from what she hoped seemed like casual glances, that he watched her, but she didn't know what he thought, because they no longer shared their thoughts. She'd never been so lonely in her life.

She spent long hours beside the fireplace in the common room, wondering if he was on the other side of the wall again. It comforted her to study that way, thinking that perhaps the voice in her head supplying the missing terms was really him, but she knew it was no use. He was no doubt studying anywhere else in the castle.

Patrols were likewise a lonely affair. She walked the hallways assigned to her, avoiding those places where Hufflepuffs commonly roamed. She feared what would happen if she ran into the Mudblood. She was equally likely to run away or to fling herself into his arms. She told herself that she needed to be strong. This was necessary, since she was going to be apart from him forever once school days ended.

Showering was a new experience. She was now fully aware of her body and what a man...one man...could do with it. Her breasts sprung to life when she washed them, and when she washed lower, her body would sometimes start to shake with want. Several times she leaned against the tiles and simply let the water wash over her, slowly turning her awakened desire into something that would allow her to function. The nights were a different story. She dreamed of the Mudblood more vividly than ever. His kisses were magic, his touches were joy, and the lovemaking was a miracle. She woke in tears and tried to still her longings, but she knew it was useless. It wasn't just the passion, either. Ted had given her a sort of affection she'd never known in her parents' home, and she thirsted for it.

She ought to stop watching him at meals, she told herself. It was becoming painful to see him, and to see his kindnesses to the other witches. There was no way that he would be allowed to stay single; the other witches would make sure he finally chose someone after Andromeda was married.

She tried to tell herself that it was better. The loveless life in her future would be that much worse if she thought he was also doomed to a life without love. Yet her heart rebelled at the thought of another witch knowing what she had known. She couldn't stand the thought of him whispering lovingly to the other witches, or kissing them. It hurt to think of anyone but her experiencing the bliss of their intimacies in that cabin.

She packed her trunk one last time and queued up to go down to the train station. The chattering of other girls in the carriage grated on her, but she looked out the window and tried to ignore them. She found an empty compartment on the train and sat down next to the window, staring through tears at the rail station and, in the distance, the school. Somewhere in a wooded section nearby was the small cottage where she had briefly known true happiness.

Someone came into her compartment. She could ignore whoever it was. She could hear an incantation to seal the door shut and thought to herself that it was as well that they wanted peace and quiet. Surely they wouldn't disturb her, then.

The train started with a lurch, and a body fell across her lap.

"Oof!" She pushed the other student off her lap, and then her whole body started to tingle and tremble. It was Tonks.

"Oh!" she said weakly.

"I've been waiting for you to make some signal. You never came nor spoke."

"There was nothing to do or say."

"There's everything, Andromeda, and all our lives to do and say it."

"I don't have the luxury of making that choice."

"Why not?"

"My family will..."

"Does it matter what they will do? If they care so little about you that they would subject you to the sorts of marriages you face?"

"I can't just ignore them."

"Why not?"

"Because they're my family. I have to do what they say."

"According to who?"

"Whom."

He rolled his eyes. "Andromeda Black, I'm in love with you."

"There's nothing I can do," she said. "It doesn't matter what I want. If I don't do what they want, they'll find me, and they'll force me..." The possibilities were frightening, and she started to lose her breath with distress.

"If they're going to force you, anyway, why not try to break free?"

"Because they do terrible things. You don't know my aunt."

"They wouldn't use Unforgivables on you."

"There are a lot of horrible spells that aren't Unforgivable, and they have magical devices, too." She recalled the day she'd been caught wandering off in Diagon Alley and the bracelet she'd had to wear for weeks that screamed whenever she got too far from her mother. Father claimed that he had a special necklace for witches who loved against their parents' wishes. It supposedly settled over the heart of the witch and caused physical pain whenever she thought of her love. Tonks could never cause her pain; she simply wouldn't allow it.

Suddenly she was crushed against his comforting chest. "Ah, love, I don't want to upset you."

"Ted," was all she could whisper as her distress turned into tears.

She awoke hours later, by the look of the darkening sky outside the window. Tonks had shifted things around so that their feet were propped up by their trunks. She was still cushioned against his chest, and his arms held her protectively even as he dozed beside her. It was heaven, and she hated to end it. He woke the instant she stirred.

"What are you doing?" he asked as she got up and moved to the opposite seat.

"It wouldn't do for me to get too used to it. I'll miss it so when I'm..." Visions of the senior Nott and his rumored perversions made her choke up. She smiled, a little too brightly, and said, "You have so much love to give, Theodore Tonks. Please promise me that you'll find someone... I'll hate her, of course, and you for the rest of my life, but I can't bear the thought of both of us being miserable."

He shook his head. "Don't do this."

"I have no choice."

"You're a full grown witch. You're of age, and I heard you've been accepted at St. Mungo's..."

She shook her head. "That's all off," she said in a voice that sounded small and weak. "My father fixed it so that a great many of the other students were accepted with scholarships this year. There was no room for me. He wrote to me that I won't have time."

"So what will you do?"

"There's my presentation before the Wizengamot in a few weeks. I'll be married a month later, or maybe two. They have several highly eligible bachelors who supposedly want me." She looked out the window and wondered why none of them thrilled her as Tonks did. They weren't all horrible.

"That's hideous."

She shrugged and tried to be nonchalant. "That's my life, Mudblood."

He moved over to her seat. "How can you stand it?"

They all flashed in front of her: Avery, Nott, the Lestranger brothers... the Dark Lord. She shivered. "I'm sure I'll get used to it or something."

"Like you got used to this?" He reached for her and kissed her. The universe slid into place as their lips met. For a few precious minutes, she let it happen. It would give her something to remember when she was forced to become another man's wife.

Then she pushed him away. "We have to stop," she said.

"Why won't you understand? It never has to stop."

"They'll never let me."

"Then let's run away... right off this train when we get to London. We'll go get married, and then they won't be able to separate us."

"And then what? How will we live?"

"We'll find someplace, and I'll have the Auror job. Maybe St. Mungo's will take you after all."

He kissed her again, and she pictured it just as he said. Even an old dusty two-room cottage with the Mudblood...Ted, she told herself...would be better than the grand marriage of her parents' design with one of those other wizards.

He pulled away. "You know you want to. You won't admit it, but you even have feelings for me."

She was suddenly tired of it all and snapped, "Of course I have feelings for you, Mudblood; I love you."

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth as she watched his face dawn like the brightest summer day.

"I...I shouldn't have said that."

"But you did say it, and it must be true. You've never really lied to me. You wouldn't lie to me about this."

He leaned down and kissed her again, holding her tight. She knew she should struggle. She should fight him for his own good because her family would never allow it, but for now she couldn't. Instead she kissed him back, molding her body against his and clinging to him. For now they were together, as perfect as could be, young and in love until... The train stopped with a violent jerk.

They got up, gathered their things, and Ted took both their trunks. It was the only chance she would ever have to say it. "Farewell, my love."

"I don't accept it," he said. He followed her to the stair and nodded toward Cygnus Black. "There's your father. I'm going to ask him for permission to visit."

"Ted, it will be a disaster."

"Nevertheless, when a man wants to court a woman, he asks her father."

"Ted!" she hissed, but he was determined.

