

To Rescue Her Prince

by reader76

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Answering the Call

Chapter 1 of 20

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A/N: I don't own the canon characters or situations posted. I make no money from the writing/publishing of this story. I was merely saddened by our tragic anti-hero's demise and 'what-if-ed' until this story nagged me to be written.

It had been 20 years since I had last lived in England. Oh, I had visited frequently, as Mom didn't want me to lose touch with my father's side of the family. As painful (and sometimes dangerous) as it was for her to be back in England after he passed away, she knew it was important. She knew that the time would come when we would all need each other.

Perhaps I should back up. My name is Elizabeth Prewett. My father, Charles Prewett, had three children by his first wife, Ginevra. By all accounts, she was a lovely woman; they say she was spirited, kind and utterly devoted to her family. Sadly, fate took her from them when Molly was but 10 years old, and the twins, Gideon and Fabian, were 7. Dad persevered and took wonderful care of their children. He thought of little else for those first few years. But when the boys left for Hogwarts, he realized that he needed to move on with his life.

Enter my mother. Mom was nothing like Ginevra Prewett. She was a Muggle and an American completing her PhD at Oxford. She was everything that the straight-laced Wizarding society in the sixties hated. She was every bit the 'make love not war' hippie stereotype from American films. But when Dad was giving a presentation to the Wizarding university and crossed paths with her, well, the rest was history. They were married two years later, and I was born about a year after that.

I wasn't particularly close to my brothers and sister, though they were always kind to me and nothing but respectful to my mother. Even as the years passed, when it became clear that Dad was in danger because of Mom and me, they stood by him and us as well. When ugly words like 'blood traitor' were used to describe our family, they remained loyal to their father.

I remember them urging Father to take Mom and me and move back to the U.S. for all of our safety. Gideon and Fabian were young men at the time, barely 20. I was 6, and I remember the fear on Molly's face. Mom was frightened as well, but she didn't understand the level of hate we were facing. She didn't understand the evil that those monsters were capable of inflicting upon innocent people. She didn't understand until Father was murdered when I was 9.

The night it happened, Fabian and Gideon took us to the Muggle U.S. Embassy. Mother was distraught, but Fabian somehow managed to convince the Muggle authorities that we needed to be flown to the U.S. to Mom's family immediately. I suspect that magic was involved, possibly of the unsavory kind. They spread the rumor that Mom and

I were killed with Father. Without a doubt, I know they saved our lives.

We lived in Boston with my grandparents. We kept in touch with Molly and the boys, and when I turned 11, Molly contacted Professor McGonagall; she connected Mom with Salem Witches Institute. Wizarding education in the U.S. was more integrated with Muggle education, which pleased my mother and grandparents. Mom wanted me educated for either world, and my grandparents were insistent that I wouldn't have to return to life as a witch unless it was my choice. Understandably, their perception of the Wizarding world was that it was a very dangerous place. After losing their son-in-law and then my two brothers to Death Eaters, they really didn't want their only grandchild to return. Molly visited a couple times a year. After the war ended, I visited in the summers to spend time with my nephews and niece.

By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to be a Healer, so I entered a training program. My specialty was curse rehabilitation, and part of the curriculum included Muggle physical therapy. I worked for a clinic in Boston after graduation. I was happy in the U.S. But, I also missed Molly's family very much. I never thought of returning seriously until about two years ago. A frantic Floo call from Molly told me something was very wrong. Arthur had been attacked by a giant magical snake. I knew I needed to be there for my sister and her family.

I spent several weeks working with the team at St. Mungo's on Arthur's case. I doubt I did anything of any significance to help the case; however, I learned a tremendous amount. The lead Healer at St. Mungo's offered me a job on staff, but I wasn't ready to return permanently. It was clear that war was afoot, again, and after my experience as a child, I felt safer in Boston. I knew that my status as a half-blood was considered marginally acceptable; however, I also knew the name Prewett would make me a target as my father and brothers had been.

This summer, when I visited for my nephew's wedding, we learned that their Ministry had been infiltrated. Even St. Mungo's was compromised. The Order of the Phoenix needed a Healer. Then, after the attack at the wedding, my other nephew ran off with two of his friends on some crazy mission; Molly was a wreck. I couldn't ignore my family and their needs any longer.

So, here I am, with the last of my things packed, awaiting the familiar glow of the Portkey on my wrist. I'm a bit nervous about returning to England. I'll be living in the home of Molly's Aunt Muriel. I remember her only vaguely from childhood. Back then, she hated the very idea of me. It was bad enough that her brother-in-law had remarried, but my mother was truly unacceptable to her. I'm not sure if it was the Muggle part, the American part, or the spunky part that she hated so much. But, regardless, my presence here is to be a great secret, so Muriel's home is thought to be the best option. And it's large enough to serve as a makeshift hospital of sorts for injured members of the Order and others in need of a safe house.

Deep breaths, it's going to be okay. Okay, 3... 2... 1.... Here we go.

The Order's Healer

Chapter 2 of 20

Elizabeth settles into life in Aunt Muriel's home. She reconnects with her family and befriends both a patient and a house-elf.

A/N: I still don't own anything you recognize. I'm just playing with these wonderful characters.

I was greeted at the gate by a house-elf. He introduced himself as Orby and showed me to my rooms at the back of Muriel's large house. House-elves were not common in the U.S., but I'd met a few elves over the years when I visited England.

"Missus said that her niece from America was visiting. She said Missy was a Healer and to show you to the east wing. She said that Orby should set Missy up with medical supplies. Missy is going to help the soldiers. Orby isn't to speak of Missy to anyone outside the house. Orby has to be sneaky in getting supplies for Missy."

"Thank you, Orby. My name is Elizabeth Prewett. You may call me Elizabeth." Orby nodded and smiled. I looked around the makeshift hospital that had been established for me. It was an excellent setup, given the clandestine nature of my work. I told Orby as much and he beamed. Then, taking me by the hand, he led me to my quarters. They consisted of a lovely bedroom with a small sitting room attached, a private bathroom and a sun porch.

"It's lovely, Orby. Where are the kitchens? I've had a long journey and would like to make myself a sandwich."

Orby scowled. "Miss Elizabeth doesn't know much about house-elves. Orby will bring you something to eat. What can I bring you?"

"A sandwich would be lovely, and maybe some tea?" And with a nod and a pop, Orby was gone. I looked around my room. Most of my things had arrived a few days before, leaving only my two bags that I had shrunk and placed in my purse. I pulled them out and enlarged them, and then I began putting my personal items away when Orby popped back into the room with a plate.

"Does Miss Elizabeth need anything else?"

"This looks wonderful, Orby. Is my aunt at home?"

"Missus says she will have breakfast with Miss Elizabeth tomorrow at eight. The first patient is coming tomorrow morning at nine. She is a young woman expecting a child."

"Oh, okay. Thank you again Orby. You have made me feel most welcome."

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth. Call if you need anything."

The next morning, I awoke, showered and dressed. Just before eight, I wandered down to the kitchen. Muriel sat at the table already looking as sour as I had remembered. She was over a hundred years old, so I supposed I should cut her some slack.

"There you are," Muriel snapped as I entered the room. She started talking about me like she wasn't aware I could hear her. "Well, let's take a look. Poor thing got the awful red Prewett hair. Decent figure though. Probably got Molly's mouth too; I bet that's why you aren't married yet."

I was dumbstruck at her rudeness. It took considerable restraint to manage a civil, "Good morning, Aunt Muriel."

"I'm not your aunt, girl. Though, I'm not sure what else you should call me, so I suppose it will do."

Nice. So that's how it was going to be. Oh, well... I sighed inwardly. *Kill her with kindness*, I supposed. "Yes, ma'am, I would like to thank you for opening your home to me and for allowing the Order and me to use it as a clinic."

"Well, this whole war business is just appalling. We all must do our part. Having a Healer around will be helpful, if you are indeed a Healer. Keep to the east wing. Some of these people Molly and Arthur associate with are dreadful indeed. Patients are to use the back entrance. I don't want them near my quarters. I've assigned you a house-elf. Orly, or something like that, will attend to your needs. The other two elves are not to be disturbed."

"Orby has been a great help so far. Thank you."

"Nonsense. He's quite useless, you'll soon see. But as you aren't used to house-elves, I'm sure he seems fine to you."

"Indeed, ma'am," I gritted out. "Do you know my first patient?"

"I'm not to be involved in that. The elf will coordinate that."

"Yes, ma'am. Well, breakfast has been both lovely and illuminating. I should go prepare for my patient."

My first patient was a young woman named Nymphadora Lupin; she was accompanied by her husband Remus. I quickly learned that she preferred to be called by her maiden name, Tonks. She was chatty and cheerful, but her husband seemed forlorn. I wondered if he was unhappy about the child. He seemed to be a kind man, so his demeanor confused me, but he was not the patient. I shook those thoughts from my head and focused on his wife.

"You know, you aren't what I expected," Tonks volunteered as I listened to her child's heartbeat.

"Really, what makes you say that?"

"Well, Molly is, um, a force of nature, and you are more reserved. And frankly, given what I've heard of your mother versus Molly's, I would have expected the opposite."

"Molly's mother died when she was a young girl, Tonks. Molly is probably more like Dad. I, on the other hand, lost him as a child. My mother was different after that. She blamed herself. She still does, to be honest. I understand how she feels. It's hard not to some days."

Surprisingly, Remus spoke up. "You know that's not true. You and your mother are not to blame for what happened. Horrible people tore your family apart. I remember hearing the story even though I was just a boy. I was pleased to hear that part of the story was fabricated for your safety and that of your mother. But, remember, it is not your fault. They've torn many families apart. That's what we are fighting."

I smiled. "Thank you. That was a kind thing to say. Well, I must say, your child sounds very healthy. I'll just cast the charm to take a look. Ah, there we go. Everything is in its place."

"Would you be able to tell if there was something, um, wrong with the child?" Remus stared at the floor.

"Wrong?" I looked from Tonks to Remus. "The child looks perfectly healthy. You are due in April, yes?" Tonks nodded. Remus gulped.

"Could you tell if the child was afflicted, with, with...?" Remus choked on his words. He was clearly haunted by something.

"My husband is a werewolf, Healer Prewett."

"Oh." I paused, understanding Remus' fears. "Please, call me Elizabeth. I am sorry, but that can't be known in utero. But, please take comfort. There are many cases where it doesn't show up in the children at all, and when it does, it's often more like the bite of an untransformed wolf."

"Like Bill?" Tonks was searching for something to reassure her husband. Remus looked up.

Careful not to give anything away, I asked, "Bill?"

"Your nephew, Bill Weasley?" Tonks' eyes were full of hope. "Bill's daily life is barely affected." She squeezed Remus's hand.

"I've not been around Bill much since the attack, but he seems well. That is one possibility."

Remus looked like the prognosis was not comforting. "We can only hope for the best," he said, assisting his wife.

"I'd like to see you in four weeks, if nothing happens in the meantime. It was lovely to meet you both."

I walked the couple out to the back entrance. Orby greeted me as I walked back into the office. "Miss Elizabeth, here is the schedule I made up. Orby will go to Mr. Arthur and Mrs. Molly each morning, and Mr. Arthur tells me who needs Miss Elizabeth. Orby can let them know what times Miss Elizabeth has available, and they send out the messages on when to come. There are many people needing Miss Elizabeth and St. Mungo's is under dark control.

So that's how it went. For the next several months, I saw my patients in Muriel's home. There was a wide range, from minor injuries to a few life threatening cases. I sent several to the Muggle hospitals if I thought Muggle technology was needed. I was trained in both Muggle and Wizarding techniques, but I was certainly not a fully trained doctor. There were a few I couldn't save, and that was painful, as it always is, but we were in a war. I knew I was shielded from the true horrors of it, and I did my part to help those that were hurt by those depraved wizards and witches following that madman.

Molly visited when she could, as did Arthur, and a few of my nephews and my niece, when she wasn't at school. I was also introduced to the Mediwitch that worked at the school Ginny attended. She shared with me some horrible stories of how the students were being treated, making my blood boil. I showed her a few techniques to treat some of the nasty curses and hexes we discussed, again, some Muggle, some magical. Poppy was a lovely woman. We would like to have corresponded more, but my position needed to remain a secret.

I continued to avoid Muriel as much as possible. I took most of my meals in my sitting room, citing how busy I was with patients as an excuse. When I saw her, she continued with the jabs about my parents, my American accent, my lack of a husband, and my Muggle training. It became familiar, almost comforting.

Sad news reached us all too frequently. There were occasionally days of good news; I delivered a healthy baby Lupin one early April night. The child showed no signs of his father's affliction, much to the joy of his parents. When Remus came across Ron and his friends, who had been in hiding for months, safe in Bill and Fleur's cottage, we all rejoiced.

And so it is with war. There is death, and then there is hope, and even in the midst of it, life continues.

Then in early May, Orby popped into my chambers and shouted in a terrified voice, "Miss Elizabeth is needed at Hogwarts. Come! They tell Orby the fighting has started. There is only one Mediwitch. She cannot attend to all the injured. Mr. Arthur calls; he says to come. Please, Miss Elizabeth, we must hurry!"

The Healer at Hogwarts

Chapter 3 of 20

Orby takes Elizabeth to Hogwarts. She and Poppy attend to the wounded in the hospital wing. When Elizabeth hears tragic news, she makes a snap decision that will have major consequences.

A/N: The characters you recognize do not belong to me.

I jumped to my feet. "Orby, get some supplies. We need to bring supplies." With a snap of his finger, Orby shrunk half the contents of my clinic into a small bag and picked it up. He immediately grabbed my hand and Apparated us with a pop.

We landed in some sort of pub. Orby dashed up the stairs with me right behind him. An old man with a long grey beard stood in front of a portrait of a young girl. He looked very somber. The girl in the portrait motioned and the old man turned.

"Who are you?" The old man barked. He looked me up and down; it seemed I was familiar to him, but he couldn't figure out why.

"Elizabeth Prewett. I'm a Healer. I've been told I'll be needed here tonight."

"Prewett? Nonsense. The Prewetts were all killed in the last war. Except Molly, but she's a Weasley now." The wand at his side twitched. He clearly didn't know if I was friend or foe.

"Charles was my father. Molly is my sister. My mother and I escaped the night Father was murdered. My brothers saved us."

He seemed to consider my words. "Are you telling me you're the wee one?" I nodded. "I thought they killed you and your mother as well."

"That was the idea." I was getting irritated. "We fled the country. Only a handful knew we escaped. But, moving forward, why does this elf think there's a battle brewing? Do you have any idea why he brought me to your pub?"

"The battle is at Hogwarts. There's a passageway behind this portrait. Most members of the Order of the Phoenix are through there. Your sister, her husband, and most of their children are fighting."

"Thank you. Orby, you don't have to go." I was cut off by an indignant house-elf. He stomped his feet and glared up at me with huge eyes.

"Orby is coming with Miss Elizabeth! Orby will help just like in the clinic at home! Orby will protect Miss Elizabeth if needed."

"I believe you will Orby." I scratched his ears. "Well, shall we?" The portrait swung open, and I climbed into the dark passageway and started to make my way through it. Orby was right behind me the whole way. We walked for what seemed like miles down the dark passageway until we finally reached a flight of stairs and a door.

As I opened the door, the sight on the other side of me was amazing. We must have been inside the castle. A cluttered room full of colorful banners and hammocks was in front of us. It appeared to be empty at first sight.

"Aunt Lizzie?" A voice called out to me.

"Ginny? Ginny! What are you doing here?"

"I came to help! But Mum and Dad won't let me leave this room," she huffed. "Everyone is out there! Our whole family! How can I just stay here? Let me come with you!" She looked exasperated, and tears threatened to fall from her brown eyes.

I sighed and hugged her. "I'm here to help tend to the wounded Ginny. I'm not a fighter."

"But I can help," she pleaded. "I'll take you to the hospital wing."

"Ginny, no. If they want you here, here you stay. Orby, do you know the castle?"

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth. Orby can take you to the hospital wing."

"Ginny, stay here. Please." I squeezed her hand, trying to comfort her. Poor girl, her whole life was out there in that battle. Orby tugged at my other hand, and soon we were running through the corridors. It was nearly midnight, and I knew it was to be a long night.

We found Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing, trying to ready things as much as possible.

"Poppy, what can I do?"

"Oh, thank Merlin for another set of hands. We're going to be needed tonight. Here, these are short distance Portkeys." She handed me what looked like necklaces.

"The teachers always have these to bring students to me quickly in an emergency. We'll need these to transport the wounded. It will be safer for us and for them."

"Orby will bring your patients to you, Miss Elizabeth. Orby will go to the kitchen and get a few house-elves. We will spread out and use the necklaces to bring back the injured."

"Great idea, Orby." Poppy smiled at the little elf. He popped away. "Elizabeth, how do we handle the Death Eaters?"

"Bind their magic for safety and treat their wounds. Sedate or stun if needed."

"Elizabeth, I've never worked under conditions like this."

"I haven't either, Poppy. We've just got to do the best we can." And almost right on cue, the clamoring outside grew louder. The battle had begun. Poppy and I continued

preparing bandages in silence for a few moments longer. Then, one of the cots began to shimmer, and a young girl appeared on the cot. She wasn't badly injured, but she had a gash on her arm and forehead. Poppy and I went to work as quickly as we could.

We work feverishly as the cots started to glow. The elves would appear and collect the necklaces, and then they would disappear again. There was a mix of injuries, magical and non-magical, simple to serious, and, of course, some we couldn't save. Both Poppy and I were struggling to contain our emotions. Orby had returned after he found several helpers to bring the wounded. He was tending to Poppy and I as much as he was helping the patients.

Then he grabbed my hand. "Miss Elizabeth, Mrs. Molly, she needs you. I am sorry to tell you. One of the tall silly boys, he is out there. He did not make it."

I was dumbstruck. What could Orby mean? The meaning of his words struck me like an anvil. "One of the twins?" Orby's eyes told me I had guessed right. I ran from the infirmary. I had no idea what I was doing. Looking back, it was very stupid of me. My duty was to the wounded. But, if one of the boys was gone, if it was too late, well, I had to get to my sister. I just had to. Orby was on my heels as I ran; he had no idea where I was going. Neither did I.

As I approached the entrance hall, I heard a young girl shriek, "No!" She cast a Stunning Spell that threw some creature across the room; the creature had attacked someone. As I got a better look, I shuddered in horror. The victim was another young girl; she was badly injured.

I knelt before her and tended to her. She was so young. *Damn it. Evil will not win here.* Orby had grabbed my bag from the table as we left the infirmary; he handed me the Dittany and some Blood-Replenishing Potion. We worked together for several minutes trying to repair the damage. After several minutes, she was stable. She would live. She would be badly scarred, probably physically and mentally, but she would live.

I smiled to Orby and patted him between the ears. "Good work, Orby, you have done well. Please take her to Poppy. I must help my sister."

"Orby will be back. Miss Elizabeth will need more supplies if she is out here."

I wiped my hands on my robes, then pulled them off and discarded them; for a moment, I just stood there in my Muggle jeans and blouse. The roar of the battle continued all around me. The night felt unnaturally cold. The chill was damp and depressing, and I was suddenly cloaked in despair. Screams echoed outside the doors. It was so cold. I nearly collapsed against the wall, barely noticing as three students ran past me.

"Boys, come on!" a little blonde witch called out.

"Seamus, hurry! Harry needs us!" a boy yelled.

"Now!" the other boy screamed as they all raised their wands.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" the three yelled together.

The sight was amazing. The three young people had come to the rescue of their fellow students. Silvery light filled the air, and then three beautiful animals flew over the second group of students. The cold eased slightly, and then they all stood strong, protecting one another. The three animals became six as the three beleaguered students joined their friends in casting the charm. Witnessing such valor in those so young, I became filled with hope. The light would triumph.

I realized who I was watching. It was my youngest nephew Ron and his two friends who had been rescued by the little blonde and the other two boys. He turned to shake the hand of the wiry boy; suddenly, a giant roared and began swinging a huge club.

The students broke in different directions, and I tore after my nephew and his friends. Molly may have lost one of her boys tonight; I'd be damned if I let this one run off and get killed.

They ran into the night, dodging the giants and the bolts of light. I ran behind them, trying to keep up. They were running with a crazed urgency; I couldn't maintain the pace. As we got away from the fighting, the dark enveloped us and it became difficult to see them. I thought I was going to lose them in the night, but I had to keep going. They eventually paused in front of an old tree which seemed to be trying to strike them. I could see Ron raise his wand; then the tree stilled. The three young people dropped to the ground, and they disappeared beneath the roots of the tree.

When I approached the tree, I saw where they had disappeared. There was a small passageway beneath the roots.

"Orby," I whispered into the night. Something told me I needed to follow them, but crawling through the passageway seemed foolish.

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth," Orby answered as he appeared by my side.

"My nephew and his friends disappeared under that tree. Do you know where it goes?"

"Oh, Miss Elizabeth doesn't want to go there. That takes you to the haunted place. It is a dark place." He shook slightly with fear.

"Orby, I need to protect those kids. I have to do this."

Orby relented. "Okay, Miss Elizabeth. Orby will take you. But we will go another way. We also need to be invisible." I nodded, casting a Disillusionment Charm on myself. Orby did something similar. He took my hand, and we Apparated to the edge of some trees.

I could see the shack a short distance away. We crept towards it slowly. As we walked, I spotted a man with shoulder length black hair approaching from the other direction. Orby and I froze. The man was clutching his left arm and wearing Death Eater robes. His pace quickened, and soon he opened the door and slid inside. This was trouble. I began inching towards the door again. Orby clung to my arm, clearly trying to stop me.

"Bad men in there, Miss Elizabeth," he whispered urgently. But I would not be deterred. The man in black had left the door ajar, and I slid through it into the corner. Two men were talking. Well, one man was talking to one creature that looked like he might have been a man at one point. This must be the monster Voldemort.

I continued to look around. Were these the only two here? Where were the children? Looking around, I stifled a gasp when I saw a huge snake in some sort of magical field. Never had I seen such a thing. I wondered if this was the creature that nearly killed Arthur two years ago.

The man on his knees in front of the monster intrigued me. He appeared to be groveling, but he was guarded. He must be a servant of Voldemort, a Death Eater by his clothing; in fact, Voldemort was talking about how valuable the man had been. Oh, heavens, Voldemort was using the past tense. This man was in terrible danger. He seemed to know it, from the look on his face, but still, he remained so guarded. What was he hiding?

I watched in horror as Voldemort pointed his wand. He aimed not at the man before him, but at the snake's magical cage, which surrounded the man called Severus.

The man fought in vain to free himself, but the snake was too strong. Severus fell to the ground. A sickening pool of blood was forming on the ground near him.

Voldemort said something I couldn't understand; the shock I felt at the sight was so great. He summoned the snake, still in its cage, and stalked from the room.

I was rifling in my bag as quickly as I could for supplies when another small blast sounded. To my shock, Ron and his two friends emerged from their hiding place. They had also witnessed the horror that had just occurred.

The boy called Harry rushed to the man, and some shuffling occurred between the three young people and the dying man. Voldemort's voice called out, sickening in its offer of truce; then he taunted and manipulated the boy.

The girl headed back to the tunnel, followed by the other two. Resolved to follow them, I headed over towards the tunnel. As I moved, I cancelled the Disillusionment Charm on myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the slightest movement from the collapsed man.

"Merlin! He's still alive! Orby! Quickly!"

I placed my hand on the man's neck. He had lost so much blood. Orby thrust the Dittany into my hand, and I applied it to the wound. It knit back together painfully slowly. If he was still with us, I could heal this wound. If I had enough Blood-Replenishing potion, he stood a chance, but what of the poison?

His pulse was frightfully weak, but it was still there. Orby seemed to be reading my thoughts and began to pour the Blood-Replenishing Potion down the man's throat as I worked to close the wound. I held my wand in one hand as healing spells flew from my lips. Over and over again, I kept uttering the spells to help the skin regenerate.

"Miss Elizabeth, we need more potions! Orby will be right back!"

"Orby, he's been poisoned! I don't know what to do about the venom."

"Miss Elizabeth will figure something out. The potions will give you more time!" Orby popped away.

The snake, the snake, I needed to know more about that snake. Was it possible the victim knew something about the snake? It was a long shot, but it was the only reasonable idea I had. I had to speak to him. But clearly, he was in no position to speak. I had to enter his mind.

"*Legilimens*," I whispered softly, trying to enter as gently as possible.

"Who, who's there?" *Oh, good, he's still in here.*

"A friend, I want to help you."

The connection was weak. I needed to get a better look into his eyes. My hair brushed across his face as I leaned across him. To my shock, his fingers reached for the ends of my hair. He touched it reverently, almost like a lover's caress.

"Lily, are you here to fetch me?"

I had no idea who Lily was, but if he would 'talk' to her, it might be best not to correct him.

"Severus, I want to help you. You've been attacked by a snake. I'm sure it's poisonous, but I don't know enough about it to help you."

"Lily, I tried to protect him. I tried. But he must face the Dark Lord tonight. I don't know what will happen. Lily, I'm sorry; I did all I could. Dumbledore says he must die. He says it's for the greater good. I'm sorry my Lily."

"Shhh, Severus. I know. You did well." *Who was Lily? Who was he trying to protect? Why was he trying to protect anyone from Voldemort? This man was a Death Eater.*

"Harry is a strong boy. He gets that from you. You can tell James that. All he got from James was a tendency for trouble and messy hair."

Harry? He was protecting Harry? Ron's friend Harry? Was it possible this man was on the side of the Order?

"Blue? Eyes, your eyes should be green. Why are your eyes blue? Lily?"

Oh, no. The game was up. "Shhh, I'm sorry to deceive you. I'm not Lily. My name is Elizabeth. I won't hurt you. Please, stay calm. I'm a Healer. What do you know about the snake?"

"Pocket ..."

"What?"

"Pocket!" How a man yells in his mind I don't know, but I got the message. He wanted me to look in his pocket. I unbuttoned his coat. In the inside pocket, there was a vial.

"Is this antivenin?"

"Obviously." I uncorked the vial as I exited his mind. I poured the contents down his throat, massaging his still badly damaged neck. To my relief, he responded slightly, swallowing on his own.

Orby appeared next to me again with more Blood-Replenishing Potion and bandages. We administered the potion and wrapped the wound. We worked and worked for hours on end. The man was still unconscious, but his pulse was stronger. His color was also slightly better.

The Dittany had helped as had the charms and spells, but this wound was horrific. If this man survived, he would have a long road ahead of him.

"Miss Elizabeth, are you okay?"

"I'm very tired. I had to enter his mind."

"Miss Elizabeth must sleep; let Orby take you and the dark man to the hospital wing."

"No, Orby. This man is a Death Eater, and Voldemort himself tried to kill him. He must be kept out of sight."

"Miss Elizabeth should go then. Orby will watch him. He is stable."

"No, Orby. I will stay here."

"Then Orby stays with you," he said firmly. And with that, he conjured a sleeping bag and pillow. I relented and fell asleep almost instantly on the floor of the shack.

The Aftermath

Elizabeth and Severus learn the results of the battle; Kingsley makes Elizabeth an offer.

A/N: I own none of the canon characters or situations. No money is made from the writing or publishing of this story.

When I awoke, I heard voices muttering outside the shack.

A worried female voice shook with grief. The woman said, "We have to make sure he receives a proper burial. Potter said Riddle killed him to control the Elder wand. All this time, we thought he murdered Dumbledore; he was working for the Order all along. He should be honored, celebrated."

"Minerva, he will be. I shall see to that," a smooth, deep voice said, trying to reassure her.

"Thank you, Kingsley, I mean, Minister Shackbolt." I could hear the smile in her voice as she corrected herself.

The door opened then and the two people entered. The older woman gasped, and a tall black man reached over to steady her. Looking back, the sight greeting her must have been a shock. Severus had been propped up against a wall, alive, but still unconscious, with dried blood all over his clothes, his neck, and his hands. I was lying at his feet. My own clothes and hands were covered in his blood; my face and hair were coated in the grime of the battle. Orby was at my feet, equally dirty from assisting me and from running about the battlefield all night.

"Oh my!" Minerva gasped.

I pulled myself into a sitting position and reached out to check Severus' pulse. It was strong and steady. I cast a couple diagnostic charms. All of his systems were functioning far better than I had hoped. He would need more antivenin and a long convalescence, but he would recover.

"Young lady, what is the meaning of this?" the tall wizard asked. His wand was trained on me, but there was no malice in his eyes, only caution.

"You must be Healer Prewett," Minerva's voice cut across the other wizard's. "Poppy said you were helping her but she lost track of you. Are you okay, dear? What are you doing with Severus' body?"

"Body? What? No, wait. He's alive." Both witch and wizard gasped. "He's weak, but he's stable. The attack was brutal," I choked out, "but he had an antivenin in his coat. I had Dittany and some Blood-Replenishing Potion. Orby has been helping me. What time is it? What has happened? Is the battle over?"

Tears were streaming down the older woman's cheeks, undoubtedly not for the first time this night. This time, her knees did give way. Kingsley stepped forward and caught her. He lowered her to sit next to Severus. He turned to me.

"Healer Prewett, Voldemort is dead. Harry Potter has vanquished him. Our side suffered many losses, but the battle is over."

"What of the Weasleys?"

"Fred Weasley fell; I'm sorry to say. The others survived with only minor injuries. Molly defeated Bellatrix Lestrange."

I nodded. I had already known one of twins had been lost. Sadness at the confirmation mixed with relief that there were no further losses in the family.

He continued, "Several Death Eaters fled, but most fell. The Malfoys are in custody, and we must figure out how to handle Severus here."

"Harry told us he was killed." Minerva could barely speak. Her voice betrayed that she was fighting more tears, and her eyes didn't leave Severus.