Cygnus Black smiled blandly upon his middle daughter. "Ah, Narcissa is the first off the train, and Andromeda finally graces us with her presence. Your grades do your family credit, my dear. Your suitors are all properly impressed."

"Mr. Black," Ted started. Andromeda started to feel panicky.

"I see you have my daughter's trunk. Thank you young man." A wand was tapped on the trunk, which disappeared, presumably home. "As I was saying, daughter..." Cygnus took his daughter's elbow firmly and walked her toward the barricade. Druella and Narcissa were ahead of them.

Andromeda turned and saw Ted, who hadn't moved in several minutes. She could do no more than mouth, "I'm so sorry," before her father tugged at her arm and said, "Don't make a scene, young lady. It's not unheard of for young witches to have admirers, but that's all he will ever be."

"No, father." But she could feel his eyes on her back, and everything within her screamed that she needed to be with him.

Andromeda did very little for another two weeks. She slept late into the mornings, feeling fuzzy-headed when she woke. Then she felt sick until she ate her breakfast. After that, she wandered through the house, looking for some spot that felt like home.

She would start in her own bedroom, but all she could think about was the pleasure she had discovered in the bed with Tonks. She wandered down the stairs and into the kitchen, where she missed having his eyes on her when she ate. She'd never really been at home in the other rooms of the house, and so invariably ended up back in her room, where the sight of her uniform or a school book would cause her to cry. She often lay down on her bed and fell asleep after that.

In the evenings, she dined with the family and whatever business associate father had in that night. On several occasions, she realized the wizard at dinner was there to assess her. Father would describe her excellence at Hogwarts and the fact that she had been a Prefect. The wizards would answer with their approbation, and Andromeda expected every morning to hear that one or another had offered a contract for her.

One day during her wanderings, she happened past father's study and heard him speaking angrily at someone. "I expected you to get the hint when I ignored you at the train station, young man."

"I refuse to be ignored, sir. I am here to ask permission to court your daughter."

"It's impossible."

"I'm sure that it's quite possible, sir. I love her, and I believe she loves me, too."

"In love with a Mudblood? Preposterous!"

"Nevertheless, I believe she and I could have a happy life together..."

"Andromeda Black was not born to be happy. Her future is to be great."

"I'm not as wealthy as your family, but I have a good job and I believe we will have every necessary comfort..."

"She's never given a thought to her own comfort. Her needs don't run that way."

"Sir, please, just give us a chance..."

"I believe this interview is over, young man."

Andromeda withdrew up the stairs, but stood where she could catch a glimpse of him.

"Thank you for your time, sir. I'm sorry we couldn't come to an agreeable conclusion."

He looked so manly standing there, in a businesslike wizard robe. He spoke like a proper wizard, too, and not with his usual common accent. But under it all was that cheerful smile, that sandy hair, and the chest that had given her such comfort. Perhaps he felt her looking at him, because he happened to glance her way. She ducked away and stood with her back against the wall, trying to calm herself.

"I don't give a tinker's damn about what gives you sorrow, young man. I've spent far more time on you than I've ever spent on a Mudblood before. Let this be the end of it."

Ted's voice raised just a bit. "I'm sure Andromeda knows that if she's ever in need, I'll be there for her."

The front door opened and closed. Andromeda's heart wandered down to the street with him, wondering what he would think and whether he would let it go at that. She wasn't sure what she expected him to do next.

"Andromeda Black!"

It was time to face the music. She took a deep breath, walked back down the hallway, and descended the stairs.

"Yes, father."

"Have you been encouraging that Mudblood?"

"No, sir." She'd done everything in her power to discourage him, for his own good.

"Do you have feelings for him?" Father's eyes stared into hers.

She forced herself to be calm. "Any feelings I might have are unimportant, Father."

Father's stance softened just a bit. "That's my girl. I believe we have almost finished negotiating your marriage contract."

"With whom, father?"

A strange look passed over father's face. If she didn't know better, she would think it was fear. "I think I'll let the wizard introduce himself to you when the time comes."

If father had that look on his face from dealing with her future husband, what would her life with the man be like? That was the day she started sorting things to put into a carpet bag Uncle Alphard gave her as a gift for completing her education. "I think you will find that it has a capacity greater than it appears," he had said with a wink. The bag held items she wouldn't have expected as well as clothes. Things she loved went into it as well as things she might need if she ever had to leave in a hurry.

A week later, she was summoned to the door of the formal drawing room. Mother was beaming and Father looked less stern than usual. "The contract is signed. The marriage is set for the fall."

"Who?"

Father opened the door and guided her into it. "It wouldn't do for you to keep your husband waiting, dear."

The door shut with Andromeda on one side and her parents on the other.

"Ah, Miss Black. How are you?"

She turned back to the door, sure she wasn't supposed to come in this room. This wizard was...

"Miss Black?" his countenance turned as dark as his nature.

She immediately sank to her knees and bowed before him. "I'm sorry, my lord. I was surprised. I didn't expect that they would have..."

"If we are to form the alliance your parents and I have agreed upon, you may call me Tom when we're alone. In public, you will call me 'my lord,' as does everyone else."

He leaned down and lifted her up. Andromeda feared those hands at her shoulders more than anything about him. It was all in the way he used them to caress his followers or to hold his wand just before some frightening spell was cast. Somehow she forced herself to remain calm as he put his fingertip under her chin to look into his face. His benign smiles were worse than the frown of any person she'd ever met. "Of course, my dear, you weren't expecting such an honor. Your modesty is charming. Yet where else would I find the best ground to plant the seed of Slytherin than the House of Black?"

"Bellatrix, my lord?"

A flash of anger crossed his features. "Barren. She's an adequate lover, but hasn't got with child. I've learned the little whore has been with several wizards with the same results. Lestrangle wants her even without issue; he can have her. I'm moving on... to hopefully more fertile ground."

He pulled her close and pressed his lips to hers. *Not... Ted...*

One of his hands was at the small of her back, pulling her close to where *something* poked into her tummy. Suddenly he pulled away from his kiss and moved his body far enough away to place his hand over her abdomen, probing. Then he smiled even more cruelly.

"I had my worries, since your sister is obviously barren, but you're quite fecund, aren't you, my Andromeda? You will be the garden of my strength."

"My lord?"

"We're alone, so please call me Tom, my dear. My followers know that I have found the secret to avoiding death. I shall teach you. I think you will find it quite easy. After a while we shall conceive the first of my loyalest followers. In the meanwhile, we will find many ways for you to serve my various needs."

Then those hands, those horrible hands, were touching her breasts. He squeezed hard, causing her to yelp in pain.

His lips lowered again, but Andromeda lost all control over herself. Her breakfast suddenly reappeared, covering the front of the Dark Lord's robe and her own. In an instant, her wand was out, cleaning up the mess. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

"Ah, my sweet witch, it's the excitement." He slid his hand over his cleaned robes and then pointed at her. "Why don't you get yourself cleaned up? A house elf can do the rest. Then we will go some place private, and I will start to teach you the secrets of my life."

She backed out of the room, and then walked quickly down the hall. It wasn't excitement, and she suddenly saw it very clearly. She closed her eyes and willed her thoughts...her very being...harder than at any time since the afternoon she had spent with Ted. *Please be there. Please... please...*

*I'm always here for you, love.*

She nearly stumbled on the stairs, she was so relieved to make this connection.

*Did you really mean it, that you would help me if I had a problem?*

He seemed to sense her desperation. *What's wrong?*

Her mind flashed the moments before... the Dark Lord... his groping... his kisses... her sudden sickness... In response, she had an impression of a pure anger, of rage even, at the wrongness of it all. It comforted her to think that he still felt this way about her.

*Can you get here?* The image of a particular place was strong in her mind.

It was quite familiar to her. *Yes, I can get there.*

*Come to me, love. We'll find a way to solve this problem.*

She turned on the taps to the shower and then dropped her dress where she stood. Without getting in the shower, she tiptoed to her room and dressed quickly. Then she pulled her bag out of the back of her closet. As she made her way down the back stairs, she heard the Dark Lord speak to her father.

"I believe she will suit me admirably, Cygnus. She's a little shy, but she'll grow out of it. She's not one of those overly bold girls, like your other daughter."

"No, my lord." Was that her father's voice, sounding so deferential?

At last the kitchen. It was deserted even of house-elves at this time of day. She tossed some powder into the fireplace and said, quietly but firmly, "The Leaky Cauldron."

*A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for their review and advice!*

## A Sea...

### Chapter 5 of 7

Andromeda enters a world that is different from the one she's known, complete with new responsibilities.

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

Ted was waiting for her right next to the fireplace. He took her hand and ran with her out of the restaurant and into the little alleyway in back. When he folded her into his arms, Andromeda felt safe for the first time since leaving Hogwarts. "Hold on," he whispered as he turned.

When the world righted itself, Andromeda looked around. They were in a forgotten corner of a quiet park. Ted led her to a bench near a playground that was empty. "The young ones don't come here very often any more."

"I'm sorry. It must have been charming once."

"The neighborhood is changing. They don't have the same sort of families any more."

They were quiet for several minutes, during which Andromeda tried to figure out just how to broach the subject that was now critical. She didn't want to bring it up until she had soaked up the feel of him and the sense of security he brought her. She wasn't sure how Ted would react to her situation, either. Surely in a few moments she would absorb enough of whatever it is he exuded to her that made her feel so safe. She sniffed the smell of Quidditch and whatever was the scent of the soap he used. It hadn't changed since the day Prewett's Amortentia had covered her hair.

"Did he get a chance to...Andromeda, I can't say the word...did he *attack* you?"

"He just touched me, through my clothes."

Ted breathed a sigh of relief. "I can't stand the thought of you being..." He swallowed, clearly uncomfortable saying the word... "raped."

She shook her head. "It hasn't happened." *Yet*, she thought.

"We can't allow it to happen."

They were quiet again, and Andromeda realized there would never be a better time to broach the subject. "Have you been ill, like we both were before that day?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm somewhat sorry to hear that." Andromeda drew back and settled on the bench, feeling like a heap of bones. Everything came to one point, even whatever the Dark Lord had been talking about.

He smiled and looked at her. "I've been feeling a different sort of pain where you're concerned. I miss you so much that it makes me ache. Now that I know what it feels like to have you in my arms and in a bed, I confess I don't think about much else."

He was so sweet and kind to her, but how would he really react? She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and just said it. "Ted, I'm late."

He sat up quickly and took her hand. "Is there some place you need to be? I'll take you there."

She shook her head and squeezed his hand, willing him to understand. "No, Ted, *late*, in a womanly way."

Ted got very still for a moment, so still she wondered if he was breathing. "You haven't had any cycles since we were together?"

She shook her head.

"And...please forgive me...there's been no one else?"

She shook her head again. "Just you."

Without being entirely sure how it happened, she was pressed up against his chest, encircled by those strong arms. He was whispering into her hair, but she just heard a rushing sound in her ears. Was he telling her he couldn't help her? She calmed. No, Ted would never brush her off. He was a man who took care of things. She started listening. "My angel... my love..."

They sat quietly for a long while. Andromeda couldn't get enough of his arms around her. She felt his strength working through her, giving her courage.

He pulled back and brushed her hair out of her eyes. "I should ask... Are you angry or upset?"

She shook her head. "My whole purpose in life was to marry someone and have his children."

"My children? I expected that you would have done or used something."

"Pureblood witches have been killed for preventing pregnancy. It was simply not a consideration. I expected you to do something."

"I had measles when I was a kid...it's a Muggle sickness. They said I probably wouldn't have kids." He put his hand over her belly, and she felt a glow within her. Was the child already responding to its father's touch? She felt a warmth move through her from head to toe. She was perfectly at home.

"Will you marry me now?"

She pulled back at that. "I... what will we do in the mean time? I can't go home."

"I know someone who can get us a special license, so it can be done quickly. We'll find a place to hide you."

"I..." Could she get married... just like that? What would her family do? Her hand fell to her tummy. The relationship was already consummated.

"What if I'm not?"

"Pregnant?" he asked. He smiled and teased her as his hands slid over her hips. "Then we'll spend the next thirty or so years trying our hardest to make you that way."

She blushed and looked down. When she looked back up, he looked just a little uncertain.

"Is there someone else, someone you wanted to marry?"

She thought of her fantasy of a tall, dark prince, and quashed it once and for all. The hero of her girlish fantasies always rescued her from grave danger. Ted, just by existing, was doing that. "There's no one. My only worry along those lines is that my parents have signed a marriage contract on my behalf."

"That can only go so far, and you haven't exchanged vows, have you?"

"No, but my family will never give consent to you."

"You're of age. I want you to give your own consent, Dromeda. Your family treats you like an object, like something to be bought or sold, but I want you of your own free will."

She felt dizzy for a moment and breathed deeply to clear her mind. "Mudblood, how can you possibly be so wonderful?"

He squeezed her closer. "You're back to yourself if you can call me 'Mudblood,' again. I'm not wonderful, Dromeda. I'm selfish and unkind to my enemies."

"You've never had an enemy."

"That's entirely untrue."

"Who could possibly be your enemy?"

"Lord Voldemort."

She stiffened in his arms at the sound of the name.

"And your family, if they want that man to violate you."

"Ted..."

"If you don't want to marry me, I'll help you find a place to stay until you decide what to do."

"We don't even know for sure..."

Suddenly, Ted stood. "Then let's go find out."

Two hours later, they stood together outside a clinic. Andromeda clung to Ted, who held her close. "It's true. I'm going to have your baby."

"Poppy said it will be born around Christmas."

"How did you know she would be at this clinic?"

"Quidditch players spend a fair amount of time in the hospital wing. I got bored one day and asked what she does over the summer."

"I'm pregnant." If she said it enough, maybe she would comprehend it.

"Yes, love, you're pregnant with our child."

"There's a person growing inside me." It was one thing to suspect and to wonder, but to know there really was a baby within her made Andromeda's heart beat wildly.

Ted put an arm around her and walked her back to a place they could Disapparate. "You're amazing, Andromeda. I can't tell you how much I want to marry you. I know we could be brilliant together, but you do have other options."

Andromeda considered the options. There were ways to end the pregnancy. She could go back to her family, marry the Dark Lord, and possibly live forever. She quickly moved to the second option. Ted said he would help her find a place to live. She could carry the child, place it with another family, and then return to her life. Or she could keep the child and raise it alone. Then again, she could marry this man who had fathered the child on that indescribable day of passion. She was sure that he fully intended more passion if she chose that option. She couldn't help a shiver of anticipation at the thought.