"The children were here when he was attacked. It was awful. I was Disillusioned. They didn't see me. I thought I could protect Ron. After Fred ... " my voice faltered. Kingsley nodded and crouched next to me. He placed his large hand on my shoulder in an attempt to soothe me.

"Go on, if you can, please."

"Voldemort trapped him with the snake and ordered it to kill him. It attacked; you can see the bandages and the blood. So much blood." I looked at my hands, which were covered in his blood. "I was sure there would be nothing I could do. I'm sure the kids thought the same thing. Harry collected a vial of something from him. Tears, maybe? I don't know; I was trying to figure out if I could help."

"Memories," Kingsley interjected simply. "Snape gave Harry a series of memories about his past, his role in Lily Potter's death, his time as a Death Eater, his joining the Order, and his work to protect Harry all this time."

"Lily Potter. Harry Potter. His mother. That makes sense now. When the children left, Orby and I were about to go after them. He moved, or sighed, or something. It was enough to show us he still lived. I started using healing spells and Dittany; Orby administered Blood-Replenishing Potion. I knew the snake was poisonous. That was the monster that bit Arthur Weasley, isn't it?"

"It was. The snake is also dead."

"Where is the snake's body? We made need it yet."

"It lies in the front courtyard of the school."

"Orby. Please, go put it in stasis." Orby smiled at me.

"Orby did that while Miss Elizabeth slept. I gave the bad snake man a good kick on my way by too." It was obvious he was very pleased with himself. Minerva and Kingsley chuckled. I patted Orby's head.

I turned back to Kingsley. "He had an antivenin in his coat. Is this man a Healer? An apothecary?"

"A Potions master. He is a brilliant one who probably knew that Voldemort would soon turn on him. Snape was too powerful for someone like Voldemort to keep alive if he didn't need him, especially if Voldemort thought Snape controlled the Elder Wand. Snape must have known the snake was a popular weapon, and he tried to plan for such an attack. But how did you know he carried it?"

"Legilimency. He told me in his mind. He thought I was this Lily at first."

Minister Shackbolt looked at me a bit closer. "You do look like her. Not an exact match, but given Severus' state, I can understand the confusion. Your hair in particular would make someone think of her. It is a bit darker than most of the Prewetts. You don't have the Evans' eyes."

I snorted. "That's what he said. Then he yelled at me to get the antivenin from his pocket."

"Oh, you cranky bat," Minerva sniffed. She was kneeling next to him, weeping. You could see relief, fatigue, and regret written on her face. "Oh Severus, I'm so sorry I

didn't understand."

A muffled whisper, barely audible, answered her, "You sentimental old Gryffindor, I was a damn good spy. Of course you didn't understand."

She gasped. Kingsley looked shocked.

I leaned over to him. "Don't speak, Mr. Snape. Your throat is badly damaged. I did my best to help you, but, well, this isn't a surgery."

"I'll speak when I want."

I stood to my full height and cast a Silencing charm. If looks could kill, well, let's just say I'm glad they can't.

"You will be quiet, Mr. Snape. Healer's Orders. Now, I'm sure you have a lot to say. I can cast Legilimens and share your answers with the others. Or we can get you quill and parchment."

Minerva tried to stifle her laugh. Kingsley turned his head to the side, but I could see his dark eyes were full of mirth. Apparently, Severus Snape wasn't used to being told what to do by random witches. He glared at me, his black eyes boring into me. Suddenly, I realized that he was casting Legilimens. Wandlessly. And in his weakened state, that was quite a feat indeed. Heavens, I knew how to pick my opponents, didn't I? This man was extremely powerful.

"Healer Prewett, if you will, I'd like to inquire as to the outcome of the battle."

"Voldemort is dead. Does this please you?" I spoke aloud, even though the others could only hear part of the conversation. I figured that was better than nothing.

"And the Potter brat, does he live?"

"Minister Shacklebolt, how is Harry Potter?"

"He is shaken, but he is well. I believe he is napping in Gryffindor tower." Snape actually rolled his eyes.

"What of Draco Malfoy and his parents?" He motioned for me to ask, which I did.

"Draco, Lucius and Narcissa are all fine. They are currently being held in the Great Hall. There will be a trial. They are the only surviving Death Eaters that did not flee."

His eyes burned. *"Lucius was only protecting his family. He wanted to defect over a year ago. Narcissa never harmed anyone. Draco is but a boy."*

"He says that Draco and Narcissa are innocent. Lucius was only protecting his family."

Kingsley raised his hand and spoke firmly, "Severus, I promise you, the trial will be fair. You will be able to testify on their behalf. The fact that Narcissa betrayed the Dark Lord and saved Harry Potter will undoubtedly bode well for her. Draco apparently saved them a few weeks ago also."

Severus didn't need words to express his reaction to that news. His eyes were full of incredulity. He looked back to me and mentally sighed, *"I should like to see my old friends."*

"He would like to see them, sir."

Kingsley nodded. "I will see what I can do. Healer Prewett, should we move the Professor to the hospital wing?"

Minerva cut in just then. "Kingsley. Is that wise? Not everyone knows Severus' true allegiance. I don't fully understand it myself. Until he can speak for himself, perhaps we should keep him out of the public eye."

"Where do you suggest?" Kingsley eyed Minerva cautiously.

"Malfoy Manor. Kill two birds with one stone. Put the Malfoys under house arrest. Bind their magic until the trial and move Severus there quietly. Healer Prewett and Orby can visit and tend to him."

Kingsley furrowed his brow. "The idea has merit. I shall return." Kingsley turned on his heel and strode out of the shack confidently.

"Professor McGonagall. I should like to go see my family. If they know I'm here and cannot find me, they will fear the worst."

"Of course, dear, I shall keep watch over Severus until Kingsley returns."

Orby handed me the necklace Portkey, and we headed back to the hospital wing. I gave the little elf a hug and asked him to go eat and rest. He frowned at first, and then I assured him I would need him later and wanted him to be ready to go. At that, he beamed.

Poppy had obviously not slept. There was a Healer from St. Mungo's that had arrived to relieve her, but Poppy was refusing to leave. The plan was to move most of the patients to St. Mungo's, but there were a few that couldn't be moved, so the hospital was going to send one Healer and one Mediwitch per shift to Hogwarts until they were ready to be moved. Ironically, I decided I was going to have to take the same approach with her as with Orby.

"Poppy, please, you must rest. I am going to check in with the Weasleys and I will be back soon to help. You must rest. I'm sure they would appreciate you taking some of the shifts here, but you need to be rested. We can't have you falling ill as well."

"I should go visit with some of the families." I eyed her sideways. "It will take just a few minutes, and then I will go. I was just informed before you arrived that Miss Brown's parents have arrived. They were told she was attacked by a werewolf but survived; I'm sure they have many questions."

"How is she?"

"She's sedated for now with Dreamless Sleep. The wounds are still quite painful, and she will need time to accept the scarring, the poor dear."

"I'll walk with you Poppy." I nodded to the St. Mungo's Healer. "I will be back in a bit."

"Where were you all night, Elizabeth? Orby said you were seeing to a patient and needed his help on the battlefield. He said you were helping a dark man, so I feared it was Kingsley. But I saw him a little while ago, and he's clearly uninjured."

"Poppy, I hate to say this, but I shouldn't say." Poppy's eyebrow rose. "I know, I'm not a fan of secrets, but I must wait. I will tell you as soon as I can."

"So, it was Headmaster Snape?" My eyes must have given it away. "Do not fret, Elizabeth. I will tell no one. Young Mr. Potter was in here to have a few cuts treated and told me the story of the snake and the shack. Orby had said that you were in the Shrieking Shack. It isn't too hard to figure out."

I smiled. "Kingsley wishes to have him moved to somewhere private before revealing that he survived. He's afraid of the controversy that would surround the man. He's still badly injured, but St. Mungo's is not where he belongs."

We had reached the Great Hall. I could see my sister and her family standing near the makeshift morgue where the bodies of the fallen were lying. As I approached them, I could feel my throat closing. Poor Fred, he was so young and always so full of life. I wondered how George would cope. The whole family had always been so close. I could see their red-rimmed eyes as I drew nearer. Then I caught sight of something that made my heart plummet even further. Remus and Tonks lying side by side in death was a sight I almost couldn't bear. It was so tragic and yet strangely beautiful as the same time. Tonks had become a friend as well as a patient in the past few months. And Remus was a kind and fair soul who cared deeply about people. That beautiful baby would grow up without knowing his wonderful parents.

"Aunt Lizzy!" Ginny called out, "We didn't know where you had gone." She gasped, getting a better look at me, "Are you hurt?"

"What? Oh, no. It's not my blood. I've been tending to patients most of the night. I'm fine. I'm so sorry about your brother, dear."

"Thank you," Arthur said, stepping forward. "We're glad to see you are safe. Thank you for coming. I heard you and Poppy saved many lives last night."

"I wish I could have saved Fred. I wasn't there. I'm sorry." I reached for my sister. I embraced her, trying to pour all of my love into that hug.

Percy spoke up, his voice as somber as his face, "Fred was taken instantly; there is nothing anyone could have done. At least he did not suffer."

I hugged my nephew. I knew he had been estranged from the family. I did not know he had returned to his family's side. I embraced them all, feeling their grief, trying to provide some comfort.

"Will you return to the Burrow with us?" Arthur questioned.

"Of course she will, Arthur," Molly forced out. I hesitated. I felt like an intruder. "You aren't leaving us, yet, are you?"

"No, Molly, I'm not going back yet. I may see if St. Mungo's needs extra staff for a few months."

"Excuse me." I turned to see Minister Shacklebolt behind me. "Healer Prewett, could I speak with you for a moment?"

Arthur shot me a look. I shrugged and turned to follow Kingsley. He led me off to a small room off the side of the hall. I was surprised to find it occupied. There were two Aurors with their wands loosely pointed at three people. All three were extremely pale, extremely beautiful, and extremely fatigued; a man, woman, and a teenage boy. The man was clad in Death Eater robes.

"Healer Prewett, these are Aurors Robards and Savage. The three prisoners here are Lucius Malfoy, Narcissa Malfoy, and Draco Malfoy."

I was severely confused what this all had to do with me, but I nodded. "Hello. Minister, is there something I can help you with?"

"Perhaps," he paused. "You see, the Malfoys are a bit of an enigma. They are known Death Eaters, so it would seem that they should be taken into custody. However, it turns out that some vital information about the Death Eaters activities made its way into Order hands; the evidence points to it being obtained and leaked by Lord Malfoy. Lady Malfoy lied to Voldemort while Harry was briefly incapacitated during the battle. She most likely saved Mr. Potter's life. Young Draco here failed to identify Harry and his friends when they were captured and taken to Malfoy Manor earlier this spring, even though he surely knew it was them. So it seems that while they were certainly a party to illegal activity, they have also each helped the Order in recent days."

"I don't see how this relates to me."

"Healer Prewett, I find myself with a rather large number of injured witches and wizards. Some will require rehabilitation and a rather long convalescence. I need more good Healers to assist in that goal. St. Mungo's, as you know, has recently had some issues with management under the prior Minister. They are dreadfully shortstaffed. They also lack the beds needed to accommodate all the extra patients."

"That brings me to the Malfoys. A trial is necessary to determine their fate, given the mixed evidence. Imprisoning them seems prudent, but at the same time, the trial may not occur for quite some time. House arrest seems to me to be a reasonable compromise. As a term of the house arrest, Mr. Malfoy has offered one of the guest wings of his home to be used as a temporary hospital. I would like you to serve as the Healer for this hospital.

"There will be two Aurors on duty round the clock, and the Malfoys will have their wands bound and tracked until the trial is over. They will be able to perform simple charms and spells, nothing harmful, and the Ministry will have a record of all magical activity performed by their wands. The wards will be modified as a condition of the house arrest; they will be magically bound to the property. Ministry and hospital employees, you included, on the other hand, will be able to Apparate on and off the grounds. Your house-elf may accompany you. The Malfoy elves will become wards of the Ministry until after the trial and will also be there to assist the hospital.

"Healer Prewett, this facility will be for rehabilitation. In particular, there are some special patients that I would like to see kept out of St. Mungo's for their safety and privacy. This would allow you to oversee their care. There are also some that may benefit from your Muggle training."

"I see. Minister, I would be happy to help, but as of now, I am set to return to America in about three months."

"I will take three months. Hopefully by then, most of the patients will have been released, and St. Mungo's will be back on its feet. Oh, and one more thing I would like you to consider," he paused.

"Yes?"

"I would like you to stay at the Manor; that would allow you to oversee your patients more efficiently."

Early Days at the Manor

Chapter 5 of 20

Elizabeth accepts the Minister's offer and moves to the grounds of Malfoy Manor. She spends some time with the Malfoys and with Severus.

A/N: I don't own anything you recognize.

Ch 4 Early days at the Manor

The next several days were an absolute blur. The Headmaster was doing well, so we moved him immediately. His rooms were the primary guest chambers in the family wing. The Malfoys offered me use of a cottage on the grounds; it was connected to the main house by Floo. I appreciated the gesture greatly. The Manor was a bit intimidating for me; therefore, having my own space provided immense comfort. I wished to impose on the family as little possible.

I coordinated the transfer of patients to St. Mungo's; we also selected a handful of patients to transfer to Malfoy Manor that we thought needed more privacy than the hospital could provide. Orby and I worked with the Malfoys and their elves to set up one of the guest wings to handle patients.

The elder Malfoys were accommodating and polite. They maintained their distance from me at first. One of them was at the Headmaster's side during most waking hours. To my surprise, Draco Malfoy assisted the elves with the transfiguration of the opulent guest rooms into simple, serviceable, and friendly patient rooms. He conducted himself in a superior and haughty fashion, but his actions told a different story. He was truly seeing to the comfort of the patients.

"Lavender is a Gryffindor, Boppy. And she's more girlish than you can imagine. But nothing too garish, or else I might vomit." Boppy, a young female elf, nodded vigorously. She snapped her fingers, and the room turned a lovely soft crème color. The windows were trimmed with scarlet curtains. Two vases appeared on the side tables filled with gorgeous bright yellow flowers. The bed was adorned with a soft comforter that was delicate and feminine. Several magazines appeared on the table. Three sets of robes appeared in the wardrobe. They were simply cut, but attractive. It truly was a room that would please any young girl.

"Thomas is an artist. Make sure he has a sketchpad and drawing pencils. He's also fascinated with some Muggle sport. I can't remember the name: it's something ridiculous where you aren't allowed to use your hands." He waved his hand dismissively.

I tried to help. "Soccer?"

"Maybe, but it does not matter. Boppy will figure it out." He strode away, issuing orders to the house-elves. He was firm and succinct, but he was not unkind. The elves hopped about; they seemed pleased to be helpful. I couldn't help but think that Draco's socialite mother would be quite proud of both his command and his sense of hospitality.

After about a week, Severus' throat was healed enough for him to speak. I entered into his room cautiously.

"Good morning, Headmaster Snape. Please allow me to run some tests this morning."

"Clearly, I cannot stop you, but tell me what exactly you plan to do to me."

"I need to check your blood, sir. The antivenin you administered was amazingly effective against the toxicity, but your levels have not been returning to normal as quickly as I would like."