"Ted, I think I'd like...I think I'd like to marry you."

"Oh, Dromeda..." He kissed her, then, and she knew she'd made the right decision. She enjoyed his kiss and realized she would be kissed on a regular basis from then on.

When he let her up for air, she had one request. "Would it be all right to stop in Diagon Alley for a while?"

"Certainly."

She went into Madame Malkin's boutique. There was a gown there that belonged to her. It was already paid for and was made just for her, so there was no point in letting it stay there.

When she came out of the shop, holding a large garment bag, Ted was waiting for her. "They're starting to look for you, but some friends are willing to take you in."

"Just like that?"

"Yes."

"Not your parents...my family will look there first."

"That's what the others thought." A cloud passed over his face. "My family is being moved for the moment. This family is beyond suspicion, and they're pureblood. It's perfect for you."

Andromeda put her hand in Ted's. "If you're sure, I trust you."

"Ah, love, the future is as glorious as I said." He put his arms around her and turned.

Andromeda felt dizzy and sick when she arrived back on solid land, with Ted's hands firmly around her. He held her until she was steady and then released her. A sweet little house, often referred to as a "start up" by estate agents, stood before her. "Where are we?"

"This is the home of Arthur and Molly Weasley."

"But they're blood-traitor Gryffindors!"

A firm hand under her chin moved her face around to look at him. "You've just consented to marry a Mudblood, Andromeda. Doesn't that make you a blood-traitor, too? Does it really matter so much? Should we reconsider the whole thing? I can take you back to your family home."

He was right. At some point in the past few hours, she'd made a final decision. She would no longer be a true pureblood. "It's no home to me." She put her hand in his and set her face to the path in front of them. She'd come this far; surely she could see it all through. Maybe if she wished hard enough, she would wake up from this dream and find that Ted was as wonderful as he was but also had pure enough blood to satisfy even Aunt Walburga.

Molly Weasley's words were kind, but her eyes had a look that said, "We'll see." Ted continued to hold Andromeda's hand as Molly led them to her room, and then he set her carpet bag on the bed.

"I'll be down fixing dinner," said Molly with a disapproving look.

Ted's hand ran down Andromeda's arm to her hand. "It's just a few days."

She closed her eyes tight and thought of what the Dark Lord had planned. The more she thought about it, the more sure she was that he had known about the baby. In the home of her parents, she and the baby were in danger. It wasn't clear whether Molly would be a friend, but at least she wouldn't hurt Andromeda. "It's different, but I'll get used to it."



He pulled her close. "I'm not supposed to come here very often. They think I'll be watched. I'm going to miss you so much, but it's just for a few days."

It was something to add to the list of things she would think about later... marriage to a Mudblood, living with blood-traitors, the look in Molly Weasley's eye, and now having to navigate this new world without Ted's comforting presence. She clung to him for just a minute. "It's the best way, isn't it?"

"That's my witch." He said it with such pride that she didn't have the heart to do what she was a hair's breadth from doing, which was burst into tears. Instead, she gave him as convincing a smile as she could.

Her reward was sweet kisses of the sort she'd come to depend upon. "My angel, we're so close now," he whispered as he caressed her face and neck. "We'll never be apart after this."

After a few minutes, they walked down the stairs and back to the kitchen. Molly was doing something with a big knife and a roast while smaller knives did things with various vegetables.

Ted made his way to the door and then turned. "I can't tell you how I appreciate this, Molly," he said.

"Hmph," was her reply.

He kissed Andromeda on the cheek. "I love you," he said as he went out the door.

"I..." she said, just before biting her lip.

"I know, Dromeda. I know." He smiled and walked down the path. An instant later, he was gone.

"Well, are you going to make yourself useful, or do princesses like you just stand around and wait for other people to do things?"

Andromeda turned. "I'd like to help, if you'll show me what to do."

"Show you what to do?"

"I've never done any of these things," she admitted, spreading her arms to indicate the kitchen full of activity.

Molly looked aghast for a moment but then nodded her head. "Your mother has house-elves, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"So you know absolutely nothing about how to care for a home, or cook."

"I can make an omelet."

"Ted Tonks is a good man. He deserves more than that."

"I...I suppose he does." Andromeda suddenly felt inadequate. "I would be grateful to learn whatever you teach me."

Molly sighed. "And Bill's going to wake up any second. Here, this is how you peel a potato." Molly took a peeler and a potato and showed Andromeda what to do.

"By hand? You were doing it with a spell."

"The spell works better when you have a sense of what it needs to do."

"But I can't do all those things! I'm pregnant!"

Molly shrugged. "So am I. Three months gone with the second baby and miserable more often than I feel good. Still, dinner doesn't cook itself, and you can't expect your husband to work all day and then come home and cook for you."

"I hadn't thought of that." Andromeda put out her hands and took the potato and peeler.

"You don't say." Molly's voice had a tone that said she didn't think Andromeda thought about much of anything. "Just see what you can do with those potatoes while I look after Bill."

A little while later, Molly came back into the kitchen holding the hand of a little red-haired boy. "Sit yourself down while mummy finishes with dinner." she said. The tot sat on a rug in the corner and played with some blocks. Molly came over to the counter where Andromeda worked and said, "You seem to have done well enough with those. This is how we put them to boil."

"Sort of like some potions with roots."

"I suppose," said Molly as if she was bestowing a great honor. Yet she seemed to unbend a bit as she showed Andromeda the various steps that went into making the dinner. She kept up a steady stream of conversation as she prepared meat and vegetables, all the while keeping an eye on the toddler in the corner, who occasionally strayed from his rug and wandered into the living room. Andromeda was given orders to stir as Molly went in search of her son. Minutes later, a new stream of conversation would start as Molly came back into the kitchen tugging the hand of her son while scolding him for getting into something.

Andromeda was sure there was a stream of perspiration running down from her neck by the time Molly declared dinner to be ready. After that, it was time to set the table for dinner. The spell for that was a variation of *Wingardium Leviosa* that Andromeda was quickly competent with.

Arthur came in shortly afterward, and gave his wife a kiss before looking for his son. He held the boy while he shook Andromeda's hand. He then took his son for a bit of play in the living room, leaving the women to do the last few things to serve dinner. When Molly declared that process complete, Arthur came back into the kitchen, strapped Bill into his high chair, and sat at the table. Andromeda sat where indicated. The meal progressed in relative silence. Molly and Arthur spoke in short exchanges about their day while passing looks between themselves that indicated there was more to say but not in front of the company.

Molly showed Andromeda how to wash the dishes and then followed Arthur into the living room. Andromeda could make out snatches of the conversation, and none of it sounded good.

"Ted's parents' house has been burned to the ground."

"Already?"

"We got them out just in time. An hour later, the Dark Mark was visible over the burning house."

"What are they doing at the Ministry?"

"Nothing on either side. Cygnus is demanding that the Minister look into this personally, which of course Fudge won't do, but they've done nothing to really help Ted, either. It's hardest on him, of course, being knocked out of the Aurors by Cygnus Black's friends a week ago."

Andromeda had to sit down. Had father really done that? It would have been right after he'd sent Ted away from the house. Was father spiteful enough to hurt a man's livelihood just for asking to court his daughter? She tended to some stray bubbles as she decided her father was exactly that spiteful.

Arthur had left *The Evening Prophet* on the table. The lead headline read, **Debutante Missing...Presumed Kidnapped**. There was a picture of her taken just after N.E.W.T.s had ended. There was no indication that they knew what had happened to her, just a tearful quote from her mother and a promise of a reward from her father.

"Is she really worth all this to him? To have his parents affected like this and to lose his job?"

"He seems to think so."

"She's useless in the kitchen. She doesn't know anything about cooking, and she seems afraid of Bill. I don't know how they'll manage."

"I'm sure every couple has their struggles to work through, just like we did, Molly. He's crazy about her, and she must like him enough to get with child."

"Hmph. We'll see."

Andromeda was exhausted that night. It was her first day of any real exertion since the school term ended, and she slept more soundly than in weeks.

*A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for help with this story!*

## ...Nourished with Loving Tears

*Chapter 6 of 7*

Andromeda learns how to manage a house while she hides and waits.

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*She was back in the cottage where she and Ted had made love. For some reason, she had to find him, to warn him about something. Then she realized it was burning down and Ted was trapped inside. She had to get to him... to warn him. Something was pulling on her, keeping her from finding him...*

She woke up to a sharp knocking on the door. "Come along, it's time to fix breakfast."

Swallowing the wave of nausea that rose to the surface, she answered, "I'll be right there."

What followed was more cooking, followed by more dishes. After that, it seemed that they cleaned for hours. Andromeda had never spent so much time on her knees as she did washing floors and cleaning the toilets and tubs. She resolved that she would never take house-elves for granted again. Then she realized she would probably never have house-elves again. Ted was neither wealthy nor well-established in pureblood circles.

She had plenty of time to think about her situation with Tonks. She scolded herself for continuing to nurture dreams of a pureblood marriage with a handsome prince who would cherish and love her. That prince didn't exist, and she'd known that for several years. Her least offensive potential mate had been Crabbe, and that only because he was incapable of speech. He and all the others had seen fit to put their lips and hands all over her at one time or another, just because they had been considered as her potential husbands at those times.

Ted...the Mudblood, she reminded herself...loved her and would cherish her. He was a Mudblood, she told herself, and the child within her was half Mudblood. A wave of nausea came over her at that thought. Could she be the mother of a half-blood? Could she love and nurture this child the way she'd seen Molly care for her little one? A small voice in the back of her mind pointed out that Molly's child was pureblood. It was easy for *her*.

She lay in bed that night and felt the hard knot low in her tummy. She wondered if Ted...the Mudblood...thought about it at all. He didn't have to worry about losing his blood status, if he cared at all about it. How had that small bump gotten there, anyway? Did that day in the cottage really happen? Her aching body answered that it had. Ted...just Ted...had loved and cherished her, and she had cherished him in return. He had shown her affection, and she had soaked it in like a sponge. This was the child they had conceived, if not in love, then in something very close to it. Yes, she could love this child.

Ted deserved a wife who could properly keep his house and feed him. Maybe some day she would be able to get into the Healer training program. If that happened, she had no doubt that Ted would share the tasks that were required to keep the household running. He had already shouldered every single one of her burdens while his own increased as well. In the mean time, she would do her share.

As the days went by, Molly showed her more of the spells for housework and cooking. It turned out that she was right to make her do it all the Muggle way first. When Andromeda could picture exactly how it felt to do the work by hand, the spell was fairly easy to perform.

One morning, she awoke with renewed purpose. She would become the wife that Ted Tonks should have. Things went beautifully that day, and Molly even complimented her progress. Then Molly showed her how to make a pie. Andromeda did as she was told and then *felt* how to do it. Within minutes, she settled the crust into the tin, added the filling, and then the top crust. As she stretched the top of the crust to the edges and pinched them together, it just felt right. Molly sniffed and showed her that she needed to make some small openings for the steam to escape.

"I have no idea how it's going to taste, of course, but it looks all right."

That night, Arthur brought home a surprise. Andromeda was helping to lay the dishes on the table when she was pulled into a close embrace. "My angel, I missed you so."

"Oh, Ted."

He pulled away and looked into her eyes. "When did you start calling me that?" he asked with a smirk on his face.

She bit her lip. "I just...just hold me, Mudblood."

He smiled. "That's my plan."

Dinner was much more cheerful than with just the Weasleys. Ted, in that wonderful way of his, kept the conversation going and made everyone laugh. Molly was happy to

brag about her teaching skills until the pie was cut and eaten. At that point Arthur raved a little too much about it, and Molly left the kitchen. Arthur ran after her.

Andromeda looked at Ted in dismay and then stood up, gathering the dishes to start washing them.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've put my foot in it again. Every time I think I'm doing well, I manage to upset her. I just can't ever get on the right side of things."

"You're perfect to me."

Seeing that the sink was attending things properly, she turned to him. "Please don't lie to me; what happened to your family? And what did my father do about your job?"

He looked away from her.

"They were right," she said. "It's all my fault. I'm not worth it. And I was right. My family is doing everything they can to kill you."

"Stop," he said, shaking her gently. "Nothing terrible has happened. Yes, my family's house was burned down, but they and all their important things had already been moved out. Your father did pull strings to get me out of the Aurors, but Magical Law Enforcement took me, and I'll be out of training and earning full pay that much sooner. He wasn't able to get me kicked out of there. Scrimgeour wouldn't have it. We're fine. We'll be fine."

The words were important, but the way he held her, and the comfort that always washed into her was more so. "All right," she answered.

"I thought we could have a little time together here tonight. Would you like that?"

"With Arthur and Molly?"

"Arrangements have been made for them to go out and enjoy themselves for a while. Do you think we can handle their son?"

Bill and Andromeda had become friends of a sort. "Yes, I think we can."

Arthur and Molly came into the kitchen, dressed for an evening out. Molly spouted directions to Andromeda the whole time Arthur steered her toward the door. Andromeda and Ted stared at the closed door and then each other.

"Why don't you play with Bill while I finish cleaning up?" she asked. "Molly keeps some toys for him in that corner over there."

After a couple of false starts, Bill decided he liked Ted. Andromeda would have been surprised if he hadn't. She was coming to understand that it was impossible to dislike Ted Tonks. In her case, it was becoming impossible not to love him. She watched them play with glowing eyes as she put dishes away and set the kitchen to rights. They had so much fun that she almost hated it when it was time to give the toddler his bath.

It was not a process that the child was fond of, but Ted made it fun for him, and Andromeda got him clean. It wasn't quite to Molly's standard, but Andromeda thought to herself that it was probably better that way. She reflected that the pie might have been too big an accomplishment and that perhaps it was as well not to succeed in everything.

When the child was asleep, they went downstairs and turned on the wireless. Ted pulled Andromeda close, with one arm around her and their other hands clasped between them. As they swayed to the music, he kissed her hair and whispered to her, "I always dreamed it would be like this," he said.

"It's like a dream," she answered.

"It's going to come true, now. The license came through today and the wedding is set for tomorrow."

She looked up at him. "It's really happening?"