"Did it ever occur to you that there might be a reason for that?" His voice signaled his impatience.

"I'm sure there is, sir, but there's very little research on this type of creature. There's only one other documented case of an attack like this." I snapped his chart closed, irritated by his demeanor.

"Indeed. And it didn't occur to you to find out who treated the other patient?"

"St. Mungo's is in a bit of chaos at the moment, Headmaster."

"Do stop calling me that, Healer Prewett. My tenure as Headmaster was unpleasant."

"Of course, how would you prefer to be addressed?" Silence. I smirked. He hadn't thought that far ahead. I decided to challenge him a bit further. "Well, sir. I'm not one for formality. You may call me Elizabeth if you prefer."

"Severus," he gritted, as if allowing the familiarity was painful. "You may call me Severus." I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Was that so difficult? I assure you, Severus, I understand you are a private man. I can certainly respect that."

"Thank you, Healer ... Elizabeth. Is it too much to hope there was a point to your earlier questions?"

"Yes, as I was trying to say, since you had the antivenin on your person, I'm guessing you know more about the snake than I do. Did you expect the antivenin to work in one dose?"

"No, he said derisively. "I will need several doses. Arthur required three, and his wounds were not made directly into the bloodstream."

"How? You know the details of Arthur's case?"

"Just whom do you think St. Mungo's consulted?" It seemed the answer must be the most obvious in the world.

"Well, sir, I wouldn't have guessed you. You, Severus, seem a bit, um, anti-establishment."

He first looked irritated, and then his faced relaxed a bit. He smirked. "They consulted Dumbledore. HE consulted me."

"Ah, I see. Well, three doses does prove a bit daunting. We did put the snake in stasis, so to the extent you need ingredients from the body, I can have Orby go to Hogwarts and bring it here. That still leaves us with the problem of a brewer. I'm guessing it is not a simple potion."

Severus looked appalled. "Are you completely daft? Obviously, I'm capable of brewing the potion."

"Obviously," I started sharply; I was about to lose my temper. "you possess the skills. However, in your current state of health, Severus, do you really think it wise? How taxing is the brewing process? How time consuming?" He seemed to calm down a bit at this point and considered my words.

"I will need an assistant. The process takes several days, but there are only a few areas that are particularly complex; I can handle those. I do not wish to share my space with another Potions master, nor do I wish to share my brewing secrets with a stranger. Lucius has a rather fine laboratory. Draco is a competent brewer; he can assist with the process if he and his parents agree."

"That sounds like a reasonable plan. Are you comfortable preparing a list of ingredients? I can have Orby collect them for you. He will certainly keep your secrets."

"Thank you. I need to speak to all three Malfoys. I won't volunteer Draco for this task without all of their consent."

"I will have one of the elves fetch them. And, I know it's not my place to say so, but I think having Draco assist you is an excellent idea. He is a smart young man, but he seems lost at the moment. Perhaps you could serve as a mentor to him."

"Well," a smooth voice cut in, and I looked up to see the elegant figure of Narcissa Malfoy, "it certainly is not your place to say so. However, you may have a point. Years ago, before he even left for Hogwarts, Draco expressed interest in being a Healer. I know Lucius hopes to see him in business, but I don't know if he sees that as his path.

Perhaps this experiment could help him find his way."

She paused, "Boppy, come." Boppy appeared in the doorway. "Go fetch Lord Malfoy and Draco immediately. Tell them that Severus wishes to speak to them." Boppy disappeared. I started to leave the room.

"Healer Prewett, if you would stay, I think your input would be valuable."

Lucius and Draco walked in a few moments later. I had taken a seat at the desk in the sitting area. Narcissa was perched on the small settee gracefully.

"Mother, Severus, is everything all right?" Draco looked confused by his mother's summons. Lucius merely looked inconvenienced.

"Everything is as it should be, Draco. There is a matter of some delicacy that I thought we should discuss. Severus, would you like to explain? I do not wish to speak for you."

"Nagini's venom is quite powerful. I brewed a potion two years ago that neutralized the venom's effect from small bites. It is what was given to Arthur Weasley at St. Mungo's. Dumbledore provided it to the main healer, who was a supporter of the Order. Since it came through Dumbledore, nobody questioned the potion or its contents.

"The potion Arthur took was effective, but it took 3 doses for his blood to completely expel the poison and return to normal. However, Arthur's bites were mostly superficial. I do not know, but I expect that potion would not have saved my life in the shack."

"Wait," I interjected, "so you've improved the potion?"

"Indeed. I added a trace element of a very special and very rare ingredient." I gasped. Severus must have figured out what I was thinking. "No, not unicorn blood. Phoenix tears." At first, I breathed a sigh of relief and understanding. Then, I was hit with a new wave of concern.

"Severus, how on earth did you acquire Phoenix tears?" I held up my hand. "Actually, perhaps I don't want you to answer that."

"Such dramatics," he said silkily. "Dumbledore's familiar was a phoenix named Fawkes. He left Hogwarts after Dumbledore's funeral. He came back one night when I'd had a nasty run in with Voldemort trying to protect a student. Fawkes allowed me to collect a vial of his tears. I think he intended for me to use them myself, but I saved his tears. I knew there would come a time when they would be needed. I saved some in a vial in the magical safe in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. I used a small amount in the potion; it was just enough to begin the healing process at the cellular level.

"Honestly, I had saved the rest for Potter. I thought I could slip them to him and protect him. However, I was attacked before I had the chance to tell him. I TRIED to tell him that night in the shack; the dunderhead boy didn't listen."

I felt the urge to change the subject. Severus may have protected Harry Potter, but he certainly didn't seem to like the boy.

"So, you still have some of the tears? You are going to need another dose of the potion. Your levels are worse today than yesterday. Only slightly, but still, I feel that delaying would be dangerous."

"The tears are at Hogwarts. Only the Headmaster/Headmistress can open the safe."

"That won't be an issue, I don't think," I said.

"Are you saying that you are going to allow me to travel, Elizabeth?" Lucius and Narcissa both looked surprised at his use of my first name. I fought the urge to chuckle at the reaction, because I was not sure how the room would take the next piece of news.

"Severus, Minerva was named Headmistress. The board believes that you have passed away. She sent me an owl last night. She is at the castle supervising the cleanup and restoration of the castle and the grounds. She wished for me to tell you that when you are ready to rejoin society, she would step down if you wish to return."

"That's nonsense. Minerva would have held the position if Voldemort had not controlled the Ministry. She is better suited to the role than I am. She deserves it."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Severus. She'll be able to open the safe for us and get the tears. I'll owl her as soon as we finish here."

"When you send your elf for the snake, he can pick up the tears from Minerva."

"How long does the potion take to brew?" Lucius asked cautiously.

"Three days," Severus offered.

"Is he going to be well enough in three or four days to brew this? What of the other ingredients?" Lucius was growing agitated; it was a bizarre departure from the cool demeanor I had seen since arriving at the Manor.

"He will weaken. How much I can't say. Severus and I have discussed this. Either another Potions master will be needed; alternatively, Severus can supervise the work of another brewer."

"How advanced of a skill level do you need?" Draco inquired from the back of the room.

"I will need a competent brewer with finesse and skill, but the techniques are not Master level. N.E.W.T. level through Apprentice level will be sufficient."

Severus, Narcissa and I all eyed the boy with curiosity. Lucius did not seem to understand the implication.

"Sir, if you think I could handle the task, I would be honored to work with you on this project."

Narcissa visibly softened. Severus looked to Lucius. "Do you consent to this?"

"Do I consent to my son helping to save your life? Honestly, Severus, you call your students obtuse? Of course I consent."

"Lucius, I did not know if you would find brewing beneath Draco."

"The boy can do whatever he chooses. And be successful at it as well, I'm sure. He is of age now. It is about time he determines his path."

"Father, I have been meaning to speak to you about that. Might we discuss options later this evening?"

"Certainly, Draco, I will be in the west parlor after dinner, as always." Draco beamed. A gentle smile graced Narcissa's lips. Even Severus's face brightened a fraction.

"Draco," I began cautiously. "It would be extremely helpful if you could also assist with brewing some of the simple potions I will need for the patients. I'm sure St. Mungo's brewers would appreciate not having to supply all of the potions for the patients here.

"I will do my best to help, Healer Prewett."

"I can provide him coaching, assuming I'm allowed out of this room."

"Severus, I see no need for you to be bedridden at this point. You need to take it easy, but if you wish to move about the house, that should be fine. Pay attention to your energy level, and rest if you need to."

"Severus, please join us in the dining room this evening. I'll speak to the elves." She exited quickly but gracefully, not even giving him a chance to consider a refusal.

Lucius chuckled quietly. "And there you have it, Severus. As you know, it is not wise to defy Lady Malfoy on social matters." Then he turned to me. "Healer Prewett, it would please me if you would join us as well." I nodded, stunned.

"Thank you. I shall go and owl Minerva." I picked up the short note I had written to her as we had talked. "Severus, Orby will come if you call him. Please give him the ingredient list, and he'll see to it. If there's anything too rare, I can obtain it from St. Mungo's apothecary."

"Draco," Lucius said pointedly, "please show Healer Prewett to the owlery." He nodded. As soon as we closed the door, Draco suddenly seemed very nervous.

"Draco, is something the matter?"

"No. Not really. Actually, not at all, but I'm just surprised. I've always wanted to pursue Healing or Potions. I never thought Father would approve."

"Ah, so you are excited and nervous about brewing with Severus?"

"Actually, I'm more nervous about discussing it with Father. Once Professor Snape is well, I would like to approach him about an apprenticeship. It's just curious that Father was so agreeable."

"Draco, did it ever occur to you that your father might be tired from spending his whole life trying to meet the expectations of others? Perhaps he wants to avoid pushing you in a direction you don't want to go in."

"We are not talking about career choices anymore, are we?"

"Well, for you, yes, we are. But for your father, I wonder if his involvement with Voldemort and the Death Eaters was truly his choice. Perhaps he's learned from the mistakes of years of narrow-minded parents."

"Are you speaking from experience, Healer Prewett?"

"Oh heavens, no, that is definitely not my experience. My parents were from two different continents, heck, two different worlds. Mother encouraged me to explore both worlds equally. I think it's safe to say that my family was always on me about cutting my own path and keeping options open."

Draco laughed. It was the first time since I'd arrived that he looked his age. "Well, it seems they were successful, Healer Prewett."

"Please, call me Elizabeth in private. I really don't like being defined by my profession."

"Speaking of calling you by your first name," Draco smirked, "What was that all about?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. I'm very informal. I prefer to be thought of as a person."

"Perhaps you are informal. But did it occur to you how difficult it might be for Professor Snape to view you as a person? If he sees you as anything but a Healer, he has to admit you are a woman, and frankly, the fact that you are the virtual image incarnate of his long lost love adds to the intrigue."

"What?"

"Surely you've heard the story. Severus and Potter's mother were childhood friends. She was Muggle-born, and he was her first contact with the Wizarding world. They were sorted into different houses at Hogwarts, and they must have drifted apart, but he always loved her. She married James Potter, had Harry, and about a year later, Voldemort murdered her and her husband. Severus blamed himself. He gave Voldemort information about a prophecy, not understanding the subject. Voldemort began hunting the Potters, and Severus went to Dumbledore, who hid them. But Voldemort found them anyway and killed the two adults. When he tried to kill Harry, something happened and Voldemort's body and power were destroyed. He disappeared for 13 years."

"I...I've heard bits of the story, but I don't see how it has anything to do with me."

"He has allowed you more familiarity than I've ever seen him grant anyone. All in a matter of a few days, I might add."

"Well, we did meet under extreme conditions. That can affect things."

"And you saved his life. And, you are a beautiful woman who happens to share many features in common with Lily Potter, the only woman that he's ever shown any interest in."

"What are you trying to say to me, Draco?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I thought you should be warned. He's not a pleasant man, but he is a good man. Make sure you don't trifle with his emotions."

"Draco. I may have a lot of faults, but I am certainly not the type to toy with a man's emotions. I wouldn't even know how, frankly."

"And yet, with Professor Snape, you may do so unintentionally. Just be careful for both your sakes. And watch out for Father as well. He's up to something. Inviting you to dinner without consulting Mother is highly irregular, especially given your family. Please don't take offense, but the Prewetts have never socialized with the Malfoys."

"I'll take that under consideration, Draco, but I think you are imagining things. I think your father is likely thinking of your future when he invited me to dinner. Odds are good he is trying to make sure I make a good little character witness if you and your family stand trial."

"We shall see. Here is the owlery. The eagle owl over there is one of our most friendly, and she has been to Hogwarts many times over the years."

And with that, he turned sharply and walked out quickly. I stood there for a moment, still stunned by Draco's theories. I pulled out the note to Minerva and held out my arm. Sure enough, the owl Draco had mentioned flew over and landed in front of me. I rolled up the note, attached it to her leg, and told her to take the note to Minerva at Hogwarts.

After taking lunch in my cottage, I received a return owl from Minerva. She had checked, and the vial was in the safe and unharmed. Around that time, Severus summoned Orby to collect his list of ingredients for the potion along with an ingredients list for several routine healing potions. I smiled at the gesture. Severus had correctly surmised that while I was a competent Healer, I was no Potions master, and compiling those lists would have been a fair bit of work for me.

With a quick pat of thanks to Orby's head, I sent him on his way to collect what was needed. The other patients were due to be transferred the following morning, so hopefully Draco could get started the following morning.

I was quite surprised when another owl tapped on my window a bit later. It was from Lucius Malfoy.

Healer Prewett,

Dinner will be served at 7:00. We are both pleased that you will be joining us. It will be just the five of us; the Aurors take their dinner in the sunroom. I would like to meet with you for thirty minutes prior to dinner in my study, if you would. I have a feeling I know what Draco would like to speak to me about after dinner, and I would like your assistance on that matter.

I paused. This didn't bode well. Was Lucius Malfoy going to try to get me to dissuade his son from pursuing medicine? I did not want to be in the middle of a family squabble, especially not in this family. No matter, I was strong enough to say no to Lord Malfoy. He may have an intimidating presence, but he was essentially a prisoner in his own home, and I was not. I continued reading.

Please know that I intend to support Draco in finding the right vocation for his skills and desires, but I wish to make sure his expectations are realistic.

Lord Malfoy

P.S. Lady Malfoy wishes me to remind you that we dress for dinner at the Manor.

I chuckled. What a graceful way to remind their 'informal' guest to be appropriate. What was amazing about the whole thing was how little they knew of me and yet how much they thought they knew. Father's family was solid and respectable, not Wizarding royalty like the Malfoys, but the Prewetts certainly had reasonable social standing. Mom's family, in the States, on the other hand, was pure Boston society. And Mom, despite her wild streak, was actually the picture of decorum when she felt it necessary. I might not have been raised a Malfoy, but the fact that they thought I needed coaching to behave as a lady was laughable.

Though truthfully, I wasn't sure why the insinuation that I would need coaching bothered me so. Regardless, I would not disappoint.