"Yes." His lips came down to hers for a long kiss.

She kissed back eagerly, and they stopped dancing as the kiss grew more intense. Her arms slid around his neck as his hands slid around her waist and up her back.

"Ah, love, I've missed you," he whispered.

"I dream of this," she answered.

She developed a dire need to feel his bare skin under her fingertips. She unfastened his robe and shirt and pushed them away from his chest. She hummed happily and settled her head against him, all the while continuing to unfasten things and slide her arms around his bare torso.

He lifted her chin up for a kiss again and started working at the fastenings of her dress and then her bra. She shimmed so that it fell around her hips. Holding her hands to the side, he stepped back from her and looked at her. He pointed to the bulge in her lower abdomen. "Is that..."

"Yes," she answered, "that's the baby."

He knelt down, pressing first his hand and then his lips over the spot. Andromeda wasn't sure what happened next, but she was soon aware of his hands caressing and massaging her breasts. Then they were kissing again, and Andromeda was pushing Ted's robe and shirt over his shoulders. She sat and then slid back on the couch, pulling him with her. Her arms and legs pulled him close, and then they were joined together.

"Oh, Ted... Teddy," she whispered. "I've missed you so much."

"My love," he groaned.

The rhythm increased, and very little was heard beyond sighs and groans until a moment when they held each other very tightly, scarcely breathing. Andromeda thought she would never know such bliss again. Ted groaned and grunted until he collapsed. He rolled and readjusted their positions so that he was on her side. They lay close together, with her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't intend for that to happen," he said.

"I don't care. I'm glad," she responded.

"I thought we should wait until our wedding night."

"I'll take you any time I can get you."

"Is it like that?" he asked with a smile.

"You're the center of my life, Mudblood," she answered. "You're all I think about, I only feel right when I'm with you, and I want to be a better person for you."

He didn't speak for a few minutes. She wondered if she'd said something wrong or if she had managed to offend him. Had she bored him to sleep? "Ted?"

He took a deep breath, as though he were choking on something. "Why is it," he asked, "that you only use my given name when you're worried or passionate?"

"I'll be using it tomorrow in our vows."

"Are you sure you'll remember?"

For a minute she panicked. What if she did forget? Would it invalidate the marriage? Then she remembered something from the weddings she had attended. "The officiator will tell me what to say."

It started as a rumble, deep in his tummy, but it quickly burst out. "Oh, Andromeda," he said as he laughed, "you're amazing."

"What did I say?"

He tipped her head up. "You said that you love me in the same ways I love you. You're the center of my life too, Andromeda Black."

"Soon to be Tonks."

"Soon to be whatever you choose as your last name. As long as I have you, I don't need anything that you'd rather not do."

They lay companionably together. "Is it love? It seems more like insanity, all the things we're doing just to be together."

"We'll be quietly mad together, then," he whispered, shifting his own head so that their lips could meet.

Soon she was whispering his name again. "Ted... Ted... *Ted-dy!*"

He laughed in triumph and joy as once again they came together.

The clock wound around to the morning, and there was some commotion downstairs. Andromeda ignored it in her much-needed sleep until it knocked on her own door. She pulled herself out of bed and tied a wrapper on. Then she opened the door and bestowed a sleepy smile...upon a frantic-looking Arthur.

"Andromeda, I don't know how to tell you this." He ran his fingers through his hair. He must have been doing it a lot, since it stood on end.

She was suddenly alert and completely awake. "What is it?"

"Ted's been staying in a safe house, and various members of the Order...well, a group of our friends...have been checking in on him in the mornings, just to make sure your family hasn't done anything. Today he didn't answer the door, so they went inside, but he hadn't been in since he was here yesterday. They've checked with his job, his old apartment, some other places... Andromeda, I'm sorry, but we can't find him."

"Oh," she said, looking over at her bed with a very pink face.

"If the worst has happened, we'll find some way to protect you and the baby."

"But, Arthur..."

"There are places you can go and people who will help you."

"We were dancing last night."

"It's good that you two had a happy evening together. I'm glad we were able to give that to the two of you. Don't worry, one way or another we'll find him, or at least find out what happened."

"Arthur, listen. We couldn't help ourselves, and well..." she pulled the door completely open and let her host see the bed. Ted had that look of mischief on his face that had always endeared Andromeda to him.

"Here? He's been *here* the whole time?" Arthur looked in amazement.

"It was after we put Bill down to sleep, and we couldn't seem to help ourselves..."

"Tonks! What the hell is the matter with you! Half the order has been frantic when you didn't check in. McKinnon is in hysterics." Arthur looked like he didn't know whether to be angry or relieved.

Ted quickly got up out of the bed, causing Arthur to turn away quickly. "Gads, man, cover yourself up. There's a lady present."

"If you'll give me a minute, I will." He reached for his clothing, which was draped over a chair. "What exactly is the fuss?"

"McKinnon went looking for you at the house and when she didn't find you, she went straight to Scrimgeour, and the whole thing was let out."

"Shouldn't she have checked back here, first?"

"Yes," said Arthur impatiently, "but she didn't. So now you'll have to straighten all of that out with the Order, then straighten it out with the boss, face your future in-laws, and be ready to get married in," he looked at his watch, "ninety minutes."

Andromeda squeaked. "Our wedding is in an hour and a half?"

Ted flashed a smile at her. "Can you wait that long?"

"Get out!" She threw a pillow at him. "I have to get ready!"

"I'll take you as you are."

"Gah! Men!" she shouted. "Maybe I need to practice saying your name! 'Mudblood' seems to roll off the tongue easier than 'Theodore' sometimes."

Ted's laughter lingered in the upstairs hall after he followed Arthur to the tasks outlined for that morning.

An hour later, Andromeda looked at herself in a full-length mirror she had brought from her parents' home. It had always been kind. It wasn't the first time she had thanked Uncle Alphard's carpet bag, but she was most grateful now.

"You look lovely, dear. He'll want to marry you," said the mirror.

"That's the intent," Andromeda said as she tried yet again to put her hair up. It was useless to try. She'd never managed anything other than brushed straight or a braid down her back.

"It's a very pretty dress," said a new voice. She looked up and saw Molly standing in the doorway.

"I was supposed to wear it next week to the Wizengamot. It wasn't supposed to look like this." Andromeda had tried to will more fabric into the bodice, which couldn't hide the generous cleavage she now had, but Gamp's law was against her. This dress wouldn't hide the pregnancy bump that seemed to be more obvious every day, either.

"He won't be able to take his eyes off you."

"Do you think so?"

"If he's like my Arthur, and I'm fairly certain he is, he will love you in whatever you're wearing."

"I want him to have a pretty bride."

Molly came into the room and stood behind Andromeda. "I think we can do something a little different with your hair." She Summoned brush, comb, pins, and a spray bottle. She spent a few minutes brushing until Andromeda's hair shone. "I suppose I was unkind when you first came here."

"I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble."

"I've been so tired with Bill and the one on the way. Worst of all, Arthur just agreed to your staying with us without asking me first. He seems to think I can handle anything that happens."

"He seems to worship you."

"I suppose," Molly said as she sprayed and brushed Andromeda's hair. "You've worked hard, learning how to do things in the house. Now that it's all been done, you really haven't been a bother at all, and it's been nice to have another witch around."