I was inexperienced with Wizarding fashion, particularly in Europe. I could transfigure something I already owned, but into what, I did not know. I walked over to the Floo and called the only person I could think of to help. My nephew's wife, Fleur, was the most elegant of my Wizarding family.

"Who is it?" Fleur's voice was soft and welcoming. Her accent had faded a bit over the years.

"It is your Aunt Elizabeth. If you have a moment, I could use some help."

"Come through, please."

"Thank you, Fleur." I stepped through the Floo and dusted myself off.

"How can I help you?"

"Well," I began, suddenly feeling silly. Here I was, a professional woman and an accomplished witch, and I was fretting about what to wear to a dinner party. "I have a dinner to attend, and I'm afraid being shut up in Muriel's home for the past several months has cut me off from current fashion trends."

Fleur wisely decided that was enough information for her. She knew where I was staying, and I knew that most of the family did not approve, even if they were quiet about it. "Do you have something to transfigure?"

"Yes." I held up a set of simple robes that were a bit more formal than my daily robes.

"You are blessed with a pleasing figure. Are you looking to show off a bit?" I blushed. *Why in the world was I blushing?*

"No, Fleur. Conservative and yet fashionable are the traits I would like. I feel the need to prove I know how to present myself as a lady."

Fleur snickered. "Are you sure there is no other reason? Perhaps there is a handsome Auror staying in the home that you would like to impress?" *Ah, so that's what the family suspected. Well, that was benign enough.*

"No, the Aurors will not be attending dinner with us. If you must know, all three Malfoys have made indirect insults on my family. I doubt they even realize it, but I'd like it to stop."

"Well, let's try this. Stand up please." She circled me appraisingly.

"With your hair and eyes, yes, blue, I think. And if you want conservative, we shall keep the neckline high. But you must at least show off your legs a bit." She pointed her wand at the dress. It swirled with magic, and the fabric turned from the somber gray, to a rich, electric blue that was both vibrant and dignified at the same time.

"Well, try it on." Fleur tapped her foot impatiently and motioned to the other room. I snickered but did as I was told. I stepped out wearing a luxurious, simple robe that was form fitting but not tight. As promised, the neckline in the front was modest, but it dipped in the back. The skirt was a bit short for my taste, but other than that, Fleur had done a brilliant job.

"It's lovely, Fleur, but the skirt is a bit short."

She huffed and flicked her wand. She mumbled something under her breath about 'old before her time'. The skirt was now a conservative knee dusting length. "Well then, let me try this instead. Take off your shoes."

"Why?" I questioned.

She clucked at me to follow her instruction. I watched as my conservative flats turned into a pair of rather high heels, the exact fabric of the dress. They were quite fetching and just a little daring.

"If you insist on being so conservative with the dress, we will add glamour with the shoes." I smiled. It seemed a reasonable compromise.

"Now, put your regular clothes back on. You don't want to get them dirty in the Floo."

"Thank you, Fleur."

"You are welcome. Oh, and you must let me know what Auror Robards thinks." I started to protest, but decided that wasn't wise. Because I was starting to realize that while it certainly wasn't Robards I was looking to impress, Fleur wasn't that far off the mark.

A few hours later I was standing in front of my mirror, dressed in the lovely robes Fleur had created, trying to decide what to do with my hair. It had always been my crowning feature, but now it made me uncomfortable with the constant comparisons it seemed to elicit in people. It seemed just in the past week, I'd heard it all. The family associations were to be expected, but Lily Potter was something else entirely. It was eerie to have so many people compare you to a woman who had passed away over fifteen years ago. *Well, then I supposed I best not make the hair the focus,* I thought, winding it into a chic twist behind my head. I knew my neck was one of my more elegant features, so I might as well highlight it. I transfigured a pair of earrings into a pair of drop earrings and matching necklace. The jewels complemented my eyes and skin. I applied some light make-up, which completed the look nicely.

I felt a bit braver. As I walked toward the Floo, I shortened the skirt for good measure. It wasn't quite as short as Fleur had made it originally, or at least that's what I told myself. Then, remembering what Fleur had said about the Floo and dirtying the dress, I thought differently and called Orby.

"Yes, Miss, Elizabeth Oh, Miss Elizabeth looks so beautiful. Miss Elizabeth is very elegant. Grumpy professor won't know what hit him."

I eyed Orby, shocked. "Orby is sorry, Orby said too much." Orby placed his hands on the wall and started to strike his head on the wall.

"Orby, please stop! What are you doing?"

"Orby is punishing himself. Orby has displeased Miss Elizabeth."

"Orby, please don't do that, ever. Do you understand? I am not displeased. If I am, I will tell you. I am simply surprised that everyone seems to think there is something going on between Severus and me. There is not."

"That is what grumpy professor told Lord Malfoy, but Lord Malfoy did not believe him. Lord Malfoy said he hadn't seen grumpy professor that comfortable with a woman since he'd known him. And Lord Malfoy said he knew he was right because grumpy professor had never spoken two words about a woman since Lily."

I sighed. There she was again; why would nobody let Lily Potter rest in peace? "Orby, everyone wants Severus to be happy. I think they are hoping he finds someone special. And I'm obviously the closest woman, and frankly, the only age appropriate one who knows he is even alive except Narcissa. It is wishful thinking on their part that he might be interested in me. There is no truth to it. Please do not share this information that you heard with anyone else. I do not want to start any rumors."

Orby nodded. "Orby will not start rumors." But then he turned his head to the side and smirked. Since when do house-elves smirk? "Do you wish Orby to Apparate you to the Manor, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Yes, please. I am meeting with Lord Malfoy before dinner." And with that, he took my hand and we apparated to the entrance hall.

Bobby appeared instantly and walked me down the hall to Lucius's study. Lucius appeared to be hard at work at his desk, and he did not look up as we entered.

Boppy cleared her throat and announced me. "Healer Prewett is here to speak with you." Lucius looked up, and the startled look on his face was priceless. He even dropped his quill. He looked me up and then down again, and then looked back up uncomfortably, as he knew I'd seen him appraising my legs. *Well done, Fleur. Well done indeed.*

"Mr. Malfoy, you wished to see me?"

He gritted his teeth, obviously trying to regain his composure. "Indeed." He motioned to the chair in front of his desk. "Do have a seat, please.

"As you know, my son plans to talk with me this evening about his chosen career path. I suspect he is going to wish to study Healing or perhaps advanced potions research for medicinal purposes. Now, there is no doubt in my mind that Draco is well suited to either of these fields. However, there is the small problem of his current incarceration. I would like you to consider training Draco for the duration of his incarceration. I would see him develop his skills, even if only informally, during this time.

"Further, Severus has agreed to do a formal Apprenticeship with him in Potions. They will continue to supply you the potions you need. I also understand that you may need some additional equipment for your work here. I can certainly make sure you have adequate resources.

"As for your salary, I am prepared to pay your Healer salary for the hospital, plus an additional stipend for your work as Draco's tutor and for the additional work on behalf of Severus. In addition, I have spoken to several hospitals, and you will be receiving four letters in the next week with offers of employment beginning once this is all over. They are as follows: Two are from purely Wizarding facilities, one is from a Muggle hospital, and one is a highly secretive, state of the art facility that specializes in a hybrid of Muggle/Wizarding techniques. Patients are selected by our two Ministries, based on the complexity of their cases and are a blend of Muggles and Wizards."

"You've done your homework, Lord Malfoy. I shall think on this and give you an answer in the next week. Right now, I think we will all have our hands full with the new patients tomorrow and with Severus' potion and subsequent treatment."

"That sounds satisfactory. I will have a copy of the contract sent to your cottage for review." He pointed to papers on his desk. "This is a standard magical contract. If anything within it is objectionable, you can write in the margins your desired edits, and they will appear on my copy once you close the contract. I can approve them or call a meeting to discuss if needed. It tends to speed up negotiations."

"That is quite clever, sir. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. Now, you may not approve of this, Healer Prewett, but Draco is under a magical binding spell. It was placed upon him when the Dark Lord returned. I knew he would seek to recruit Draco, and I knew that I did not want my son drawn into service with the Dark Lord. I thought if he appeared average, but not exceptional in his abilities, he might escape the Dark Lord's notice. It was a theory that might have worked had it not been for the Dark Lord's anger at me for the failure at the Department of Mysteries the following spring. I had planned to lift the spell when he came of age, but my home was invaded, and my wand was taken at about that time." He looked out the window, crestfallen for just a moment, before snapping back into his superior persona.

"But that is neither here nor there now. I shall inform Draco of this when I meet with him this evening. We will lift the binding spell. I do not think there will be any negative consequences, but I would ask you to stay on the grounds this evening, in case your assistance is needed."

"Very well, I can do that. Is that all?"

"Almost." Lucius suddenly grew colder, more threatening. I forced myself to stand my ground. "Healer Prewett, you cannot have missed my reaction to your attire this evening."

I widened my eyes in mock innocence. "Is it not smart enough? I'm afraid it's been a while since I've attended a formal dinner."

"No, it will certainly do. You look quite elegant. No doubt Narcissa will be pleased at your fashion sense. I am thinking of our other guest. He has noticed you, my dear." The endearment dripped with disdain. "I do not know whether it is welcomed by you or not, but you will tread carefully." His aristocratic drawl became low, but ever more dangerous. "He has been abused by this world enough, and I will not have it under my roof. You will treat him with respect, and you will not toy with his emotions."

Now it was my turn to smirk. "You know, your son gave me the same speech. You two should really try playing good cop/bad cop. I definitely think Draco should be good cop though."

"What?"

"It's a Muggle interrogation tactic. One partner is nice and cordial, understanding and friendly even, while the other is intimidating and harsh. The idea is that the one being questioned will see the 'good cop' as a safe place to confide in. But you missed one detail. Bad cop needs to go first."

"I assure you, Healer Prewett, there is no attempt at manipulation here."

I laughed inelegantly. "I assure you, Lord Malfoy, I was not born yesterday." I stood, trying to assert myself with this man. I felt suddenly grateful for the heels. "I do not wish to be your adversary." Looking him dead in the eye, I continued, "But I will remind you, Lord Malfoy, that you are the prisoner here, and I am the one that is free to leave at any point in time. And I will also remind you; there may come a time when I am called to testify on the behalf of you, your wife, and possibly your son. I would hate to have to tell them I felt intimidated in your home. As much as I don't want you as an adversary, Lord Malfoy, I assure you, the opposite is also true."

"Touché, Healer Prewett. Perhaps I have underestimated you."

"As to your character dispersions, while it is not your business, I will state that I am not the type of woman to play with a man's emotions. I find those women quite despicable, and frankly, men don't respond to me in that way anyway."

"So now we find that you are in fact, a bit naïve. The fact that you abhor trifling females makes you all the more dangerous to the type of man that also dislikes that type of behavior. And the fact that you do not flaunt your femininity, well, at least normally," he sneered as he rose to his feet, looking down at my legs pointedly, "makes you far more deadly when you do."

Lucius and I remained that way for a moment, surveying one another, neither one prepare to blink. The tension was broken by the sound of a throat clearing in the doorway. I turned to see Draco, looking a bit sheepish, obviously concerned by what he had walked in and witnessed.

"Mother is waiting in the foyer, Father. Dinner is ready to be served." Lucius thanked his son. He gave me a curt nod and left the room. Draco offered his arm to me.

"Well, Elizabeth, you certainly clean up nicely. Mother will certainly approve. And undoubtedly so will Severus."

"Truthfully, Draco, this is for your mother's benefit. I get the feeling that your whole family expected me to show up to dinner in ripped jeans and a concert tee-shirt." Draco looked confused.

"All I'm saying Draco, is that it is possible for a non-Malfoy to know how to behave with decorum. Your family does not hold a monopoly on charm and sophistication."

"Well, you were raised in a completely different culture."

"Yes, I was, Draco. And my mother's family is every bit as 'ancient and noble' as many of the old Wizarding families. And while our customs are in many ways different, there are similarities. The formality is all quite familiar, and this is all territory I'm perfectly capable of navigating. Just because my mother couldn't perform magic does not mean she lacked good manners or that she failed to teach them to me."

Draco looked thoroughly chastised. "I didn't mean anything personal."

"Draco, I'm not trying to be harsh. This life is all you've known. Just think about what I've said as you make your way in the world. In a lot of ways, you've seen way more than you should at your young age. But in others, you've been pretty sheltered, brainwashed even. Try to find the value in the perspectives of others, even when you disagree."

"That's profound advice. Someone should have told Father that when he was my age."

I snickered. "Well, this turned into a pretty heavy conversation for a stroll through the house. You're a good kid, Draco. You've got a lot to learn, but you've got a lot to offer."

"Thank you. Well, here we are."

We stood in the doorway of the elaborate dining room. The table had been re-sized to fit our party comfortably without feeling overwhelming, but the rest of the setup was every bit as elegant as a state dinner. Narcissa and Lucius were talking with Severus by the table. Severus had his back to us, but Lucius made eye contact.

"Ah, there you are. Wonderful."

Narcissa looked on with piqued curiosity. "Why, Healer Prewett, you look positively charming. Wherever did you get your lovely robes?"

"Fleur Delacour Weasley is my niece. She has an excellent eye and assisted me in updating one of my old robes."

"Is that the young girl from Beaubaxton's from the Triwizard Tournament? I did not realize that she was a relation of yours, Healer Prewett."

"Please, you must call me Elizabeth. Fleur is married to Molly's oldest son, Bill."

"How lovely, and please, call me Narcissa. I can't have you call me Lady Malfoy at my dinner table. Well, I must say, she is quite talented, though she has a lovely subject. Don't you think so, Severus?"

Severus had not spoken since he turned around. In fact, other than when we first entered, he hadn't looked at me at all. I suddenly realized he was trying to look anywhere other than at me.

"Very nice," he said quickly, "but what do I know of fashion?"

Lucius laughed a deep, hearty laugh that I had not heard from the man yet. "No, my friend, your fashion sense can be described in one word. Expedient. Your wardrobe wastes no time, for you wear the exact same style robe for all occasions."

"Indeed." Severus did not seem amused at all by Lucius' joke at his expense. Luckily, just then a house-elf appeared with the first course. It looked and smelled fantastic. All attention was turned from fashion to the wonderful dinner in front of us.

A few minutes later Lucius stated, "I received an interesting owl today. Apparently, Harry Potter would like to visit. He would like to formally thank you, Narcissa, for your assistance during the battle. He would like to speak with you as well, Severus. Kingsley apparently had to hold him back from Apparating here days ago when he was told of your survival."

"Potter?" Draco sounded incredulous.

"Oh, what joy," Severus groaned. "As if it isn't bad enough that he seems to have shared my life's history with the entire Wizarding world, now he wants to discuss it."

"Now, now," Lucius tried to soothe his guest. "Let us not forget that there may still be trials. Regardless of anyone's personal history with Mr. Potter, he could be an important ally."

"Very true," Narcissa agreed. "How do you plan to answer him, Lucius?"

"I intend to invite him to the Manor for the day after tomorrow. With the patients arriving tomorrow, I think we'll all be quite busy."

I looked down into my plate to hide my smirk. Lucius was quite a skilled strategist. I seriously doubted any of his family would have much trouble at their trials. He knew exactly how to court public opinion.

"What about the trials, Lucius? Have you heard anything?"

"No, I haven't heard anything yet. I have secured a barrister that will represent all four of us, if needed. Hopefully, it will not be needed, but we shall see."

"I take it that most of Britain still believes I am dead." Severus looked towards Lucius.

"Yes, Severus, Kingsley said he would keep your secret to allow your recovery to continue uninterrupted for a while longer."

"Good. Draco, I now have the ingredients needed for the antivenin and the other basic potions for the patients. I would like to start tomorrow."

"Very well, sir. That will work. Elizabeth, what time are the patients arriving? Would you like some assistance getting them settled?"

"They are arriving after lunch. Severus should probably rest in the afternoon, so if it is agreeable to both of you, you can work with Severus in the morning and assist me with the patients in the afternoon. There are some basic diagnostic charms that I can teach you that are quite useful." Both Severus and Draco nodded.

The rest of dinner continued in companionable conversation. Robards had requested an audience with each of us to take a formal statement, and Kingsley was planning to come by in a few days as well.

"I plan to spend Sunday at the Burrow. I have spoken to St. Mungo's, there will be a Mediwitch here to observe the patients."

"Of course, Elizabeth," Lucius smiled. "And of course, your family is welcome to visit you at the cottage if you so choose. The wards at the cottage are separate from the main house. They are controlled by the current guest. You do not need to seek permission for guests to visit you there."

"That is very kind, Lucius. Thank you."

Upon finishing dinner, Severus excused himself. "It has been a pleasant evening. I am feeling a bit fatigued; I think I shall retire." I looked up, concerned.

"Severus, are you alright? Please allow me to check your levels and see if you need any additional potion."

"That will not be necessary," he snapped. Then, less harshly, "I thank for your concern, but I am simply tired. A good night's rest will do me good. I am sure you will be around in the morning to poke and prod at my person. That will be sufficient."

"Very well, Severus, take care." I felt my face warm slightly, and I looked down to avoid his gaze.

"Lucius, Narcissa, I will see you at breakfast. Draco, we will begin work after breakfast. Good night all." He exited quietly.

Narcissa looked towards me and smiled. "Elizabeth, please join me and let us sit and talk in the parlor. It has been too long since I have had some female company apart from my departed sister, and she was ... "

"Insane." Draco deadpanned.

Narcissa shot her son a disapproving look. "She was damaged from years in Azkaban." Draco winked at me. It wasn't necessary. I knew of Bellatrix Lestrange. She was damaged long before Azkaban. But, Narcissa seemed as sane as anyone, and she had, in the end, helped Harry defeat Voldemort. And she had been nothing but polite to me.

"Certainly," I smiled. "I must admit I've been limited on company as well. My Aunt Muriel is less than approving of me." I grinned. "An unmarried American witch in her thirties is not her idea of an ideal houseguest."

"Goodnight, Elizabeth. Narcissa, darling, I will be up as soon as Draco and I finish our discussion." Lucius nodded as he left the room.

"Mother, Elizabeth, I bid you good night." Draco looked apprehensive as he left the room. I tried to shoot him a comforting smile. It was strange; I'd never had a little brother myself, but Draco was, in so many ways, like a little lost puppy. I wanted to see him succeed.

Narcissa led me across the house to her parlor. It was a beautiful room, and she motioned for me to have a seat.

"Now, Elizabeth, we both know that Draco and Lucius are discussing Draco's career. Tell me, what do you think of all this?"

I blinked in surprise. To say I was shocked at Narcissa's bluntness was an understatement.

"I'm a Slytherin, dear," she said, smiling a bit too sweetly. "And you, I can tell, are savvy enough to see through any veiled effort I make to get information from you. So, really, it seems the best approach is just to be direct."

I laughed. "There is so much emphasis on Hogwarts houses here. It is truly interesting."

"You would have been destined for Gryffindor, but you lack the brashness. I think you would have been sorted into Ravenclaw, given your intelligence and ability to learn multiple disciplines."

"Not Slytherin, then?"

"It would be unwise to call anyone affiliated with the Weasley family a Slytherin. You would never trust me again." She smiled, pleased with herself.

"Anyway," I said, shaking my head. "Draco is a fine young man. You should be very proud. He will succeed at whatever he puts his mind to accomplishing."

Narcissa smiled and nodded. "He seems excited about this work with Severus and with you. I do hope you will accept our employment offer to train him."

"Ah, good cop," I smiled.

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, never mind. Lucius's offer is quite fair. If it is the path that Draco is interested in, I will be happy to help. I should probably speak to Kingsley about it. We wouldn't want to appear to be hiding anything from the Ministry, regarding either my workload or Draco's training."

"That sounds reasonable. May I ask another question?"

"Of course, though I may decline to answer." She smiled at that.

"How long do you plan to stay in England?"

"Well, the original plan was a year, which is about three months from now. But now, with the war ending, and things being in such upheaval, I do not know. If I take on Draco as a student, I intend to stay long enough to give him a meaningful practical background. Lucius spoke of some job offers for when this was over, and I'll be honest, they sound intriguing. Truthfully, my mother and grandparents are in Boston, but international travel is so simple in this world, I don't see that being a major deterrent to a move."

"What about other acquaintances in the U. S.?"

"What happened to that directness, Narcissa?"

She laughed, her eyes alight with amusement. "Oh, how droll. It is quite fun to have another woman to chat with! And you, my dear, are delightful. Well, then, tell me, do you have someone special in Boston?"

"There is nobody serious. With my hectic career, I'm afraid I've neglected my social life."

"A familiar story," she said with sympathy, "though, it is less common with witches, I think, than Muggle women. Our world is a bit more old-fashioned in that regard."

"It is in Britain from what I can see. I'm not sure I would make that argument in the U. S."

"Are marriage and children something you desire, when the time is right?"

"Most likely, though I cannot say for sure. I suppose it will depend on when I find the right partner." Narcissa raised an eyebrow at my use of the word partner. My, this woman was easy to ruffle.

"And what kind of partner are you looking for?"

"Someone who is intelligent would be ideal, and someone strong enough to handle my career is a must. Though truthfully, I will eventually want to slow down if we have children. Things have been hectic for a long while now."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find someone wonderful. You have many traits that make you desirable as a spouse. Were it not for the age difference, I might encourage Draco to court you."

I breathed in sharply, and air went down the wrong pipe. I started coughing madly. Narcissa calmly snapped her fingers and called for a house-elf to bring water. I thanked Boppy between coughs, and I managed to calm myself.

"Narcissa, I assure you, that while Draco is a fine boy, if and when I settle down, it will not be with a man so much my junior. No, whatever man I pursue will need to have experienced life on his own." Suddenly, I realized she was laughing.

"Oh, Elizabeth, do forgive me. That was unkind. But you were playing so close to the vest, I had to say something to get a reaction."

I smirked back at her. "Slytherin!"

"Now you understand what it means. So, it is wizards you prefer. Are there any in particular?"

"Well, Narcissa, I hardly know anyone here that I am not related to, at least by marriage."

"You know a few," she paused meaningfully.

"Et, tu?"

She smiled. "He's a good man, Elizabeth. He deserves to be happy."

I looked around and lowered my voice to hiss, "But I barely know Auror Robards!" Now it was Narcissa's turn to gasp in shock.

"Oh. Well, that is, I don't know him well either, but he seems a good man. Elizabeth! That isn't funny."

"Oh, I assure you, from where I sit, it's quite funny. You do realize that your son, your husband, and now you, have tried to warn me off of Severus Snape."

"Oh, I'm not warning you off of him. I think, honestly, that it would be a splendid match."

"Narcissa, please, from what I've heard, the man's life hasn't been his own for over twenty years. He needs to spend some time learning who he is before he considers how to proceed. In many ways, he's like a young man just starting out; this is the first time in his adult life he's been free to make his own choices."

"You seem to have a pretty strong insight for someone who cares nothing for him."

"Well played, Narcissa. I will not say I care nothing for him. He does intrigue me. And quit smirking. And STOP with planning our wedding. I barely know him."

"I think you may know him better than just about anyone alive, except perhaps Lucius."

"And that is quite sad, Narcissa, for I know next to nothing of him. Let him live his life. Don't try to marry him off to the closest available witch, just because I have the same color hair as a woman from his past."

"My dear, that is not it at all. You are the rare breed whose spirit could match Severus'. There is strength in you and fierceness; but it's controlled, reserved even, most of the time. You could match each other word for word, probably hex for hex, and yet, there's a caring, a protectiveness in both of you. If it were directed towards a spouse, it would be something truly rare and special indeed. You're both half-bloods with histories in both worlds. You've both suffered great loss, and you've both made great sacrifices. You are intellectual equals at a minimum, and successful matches have been made on far less.

"However," she said, changing the subject abruptly, "it is late, and you have a big day tomorrow with the patients arriving. Get some sleep." She patted my shoulder as she stood. Then, she left the room silently.

The Arrival of the Patients

Chapter 6 of 20

The hospital at Malfoy Manor receives its patients. Elizabeth attempts to treat her difficult patient.

A/N: I still don't own anything you recognize. Severus' character starts to evolve here. It's definitely different from canon. I do feel he would have been different once out of the clutches of Voldemort and Dumbledore for good. I'm hoping as the story unfolds, the transition makes sense.

I rose early the next morning. There was much to do before lunch time, and I knew Severus would want to get on with his morning with Draco. However, it was important that I check his levels before he started working.

As I stood outside his chambers, I suddenly felt nervous. All the Malfoys, plus my house-elf, had hounded me about Severus yesterday. What must they be saying to him? I knocked hesitantly on the door.

"Enter."

I walked in the room. Severus had obviously just finished eating. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"I feel like I was attacked by a massive poisonous snake."

"Would you like any pain relief potion?"

"No. Can we get on with this? The sooner Draco and I get going, the sooner I can finish the antivenin; which is what I need, not these endless questions."

"Very well, Severus, I can multi-task." I took out my wand and tapped his arm, casting the first of the diagnostic charms.

"I see they've moved you from liquids to soft foods. Are you experiencing any more pain from that?"

"No," he sighed.

I moved to the next diagnostic charm. "Your voice sounds stronger. How does your neck feel?"

This time his sigh was accompanied by an eyeroll. "Sore," he grumbled.

I performed the next diagnostic charm. "And how is your energy level?"

"Low."

"Where is this belligerence coming from this morning, Severus?"

"I'm not a pleasant man, Healer Prewett."

"Well, your levels are holding up reasonably well. You should be able to brew this morning without too much trouble, but do take it easy."

"I think I know what I can handle."

"You do realize I'm trying to help you?"

"Of course I do. I'm not a child. But don't expect me to be thrilled about your incessant questions and manhandling."

"Manhandling? It's a simple blood test. Given all you've been through, I wouldn't think you'd be so jumpy about a few medical tests."

"Given all I've been through! Seriously, woman, what do you know about what I've been through?"

"Severus, stop. I'm just trying to help you."

"Don't think you know me because you saw into my mind! You don't get some kind of pass because you look like her! You don't know what my life is like. And I don't care how much Lucius tries to play his little games, you are not Lily."

"No, Severus, I'm not. Let's get that straight. I have auburn hair. End of story. That's it. I'm not Lily; I'm not trying to be Lily. If you think I'm any happier than you are about the comparisons, you are sadly mistaken."

"In the shack, you let me believe you were her. I thought she was taking me home."

"In the shack, you were disoriented. I needed information from you. I didn't have time to go through a long drawn out 'getting to know you' session. Healers use the information they can get quickly, information that they need to help the patient. I didn't interrupt your delusion. You were dying, Severus. Should I have let you die? Should I have followed some ridiculous ethical code above all costs at the expense of my patient's life?"

And then something strange happened. He laughed. It was a dark, slow, laugh at first, which provided no comfort.

"What could possibly be funny?"

"I've become a Gryffindor! It's official! I'm in hell."

"Well, if Gryffindors are prone to melodrama, you're doing a good impression," I started sharply. I stopped myself. I had to maintain control; I wasn't the one that almost died. I continued more softly, "Are you really angry at me for not correcting you in the shack?"

"Yes. No. Merlin, I don't know. You did what you had to do to achieve your goal of helping me. It's just embarrassing." He looked up at me, clearly trying to hide pain behind those black eyes. "My whole embarrassing life is going to be on display with these trials coming up, Potter spilled my memories all over the Daily Prophet, and I gushed to you thinking you were Lily."

"Severus, I don't know what you think you let me see, but it wasn't much. It wasn't about Lily. It was about Harry. You were upset that you weren't able to protect him. You thought he was going to die, and you apologized to me, to Lily, because of Dumbledore's scheming. You said Harry got his good traits from Lily, and you made a crack about James. Then, you noticed my eyes. At that point, I told you I was just trying to help you, and you yelled at me to look in your pocket. Then you passed out again. The next person that cast Legilimens was you, after I silenced you."

He shot me a dirty look, but this one was less malicious. "Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. Look, I am not a master at looking into people's minds. I can only connect with their current train of thought. I cannot rifle through memories, and if anyone wants to toss me out, they can. Even mild Occlumency walls are more than I can breach.

"You entered my mind after you woke back up; you asked me a few questions about the battle. After that, Lucius took over that job at your request."

"I remember more conversations with Lily while I was in the shack. She was there."

"I don't know, Severus. A dream, an apparition, a side effect of having your memories stirred up when you gave Harry your memories of her. Maybe your daydreams got tangled with your memories. It could have been a simple hallucination caused by blood loss and trauma. Seeing Harry, plus seeing me and my physical similarity to her; either may have triggered it. I swear to you, Severus, I did not see anything of a personal nature regarding you and Lily."

He covered his face with his hand. "I am sorry. It was unfair of me to attack you, even if you had seen something. You saved my life. It's just difficult, after keeping secrets for so long, to live with them being so very public." He looked away.

"And the thought of having a stranger rifling through your most intimate thoughts made it that much uglier?"

"Yes. Combined with the fact that you saved my life, and the fact that Lucius and Narcissa started in about you the moment you arrived here. I'm tired of having my life meddled with by others. I've survived twenty years under the thumb of two masters, and I'm ready to be my own man."

"Severus, you don't owe me anything. I didn't pull you from a burning building. I'm a Healer. You were a patient in need. I did my job."

"I owe you a life debt."

"No, you don't. What I did was not at any peril to me. It is my job. It's specifically why I was at Hogwarts that night. I've been the Order's Healer for nearly a year now. And as far as Lucius and Narcissa go, honestly, it's harmless gossip. They are happily married; they want to see you happy. You're an eligible man, I'm an eligible woman. We met under stressful circumstances, I 'saved your life', and I look like your long lost love. It's a bunch of romantic nonsense. Let it go in one ear and out the other. Honestly, consider it a compliment that they care so much about your happiness."

"You realize I'm not used to being the subject of romantic gossip, right?" Severus frowned in a self-deprecating way.

"What makes you think I'm used to it?"