Andromeda smiled at that. "I'm grateful for everything you've taught me. I want Ted to have a comfortable home. He deserves to be happy. He's gone to so much trouble to make this work."

"I think you'll both be." Molly combed, twisted, and pinned for a few minutes. "You seem to have that thing that happy couples have."

Andromeda realized she was becoming part of a couple and suddenly felt nervous. "Do you ever regret it?"

"Regret what?"

"Marriage, motherhood, any of it."

Molly paused with pins in her mouth and a brush in one hand. Finally she nodded. "On a great many days, I do, especially when Arthur says I'll do things without asking me first." Both witches giggled. "But every day I also find some reason to be glad that sweeps any regret away."

"There are moments when I don't think I can do this, but then there are moments when I know that if I don't do this, I'll simply die."

"You love him; that's obvious."

Did she love him? It was the most incredible feeling she'd ever had, but she wasn't sure if what she felt qualified. Andromeda bit her lip, but then she looked in the mirror and saw herself. "Oh, it's amazing, Molly!"

"I was always pretty good with hair. With any luck this new one will be a girl and I'll get to do hers."

*A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for beta reading!*

## A Preserving Sweet

*Chapter 7 of 7*

Andromeda starts a completely new life.

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

Molly and Bill escorted Andromeda to the Ministry but then had to leave. Andromeda stood nervously in the anteroom of the Registry Office and waited. After a while, she heard voices coming down the hallway.

"I don't give my consent!"

"She's of age. She will give her own consent."

"She's been enchanted. She doesn't know her own mind."

"Poppy Pomfrey did a full check of her just last week. She's not under the influence of any spell or potion."

Andromeda heard her father clear his throat loudly. "She's my daughter, and I'll see for myself."

Andromeda had been starting at every sound of her father's voice. Now she looked in fear at the door that was about to open. She looked around the room. Ted hadn't gotten there yet, and she was defenseless.

Father entered the room. "Andromeda Black, it's time to come home and end this. The Dark Lord is willing to overlook your indiscretion. He will honor the marriage contract."

Her father was followed by a kind-looking official, her mother, and Uncle Alphard. The group filed into the room and they were ushered into the main office. Cygnus reached for Andromeda's arm and held it.

"Your mother has been worried to a sick bed, crying over your disappearance."

Andromeda looked at mother, who was impeccably dressed and whose placid face had not been perturbed in decades. "Emotions cause *wrinkles*, dear," she'd said time and again. Andromeda doubted there had been many tears at all, once the newspaper reporter had left the house.

"It's only the comfort of my brother, here, that has gotten me through the past week."

Uncle Alphard's eyes twinkled, and Andromeda knew she had a friend. "I'm sure there's a way to work through this whole thing," he said.

The official smiled nervously. "Yes, that's what I was saying. Miss Black, have you come of your own volition?"

Father glowered, Uncle Alphard twinkled, and mother looked impassive. Although she was afraid of father, and although she somehow knew Uncle Alphard would help her, it was mother who decided her. Did she want the life Druella Rosier had? No, Andromeda Black wanted to *live*.

She pulled her arm out of her father's grasp and stepped away from him. Then she looked directly at the official and smiled. "Yes, sir, I fully intend to marry Theodore Tonks."

The official sat at his desk and opened a folder. "All that remains, then, is the groom."

"I won't allow it!" thundered Cygnus.

"This is what I'm going to do, father. I didn't mean to disappoint you, but I simply can't...I can't do what you're asking."

"Please, at least consider a pureblood wizard. I was approached by the Prewetts a few months ago. Gideon was interested in you."

Andromeda shook her head. "They're nice enough, but I can't marry him."

"You're going to marry the Mudblood, then?"

"I love the Mudblood."

"Love!" he spat out. "Useless, and you're a useless little brat if that's all you care about. This is not why I have daughters."

Andromeda stared at her hands and then turned to the official. "Is there any paperwork I can sign while we wait?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Black, I have several things..."

"Andromeda! I'm telling you now. Do not sign those papers."

She walked over to the desk, where her father again put his hand on her arm.

"Let her go, sir."

Andromeda turned and saw Ted. He'd showered, and he was wearing dress robes. He looked amazing. "You're here."

"So are you." Ted walked toward the official's desk and pointed his wand at Cygnus's hand. "Let Andromeda sign whatever she wishes."

"I will not let her throw her life away and further, to become a tool of Mudbloods and blood-traitors!"

"If she marries me, she will be a cherished wife. Let her decide if that's throwing away her life. If she chooses to become a tool of any group, that's her business as far as I'm concerned."

"She'll be giving up her family, her position, and all of the respect of her peers."

Ted looked at Andromeda. "Will you miss it?"

"A little," she admitted. "It's all I've known for almost eighteen years."

"Shall we call it off, then?" He smiled cheerfully, but suddenly, she realized that she had access to his mind again. She could feel how important this was to him. Marriage would bind her for life, yet Ted would give her freedoms she had never known as a Black. Even now, when her choice was desperately important to him, he gave her the freedom to make this decision.

She had a reason to smile for the first time since arriving at the Ministry. "Don't you dare."

Cygnus's grip tightened, and Andromeda winced.

Ted faced the man who would, within minutes, be his father-in-law. "I'm going to be a good husband who will protect your daughter to my last breath, even if the person hurting her is her own father. So please, REMOVE.YOUR.HAND,SIR."

Cygnus saw the look in Ted's eye and let go of Andromeda's arm. He stood back with his own arms folded. "I'm not going to sign the contract."

The officiator cleared his throat and spoke as if this sort of scene happened in his office every day. "She's an of-age witch, sir. We only need your signature as executor of the trust fund, and that is really pro-forma."

"My wife's parents established that trust for proper pureblood husbands. It isn't intended for Mudbloods."

"What they may or may not have intended is not written here. What is very clear is the magic regulating the trust. Miss Black's portion is to be transferred upon her marriage as a dowry."

"I don't want it," said Ted.

"Mr. Tonks," whispered the official, "It has to be transferred upon her marriage. Old family magic is worked into this trust."

"Well, then," said Ted, "put it in the name of Andromeda Black."

"We can do that," said the official, after scanning the faded parchment.

"Tonks," said Andromeda, "Andromeda Black Tonks." She would become a new person, a person with more freedom than she had known in the past.

Ted's face shone with happiness at that, just as it had the first time she told him she loved him. When Uncle Alphard helped her with her cloak, his face got even brighter. "You're so beautiful," he whispered, making her feel like the brightest star. When they knelt together to say their vows, she felt as though a bright light was within the two of them. They clasped their hands to say their vows, much as they had weeks before in the cabin, and once again Andromeda had the feeling that they were merging

together.

Her parents left as soon as the wedding rite ended. Druella had sniffed throughout the whole thing about witches who got married in presentation gowns that were obviously too small. Cygnus, having already had his say and having had it ignored, glowered silently. Andromeda wasn't sure why he stayed, unless it was to see if she would change her mind at the last minute. He stalked from the office without even looking to ensure that Druella and Alphard were with him.

After they left, Uncle Alphard frowned as though scolding Andromeda. He placed his hand on hers as though to accentuate whatever point he was making, but in actuality, he handed her an old fashioned key. "It's set to activate at five this evening," he whispered. "You may have the run of the place for two weeks." He let her go with a twinkling wink and then followed his brother.