"You lived with Molly's Aunt Muriel; no doubt she clucked and doted about you."

I laughed. "Clearly you've never met Muriel. She certainly clucks, but doted, oh no. Her favorite topic is how disgraceful I am. I'm not sure I'd classify Muriel's gossip as harmless."

"See, that's the kind of gossip I'm used to, Elizabeth. Greasy git, bat of the dungeons, whisperings that I'm a vampire, this is what people say about me." His face showed the tiniest hint of a smile.

"Vampire? I'm not sure I can top that one."

There was a knock at the door. Draco peeked around the corner. "Are we ready to start?"

"We're almost done, Draco. One more test. I need to check if he's still a Slytherin."

Severus pouted, and then Draco laughed.

"No really, Draco, I'm all finished with him. Do you have a moment?"

Draco nodded. I stepped out into the hall with him. "How was your talk with your father?"

"It went reasonably well."

"I wasn't called down last night, so I'm assuming everything went smoothly."

"You mean the release of the binding spell? Yes, no serious issues. It's strange; I am feeling a little out of sorts today, clumsy almost."

"Your body is adjusting to the new feeling of your unbound magic. It should go away in a few days. Don't try any spells that requires precision for a few days."

"How am I going to shave?"

"Really, that's the best you could come up with?"

"No really, I mean it."

"You're a Malfoy. Call a house-elf."

"Ouch!"

"Alright Draco, Severus will have my head if I detain you much longer. I will see you at two for afternoon rounds. We'll talk more then."

I headed to the hospital ward to take a final inventory before taking the Floo to Hogwarts. Everything appeared to be in order, thanks to Orby and the Malfoys. Lucius had been as good as his word and had provided everything we needed.

I walked over to the Floo, took a handful of powder, stepped in, and tossed it into the flames, calling out, "Hogwarts!"

Minerva was at her desk waiting for me. "Elizabeth, it is lovely to see you again."

"Thank you, Headmistress."

"How is Severus?"

"Physically, he's still weak; however, I think once we get him the next dose of the potion, he will feel much better."

"And how is otherwise?"

"He's coping. He's been through a great deal."

"And how are you faring? Is living with the Malfoys too much of a strain?"

"I'm staying in one of the cottages on the property, but honestly, Narcissa and Draco have been nothing but polite. I can't say that I trust Lucius." Minerva paled at my words. "Don't worry; it's in his best interest to treat me well, and he's savvy enough to know that. I'll be tutoring Draco until his trial. He is considering medicinal potions as a career or possibly becoming a Healer."

"That is interesting. Draco was always a bright boy, though his magic became a bit cloudy during the war. Perhaps the pressure of it all affected him."

I looked at the ground. That was not my secret to share.

"Minerva, are the patients ready?"

"Yes. St. Mungo's sent some orderlies to handle the transfer. Poppy has their charts for you. You'll just need to open the Floo for them and then show them to their rooms on the other side."

"Thank you. The Malfoys have established a lovely area for the patients. There are two lounges and a dining room. One lounge is much like the common rooms here at the school. It contains a sitting area, a fireplace, and some wizarding games. The other has actually been charmed to allow Muggle technologies. It has a television, computer, a few game tables, and other Muggle diversions. The intent is for them to feel like guests rather than patients. We will be keeping them to the wing with the patient rooms,

as we don't want them to stumble upon Severus, nor do I want them intruding upon the family in their private quarters. There's also the trouble with some of the portaits. They will have access to one of the smaller gardens to get some fresh air."

"It sounds like you've all put in a lot of work to make them comfortable."

"Honestly, it's mostly been Draco. Though Lucius, I'm sure, we'll be happy to have all of this reported to show how they've changed."

Minerva chuckled. "Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin. Do watch him, dear."

I nodded. "How is the restoration of the castle coming along?"

"Slowly, but we've had a lot of offers to help. Several have come from abroad. The Ministry is short on resources and will likely soon be distracted by the trials as well."

"Yes, I expect it will." We had arrived at the hospital wing. In front of me were the eight patients that were being transferred to Malfoy Manor.

I was officially introduced to Lavender Brown, the young girl that had been attacked by the werewolf. Her wounds were healing as well as could be expected, but as they were cursed wounds, the scarring was extensive.

Dean Thomas was next. He was a pleasant young man, handsome and charming. He had fallen during the battle and had done serious damage to his spinal cord. The doctors from St. Mungo's had performed most of the healing necessary, but his body would need to be retaught how to use those muscles. He was in a wheelchair, but he still maintained use of his upper body.

Terry Boot was another young man with similar injuries to Mr. Thomas. One of his arms had also been badly broken and would need some therapy as well. I shook his uninjured hand as the orderly wheeled him past me towards Minerva's office.

Professor Sinistra had been struck by a particularly nasty curse and had lost much of her memory. It was not a case for the Janus Thickney ward, for her ability to learn was intact, as was much of her general knowledge. But her personal memories and much of her professional knowledge was either locked away or erased. It was our job to figure out which and to help her move forward. She smiled sweetly as we walked together towards the Floo connection.

Edward MacMillan had a gash on his arm that seemed to reopen about every 24 hours. Poppy had tried all forms of magical healing that were commonly used, and she had also tried to treat it through Muggle means, but there was clearly some sort of exotic hex that had been used. His arm was currently wrapped in a sling.

Jessica Wood had been hit by a curse that had caused sudden muscle atrophy in her legs. Muggle therapy would reverse the effects, but it would be slow and painful. She was also in a wheelchair.

Margorie Davies had suffered a head injury, and while she seemed fine much of the time, she suffered from frequent fainting spells. She also had occasional panic attacks and hallucinations of Death Eaters. I had arranged for Lucius and Narcissa to stay away from the hospital for the first few days. Draco was to wear his Healer trainee robes at all times in her presence to try and remove any past association with the Death Eaters.

Rosalyn Kirkwood had lost the use of one of her arms from a curse. St. Mungo's had not been able to figure out the cause. Like Edward, her arm was in a sling to protect it.

I led the orderlies back through the castle to the Floo. One by one, I tossed the powder into the Floo and called out the destination. Boppy and Orby waited on the other side to lead them to the lounge.

As I walked through, I saw that they had already settled in waiting for me. Boppy and Orby were there as well. I saw Draco standing off in the corner. He understood that his involvement would likely take some time for some of the patients to accept. I took a deep breath and addressed the group.

"Welcome to Malfoy Manor, everyone. I know some of you may have been nervous about coming here, but let me assure you, you will be safe. There are two Aurors onsite for your protection, as well as a variety of charms and wards. Further, we will do everything to ensure your comfort. If there is anything you need, please call Boppy or Orby." I motioned to the elves.

"They will find me, Draco, or the Mediwitch working the current shift; whatever is appropriate. They will also help you with any accommodation requests you might have.

"There is an owlery available for your use. We will also have regular visiting hours starting tomorrow. You may have visitors in the afternoons or before nine in the evenings. The Floo will be open to the visitors that you had previously approved while you were at Hogwarts.

"There will be meals in the dining room, or the elves can bring them to your rooms if you prefer. Please let the elves know of any requests for meals. I will review any requests for health limitations, but beyond that, you are guests here, so feel free to let us know what you need or want.

"Through the doors behind you is the Muggle lounge. Please do not take wands in that room. The equipment is warded, but nevertheless, it is important that we be careful with magic in there.

"To your left are the gardens. Stay inside the hedges unless you speak with Draco or me first. We do not want to tread on the hospitality of our hosts, so that will ensure their privacy.

"If there are no questions, orderlies, please see Draco for the room assignments and take your patients to their rooms. I will begin rounds in approximately one hour."

"Very impressive, Healer Prewett," called a deep voice from behind me. I turned to see Minister Shacklebolt.

"Minister, I did not expect you here today."

"Honestly, Healer Prewett, I came today to check on the Malfoys and reassure myself of the decision to allow them to remain in their home. I had lunch with them a little while ago, and I am quite pleased. Lucius shared with me Draco's role in the hospital, and Narcissa told me of the renovations you all have done for the patients. You really have gone above and beyond."

"I've had a lot of help, both with the work and with the ideas. Draco has thrown himself into making this operation a success, Narcissa is a master at hospitality, and Lucius has spared no expense. The elves are dedicated, St. Mungo's has been helpful, and Minerva and Poppy ran a splendid operation at Hogwarts that made the transition easier."

"Excellent, I'm very pleased to hear it. Did Lucius correctly relay that you intend to stay on as Draco's tutor until he is able to move on to the the next stage of his training?"

"I have not officially accepted Lucius's offer. But that is my intent, and I have communicated as such to Narcissa."

"Well, we're happy to have you as long as you wish to stay." Kingsley smiled.

"Do you speak for all of Wizarding England?"

"I believe I do. I have heard nothing but praise for your work. Now, I was planning to go speak to your other patient before I depart. I would like to hear of the plans for Draco. Do you care to join me?"

"Actually, I should probably check in with Severus and see how he feels after working with Draco this morning. Follow me." Kingsley and I began walking to the family wing. Draco, who had finished talking with the orderlies, caught up with us.

"How did this morning go, Draco?"

"Well, I think. Professor Snape is a far more patient teacher when it is one on one. We were able to complete the first stage of the potion for him. We also started a couple simple potions for the other patients. There is one other that will need some attention this afternoon. I will bring them by the hospital storeroom this evening before dinner."

"Excellent. How is he?"

"Professor Snape is as stoic as always. I think brewing, or even instructing brewing, is more taxing on him than he would like to admit."

"Hmm, well, presuming the brewing continues to go well, hopefully he'll be better shortly."

We had arrived at his room. Kingsley knocked firmly.

"Enter." I walked in with the others. It was difficult not to laugh at Severus' cross face. Orby's description of grumpy certainly seemed to fit.

"Severus, how are you feeling after working with Draco this morning?"

"A bit more tired than yesterday. I plan to rest this afternoon. Healer's orders."

"That is excellent, Severus. Snark is a vast improvement over vitriol."

"Trying to beat me at my own game, Elizabeth?" Severus inquired with considerable mirth in his voice.

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it, Severus. I'm merely hoping to learn from the master." I gave him a smirk of my own.

"Your color looks better than this morning. It looks like exercising your mind is helpful to your overall well-being. But don't overdo it. How did it feel this morning, being back in the lab?"

"It was energizing, actually; though I did tire out quickly."

"After your nap, I'd like you to take a short walk, if you are feeling up to it. Draco, are you available to escort him? I'd rather someone be with him in case he needs assistance."

"Actually, I cannot. My interview with Robards is later today. Mother is also meeting with him today, and Father is in business calls all afternoon."

"Oh. Well, then, Severus, I suppose you are stuck with me. If you don't mind, that is." I felt my face warm a bit. Draco's eyes gleamed.

Severus frowned at Draco. "That should be fine. Perhaps we can use that time to discuss Draco's training in-depth a bit more." He eyed the boy menacingly.

Kingsley stepped up at this time. "Severus, you look much better than when I saw you last."

"Thank you, Minister Shacklebolt."

"I have been approached by several Ministry officials regarding the first round of accolades for service during the war with Voldemort. Your name has come up. You have been nominated for an Order of Merlin, First Class. Well deserved, mind you, but I can't give you a posthumous award in good conscience, since, well, since you are alive."

"It will be interesting to see how those opinions change when people know I have survived." His voice betrayed his doubt.

"Oh, I doubt that it will be as significant as you think, Severus. Mr. Potter is leading quite the campaign on your behalf."

"Minister Shacklebolt, please ask the boy to desist. If not for my sake, how will it look for him when my survival is revealed?"

"Still protecting the boy, Severus?" Kingsley inquired honestly.

"Hardly," Severus sneered. "I vowed to protect his life from Death Eaters; I did not vow to protect his reputation from his own foolishness."

"In addition to worrying about the reputations of those keeping your secret, the goblins are inquiring as to why there has been no discussion of the settlement of your estate."

"So, you are saying that the time has come to reveal my whereabouts?"

"Not to the public at large, but to appropriate officials, I do think it is prudent."

"You know it will leak, don't you?"

"I'm aware that it is possible, even likely."

"Minister Shacklebolt, is it possible to hold off one more week? Severus will be much stronger after his next dose of the potion."

"How soon will it be ready?"

"Three to four days," Severus said.

"He'll need a few more days of convalescence before he sees anyone besides the small circle we've already discussed," I said definitively, putting on my most official Healer voice. "He's making good progress; I'd hate to see that impeded." Severus gave me a very subtle nod of thanks.

"Very well, I shall wait one week, and then I'll send an answer to Gringotts. Severus, I shall protect your privacy as much as I can. Frankly, there are very few people that can be allowed on the property, given the fact that the Malfoys are formally under house arrest."

"Thank you, Minister."

"Draco," I began, "we should go. We need to start our rounds soon. Minister, it was good to see you. Enjoy your visit, but do allow Severus his rest."

The Garden

Chapter 7 of 20

Elizabeth and Severus spend some time together in the Malfoy gardens.

Afternoon rounds were uneventful. The patients were still settling into their rooms. I introduced myself and Draco to those that didn't already know us. I did a quick exam, and we went over their schedules for potions and therapy. Then, we just spent a few minutes talking with each patient, trying to learn what their biggest concerns were for their recovery. Normally, I wasn't a chatty type of Healer, but this was a special situation.

By the time we were finished, I was fairly drained. I used the Floo to go back to my cottage. I washed up and then changed into a pair of khaki capri pants and a light blue blouse. I brushed my hair out quickly before helping myself to an apple and a glass of water. After a few minutes, I felt refreshed and ready to go check on Severus.

When I reached his door, I knocked softly. "It's Elizabeth."

"On my way," he called out. A moment later, the door opened. I was a bit shocked at the sight before me. He was dressed in a simple white button-down shirt, black pants, and black shoes. His hair was pulled back neatly at the nape of his neck. He looked more rested and relaxed than I'd seen him yet.

"You look rested, Severus. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Honestly, I think the idea of getting outside is quite appealing."

"Well, the air will be good for you. Honestly, it will probably be good for me as well."

"We should go this way. The garden off this sitting room is one of my favorites. Narcissa is quite proud of her gardens, and she puts a great deal of effort into keeping them up."

"That sounds fine. It will be nice to have a tour guide for the grounds." He led me out the doors into a vast and beautiful garden. We talked for a few minutes about the types of flowers, trees, even some discussion of the sculptures Narcissa had commissioned of Malfoy ancestors. Severus was pleasant, and he seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself, though he remained characteristically guarded.

We discussed Draco's first day and what our plans were for the rest of the week in balancing his time. The conversation then moved to the clinic itself.

"How are the other patients?"

"They are getting settled in to their new space. Therapy schedules start in the morning for those impacted. I have some research to do on some of the curses, as I don't have a clear treatment plan for most of the patients yet. Some of the curses and hexes are unfamiliar to both me and the other St. Mungo's Healers."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly, Severus, other ideas are welcome."

"Don't forget to use the resources at your fingertips. The Malfoy library is extensive, and there is a reference section on dark curses and potions that may contain items that St. Mungo's might not possess. I think even there are some materials that Voldemort himself added to the library. No doubt some of the nastier curses he knew or created were passed to some of his Death Eaters."