Ted took her to a quiet restaurant in a suburb of London. "I've heard this is a very good place," he said. "I'm afraid I can't afford it as a regular thing, though."

"I don't expect it," she said. "I think I enjoy cooking. I want to see if you like the things Molly has taught me."

"I'm sure I will."

For the first time, they discussed the practical realities of the future. "I'm not sure if my flat is any sort of place to bring you," he said.

"Will you be there?"

He smiled. "Of course."

"Then it's exactly the place to bring me."

"But when the baby comes, it will be cramped."

"Don't we have time to figure that out?"

"Yes, we do." He took her hand. "What do you want to do about your uncle's Portkey? Is it safe?"

"I think so. He's very quiet when Aunt Walburga and father start talking, and he's Slytherin enough to be hiding different sympathies."

"Then why don't we?"

So was that at five in the evening, they were holding their bags and the key from Uncle Alphard. An instant later they were standing in the hallway of Alphard Black's cottage. A diminutive personage stood on the stair and greeted them.

"Is she Mistress Andromeda?" it asked.

"Yes, I'm Andromeda," she answered with a smile.

"I is Thallia, mistress. I shows Mistress and Master to bedroom."

She brought them upstairs to what was obviously the main bedroom.

"Oh, but isn't this Uncle Alphard's room?"

"Master moves downstairs after Mistress's death. We both waits for new Mistress."

"Oh," said Andromeda, not sure what that meant.

The house-elf worked around the room for several minutes, placing the bags someplace she had prearranged with herself and emptying them quickly. Her last act was to turn down the covers of the bed. Within ten minutes, Ted and Andromeda were alone in a bedroom they could call their own until Ted had to go back to work and Uncle Alphard came home.

Ted took her hands in his and looked at her. "I'll ask you this last time. Are you sure this is what you want?"

She had known that a moment like this one would come, and she knew what she needed to do if not exactly what to say. She knelt at his feet. When he leaned down and tried to lift her up, she put her hands over his lips. "I need to do this," she said.

Something in her eyes must have indicated her seriousness, because he nodded and said, "I'm listening."

"Theodore Tonks, I pledge myself to you for the rest of our lives. I don't know what will happen or how we will manage, but I trust that we will find our way through it together. I love you and you alone, and it is you with whom I will share a bed and children." She wasn't sure what else to say; they'd said everything else when they had exchanged their marriage vows, but it was important to her that she tell him that she was as sure of their love now as he had been in the cottage all those weeks ago.

Ted seemed to understand. His eyes were damp as he reached for Andromeda's hand and lifted her up. "I'm not sure what to do next," he said. "Suddenly, I have all of time to do the things I've always wanted to do with you, and I don't know where to start."

"What was the first thing you ever wanted to do with me?"

He tugged her closer. She leaned in and lifted her face, expecting to be kissed. Instead, he brought her hand up to his face and kissed the inside of her wrist. She wasn't prepared for the way it made her knees wobble.

"What are you doing?" she asked without breathing.

"When I first realized I love you, it was because I saw you holding your wand in Charms class and I wanted to kiss your wrist, just below where your wand ends. You've always had such sweet wrists."

"What year was it?"

"We were learning Cheering Charms in third year."

"I'm clearly a slow learner," she said.

"Why?"

"Because," she said, reaching her hands up to his shoulders, "the first time I realized I fancy you was not even a year ago. It was the beginning of last year when we were patrolling the dungeons. I saw your shoulders and I wanted to snuggle up to your chest."

"Did you?"

Andromeda very deliberately unfastened his tie and whispered a charm as she traced the line down the front of his shirt. Buttons gently unfastened themselves and his

shirt parted. Humming with delight, Andromeda slid her hands around him and pressed her face against his warm skin.

"Oh, love," he said, "I'm going to lose all control."

"Isn't that the general idea?" she asked.

"And here I thought you were demure and shy."

"Do you want me to be shy with you?"

He tapped her nose and then let his finger trail down her chin and then between her breasts. "Not in the least." Now he slid his hands along her face and brought her close for a kiss. He groaned. "It's just that I want to gently undress you and slowly become one."

"Does it matter?"

"This is our first time as husband and wife. I imagine there will be many different ways of expressing our love over the years, but I want this time to be one we remember as special."

She didn't know how to describe what she was feeling. "Ted..."

He smiled teasingly. "Ah, love, is this passion or worry?"

As it so often did, his mischief rescued her. "Shut it, Mudblood, and love me."

He chuckled at that as his hands moved along the satiny surface of her dress, sliding up her ribs and around her breasts. Her body instantly reacted, and she could feel a corresponding reaction pressed up to her middle.

"I want you," he whispered.

"I want you, too."

His fingers were tangled in the laces of her dress. "May I?"

She nodded, and then held her breath as he unfastened the tie and loosened the strings. He slid first one breast and then the other out of her bodice, holding and caressing them in his hands.

"Ted..." she whispered as his thumbs traced her nipples.

"Definitely passion this time," he whispered against her lips.

She reached around to pull him closer to her. She pressed her body up against his and enjoyed the feel of his skin to hers. "Oh," she sighed, blissfully.

"Do you like this?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes."

"I do too," he slid his hands up over her shoulders and pushed the dress the rest of the way down her arms and over her bum. It pooled around her feet. He ran his hands over her waist and down to her hips, which he pulled close to his own. "I love you, Dromeda."

"Oh, Ted..."

"Yes?" he prompted her.

She couldn't speak. His hands were... and they were somehow moving across the floor and over to the bed... and they were clasped together as they settled down among the turned-down sheets.

Rather, she was settled onto the bed. He stood next to it for a few seconds to remove his clothing. She stared at him in wonder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I do love you, Mudblood."

"I know you're not lying to me when you say it like that." He smiled at her as he got on the bed beside her. "I know it's real when you look at me like that." He brushed her hair back and caressed the sides of her face. "You are so pretty, love. I could look at you all day."

Her insides turned to jelly. "You always do this to me."

"Do what?" he asked as he moved closer to her.

"You make me feel such amazing things."

"Such as?" he whispered as he kissed her.

"All you have to do is look at me, just like that, and I can't breathe. Nothing matters but that I be as close to you as possible."

"That's all that does matter, love." His hands were stroking her back, calming her, while the the hairs on his chest stimulated her.

She lay in his arms as he kissed her. Her body started trembling, eager for more, and he smiled down at her. He ran his hand from her shoulder to her knee, causing her to shudder with desire. "I want you..." she whispered.

"Do you?" he asked as he kissed her neck.

"I want to feel you...inside me."

"Are you ready?" he asked. She nodded. He gently nudged her legs further apart as he settled his body between them.

"Oh, Ted..."

"Yes, love..."

Andromeda hadn't expected much difference between the act from before they were married, yet there were subtle changes. There was no fear of discovery, there was no bittersweet worry that they would be parted soon. They belonged together, now. An attraction had existed for a very long time; it became a compulsion after the accident brought them together until it was love. Now, as Andromeda was brought to bliss for the first time as a married woman, she felt Ted become an extension of herself.



*A/N: Thank you to Kyria of Delphi and Pennfana for beta reading!*