"That would be quite helpful. Do you think Lucius would allow me access to such materials?"

"That's a valid concern. However, even if he would rather not grant you access, surely he would allow Draco access. Or me, for that matter."

"Would you be willing to help consult on some of these cases?"

"Yes, though it will be harder without seeing the patients directly."

"Perhaps we could use a Pensieve? Do you know if the Malfoys have one?"

"They do, though some of the Death Eaters had pet curses. If Lucius and I were told who hexed the patients, we might be able to narrow down a list of possibilities; perhaps you and Draco could research from there."

Hope surged through me. His knowledge would be an amazing resource for helping the victims. "That would be so helpful. I was really concerned about some of these cases. I haven't been exposed to that much Dark magic, thankfully, except for this past year. This could really help us with a direction!" In my excitement, I grabbed his hand. "Thank you, Severus."

"Yes, well, Elizabeth, I have much to atone for; anything I can do to help, just let me know."

Realizing what I had done, I flushed bright red. "I'm sorry, I got excited." I couldn't help but notice, however, that I was the one that had pulled away.

"I can tell. Do try and show some decorum in the future, Elizabeth." I looked at him, mortified, until I noticed his smirking.

"Severus! I'm embarrassed enough. That wasn't nice."

He leaned in close and whispered, "I told you that I'm not a pleasant man, Elizabeth."

"I'm not sure I believe you. For all your bluster and snark, you aren't as unpleasant as you would have people believe. And I don't scare easily, Severus Snape." We were now standing nose to nose, eyes locked. My pulse quickened, and my breath felt constricted.

"Is that a challenge, Elizabeth?"

I have no idea what came over me. But this man provoked a reaction in me, both intellectual and physical, and at that moment, rational thought was not driving me.

"No, but this is." I leaned in and kissed him. The kiss was intended to be quick, but I underestimated my opponent. I started to pull away, but his hand slipped into my hair, and I found myself being held in place and kissed back soundly. I gasped slightly, and he deepened the kiss as I put my hands around his shoulders. A few moments passed as we explored each other. My eyes were starting to slip shut when he pulled away sharply.

"Damn." He turned his back to me.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

He turned back to face me. "Nor should I have lost control like that. But there's something else. Lady Malfoy just stepped out into the gardens as we were embracing."

"Oh, no, that's certainly not going to help with the rumors."

"No, it's not."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. The kiss wasn't unpleasant. Nor was it unwelcome." He froze, realizing what he had said. He shook his head slightly and continued, "The meddling will be bothersome, but as you astutely pointed out before, it does not come from a bad place. I can handle the Malfoys."

"It was terribly unprofessional of me to do that."

"Elizabeth, this ..." he motioned between us as he spoke, "has been off the professional track from the beginning. I can't imagine myself bantering this way with any of my other past medical professionals as we have. You live here, the Malfoys have been posturing for days, even Kingsley was hinting."

"No!"

"Yes."

I laughed. "Well, you can add the house-elves to that list."

"What about the Weasleys?" He looked more concerned at that than anything so far.

"No, we're safe there. I may have let Fleur think that I was trying to impress Auror Robards with that dress the other night."

"Well, I'm sure he was impressed with your style, but it's unlikely in the way Fleur suspects. Auror Robards prefers wizards." We both laughed. It was a great feeling, as no doubt there had been very little true laughter for either of us in quite some time.

"So, what now?" I asked tentatively.

"Well, obviously, I'm attracted to you. It seems to be mutual." He paused for my reaction. I nodded shyly. "But this is awkward on many levels," he continued. "Truthfully, it's full of pitfalls for both of us. But I haven't felt genuinely drawn to someone in a very, very long time." He closed the distance between us again. "It's not something I intend to ignore."

I smiled. "I like that answer. I suppose the best approach then is just take things slowly to get to know one another, and be as discreet as we can when dealing with the Malfoys. Although, the Healer/patient thing still gives me pause."

"Elizabeth, I am really more your colleague than your patient. This whole arrangement is unconventional. Do not beat yourself up over some ... what was it you said before ... some ridiculous moral code. I assure you; no bounds have been overstepped, and I do not feel you have taken advantage of the situation." He raised an eyebrow at me on the phrase 'taken advantage of'. I blushed again.

"I must admit that part of my willingness to help you with the research on the patients was out of an interest in getting to know you better." He looked at me seriously. I found that once again, I could barely breathe.

"How very Slytherin of you, Severus."

"Yes, and it worked far more quickly than I could have hoped." He stepped in and kissed me again, this time slowly and deliberately. I felt my knees start to tremble. Feeling nervous, I backed out of his embrace. Looking up at him, I could see his black eyes were aflame.

"Slow, Severus. Really, I think it's better for both of us." My words sounded convincing, but I knew that I was trying to convince myself as much as anything.

"Elizabeth, I understand. But at the same time, we aren't teenagers. We aren't beholden to anyone. There's no need to feel guilty."

"It's not guilt, Severus. It's caution. Fear even. The last thing either of us need is to enter into something under extreme conditions and find ourselves hurt."

"Fair enough, I'm not an impulsive man, Elizabeth. Shall we head back to the house?"

I sighed. I was a bit worried about running into Narcissa just now. "I should go back to the cottage. I need to send Lucius an owl about the books and the Pensieve."

"I can speak with him if you like."

"Is that wise? Drawing more attention to us working together on this?"

"If Narcissa saw what I think she saw, I will have a lot more to explain than a Pensieve."

"This is going to be complicated."

"Yes, it is."

"Though, you are right. We're adults and can handle this."

"Is it acceptable that Draco work with me in the morning and you in the afternoon again?"

"Yes. I will go over all their charts after rounds and summarize what I can. Perhaps we can spend some time tomorrow afternoon developing a plan of attack for the research."

"My Healer insists I nap in the afternoons. Join me?"

"Severus ..."

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"Draco and I will meet you after you have a chance to rest tomorrow."

"After that, you will let me show you the stables, and we shall talk, just the two of us. I'll have the elves prepare us a basket of sandwiches for dinner."

"That sounds nice." We had reached the house.

"Are you going to Floo back to the cottage?"

"No, I think I'll walk tonight. I'm not sure I can handle the speculative looks if we cross Narcissa's path."

"Very well, Elizabeth." He leaned in and kissed my cheek. "I shall see you tomorrow."

"Have a good evening, Severus."

And with that, he stepped into the house. I turned and started back toward the cottage, somewhat dazed. What had just happened? My mind was a whirlwind. I couldn't break through the feeling that this was a bad idea. It was too soon after his injury and the end of the war for him to be thinking straight. What if we were just thrown together and allowing this attraction to take over too quickly? What if it wasn't me he was interested in; what if I was just a soft place to fall?

This wouldn't do at all. I would not be one of those ridiculous swooning women. I needed to find some useful way to occupy my time this evening to take my mind off this. Then it hit me. I would prepare for tomorrow. I could go ahead and gather the needed information on how the patients were attacked and see if I could get names of the Death Eaters that cast the curse.

My first stop was Auror Robards. If he had taken an official statement from the patients, I might be able to get some of the information without bothering them this evening. I sat down at my desk, pulled out a quill, and jotted down a note.

Auror Robards,

Please grant me an interview regarding the information you have collected so far on the curses afflicting the patients; I believe it might assist me in treating them more effectively. In exchange, I can share any information about the type of curses that I am able to obtain through my research.

Healer Elizabeth Prewett

I sealed the envelope and called Orby to take the note to the owlery. Auror Robards wasn't at the Manor this evening, but he might have a shift in the next couple of days.

My next step was summarizing the chart information for Severus. I took the Floo to the hospital fireplace. I was surprised to find Draco seated in the lounge area; he was talking intently with Dean Thomas.

"I am truly sorry for everything that happened to you here, Dean."

"Draco, it is best we all try and move forward. Obviously, a lot of bad things happened. But, don't think I don't know who was slipping nutrient potions into the food that you brought down here. Ollivander wouldn't have survived without those."

"Ollivander suffered greatly."

"Yes, Draco, he did. But adding yourself to the list of casualties wouldn't have helped anyone. Learn from it and move on. You are still a Malfoy. You've still got resources at your disposal most of us can't even fathom. Use it for good."

"Anyway, Draco, are you always going to be this much of a bore? How about I show you a thing or two about Muggle video games in the other lounge?" I could tell Dean was trying to lighten the mood with a little competition. Draco took the bait.

"Really, Thomas? You think you can beat me at anything?" Draco stood and started to follow Dean as he wheeled from the room.

"Draco, can I have a moment?" I called. "Dean, I promise I'll only keep him a couple of minutes."

"That's fine, Healer Prewett. It takes a couple minutes to set up. Draco, prepare to be taught a thing or two."

Draco crossed to me. "Is everything okay, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, yes, it's fine. First of all, you know he's right." I motioned to Dean.

"Yes. Actually, what he said about using the Malfoy influence to help move forward is a good point."

"You'll have to sell that to your father."

"Oh, that will be easy. I'll just have to show him how it benefits us."

"You mean legally?"

"Partially, yes. But honestly, the company has always had very little dealing with the Muggle world. There are vast markets out there that are untouched. He could hire a few people like Dean, and there are no limits to what they could do together."

"Interesting idea, which reminds me Draco, we never did really talk about how your father took the idea of you not going into the business."

"Father's not ready to retire. He just informed me that I'll have to produce an heir that has his business inclinations to make up for 'abandoning him for my altruistic pursuits'." Draco had put on his best haughty air when quoting Lucius. I tried, quite miserably, not to giggle at the sight.

"Lord Malfoy is always thinking ahead, is he not?"

"Yes, he certainly is. By the way, why are you here, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, I've come to make copies of the intake charts. Severus and I were discussing the cases of unknown origin. He mentioned that he and your father might have some inside knowledge that could give us a direction in finding the proper treatment."

"Did he now?"

"Yes, and he also mentioned that the family library might have some useful books."

"Well, Father's personal elf maintains the library. So, if Father consents, I can probably get what we need."

"That would be helpful. Tomorrow afternoon, we'll do rounds, and afterwards, we will spend some time doing some brainstorming with Severus and see if we can come up with a direction."

"Which cases?"

"Edward and Rosalyn seem like good candidates. I have a feeling he might be able to help Professor Sinistra as well, but I don't think there's any rush on that. I want him healed before he undertakes any serious efforts like unlocking someone's memories. Edward's case is likely quite simple if we just knew what was used against him."

"What if we used Edward's memories from the moments before the attack? He might remember something that didn't seem significant to him at the time. You never know what clues we might find."

"That's not a bad idea. We'll keep that as an option. Well, go enjoy yourself with Dean. I think it would be good for both of you to get to know each other." Draco nodded, and I collected the paperwork that I needed and took the Floo back to my cottage.

Orby prepared me a light dinner while I sat down and went through the charts and transcribed the notes that I thought were important. While I was eating, an owl arrived from Molly. I called her via the Floo and confirmed that I was coming over on Sunday. As usual, Molly had a full house, so we didn't talk long. I returned to my work.

A couple hours later, one of the Malfoy owls appeared toting a book and a scroll. Attached was the following note.

Elizabeth,

Draco and I discussed our plan to research the curses together before dinner. He mentioned the reopening wound. There are a variety of curses that could cause this. This book contains a chapter on duplication curses. There are many. There are a few that work on a time-lapse basis. You may want to read over that chapter to help you understand these curses better if you are unfamiliar with them. There is some discussion of reversal, but this does not deal with the uses of the curse directly on people, but rather on objects.

I think I will need to see the wound while open to determine the cause of the curse. It would be even better if I could observe the process occurring (recorded via memory would be fine). If you have the opportunity to gather that information, it would be immensely helpful.

This is only one possibility, but I thought it might give you a direction to approach the problem. Let's discuss tomorrow.

Severus

P.S. Narcissa seemed especially cheerful at dinner, but the inquisition has not yet commenced.

I chuckled. It was good to see him keeping a sense of humor about this. It seemed it was his turn to be the level-headed one, and it was my turn to panic about the situation. Opening the book, I carefully reviewed the marked chapter, making significant notes as I went.

I sent Orby with another note to the Mediwitch onsite that if Mr. Macmillan's wound reopened during the night, I needed her to observe the event. We would take her memory of it in order to help determine the cause.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day with several therapy sessions and a lot of research scheduled. I only hoped it would be a productive day. And I couldn't help but hope for a repeat of those kisses from Severus.

Breaking News

Chapter 8 of 20

Elizabeth hatches an idea to help Lavender with her recovery. Harry Potter visits the Manor. Lucius has some important news to share.

The next morning, I stopped by Severus' room on the way to rounds with the other patients.

"Good morning, Severus. How are you feeling?"

"Honestly, I feel very run down. I plan to take some Invigoration Draught if that meets with your approval."

"I don't think that will cause any problems just for a day or two. May I check your levels?"

"Yes." I proceeded with the tests while trying to continue the conversation and keep things light.

"I received your owl last night; the book was helpful. I sent a note to the Mediwitch on staff that we were trying to get a recording of the wound reopening via Pensieve. If we can't get that, I might even see if Edward could use a Muggle recording device when it happens."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Your levels are a little worse again. But no more than I expected, so I think you'll be able to complete the potion with Draco over the next few days."

"Good. Today is mostly a waiting day for the potion. We'll add some ingredients this morning, and then it won't need tending until tomorrow. Draco should be able to spend the morning on the other potions, which he really can handle without any intervention from me, so I'll just be there for questions."

"Did the Malfoys give you any trouble over what Narcissa saw yesterday?"

He chuckled. "Very good, Elizabeth, you waited a whole minute before asking me."

"Severus ..."

"Narcissa was curious. She told me after dinner that she had seen us in the garden. I told her that it was too soon to speculate on what anything meant. I enjoy your company, but beyond that I didn't care to comment. It's really not any of their business, but I'm not going to deny my interest in you."

"And Lucius, did he have any reaction?"

"Other than 'I told you so', no, he didn't really have much to say."

"That figures. You know, if this works out, he'll be claiming he engineered the whole thing."

Severus snorted. "That's probably true. And if it's a disaster, he'll say it was a Ministry conspiracy to punish the former Death Eaters."

I laughed. "I need to get to the other patients. Do you have some Invigoration Draught, or shall I have one of the elves bring you some?"

"Please have some brought up."

"I will do that. Have a good morning, Severus. I'll see you later today."

When I reached the hospital lounge, Draco was chatting with Dean and Terry. "Good morning, Dean, I trust you showed Draco here a lesson or two on your games."

Dean smiled. "He's actually a pretty quick study. I may have to pick something else to taunt him with. Perhaps football when I get back on my feet."

"Dean, your therapy is first this morning, I'm going to do rounds; I'll see you last, and then we'll start your session. I'll be in the therapy room at 9:30."

"Terry, your session will be after Dean's. If you have no questions for me, just meet me at 10:30."

"Draco, you have brewing to do. Could you please deliver two vials of Invigoration Draught to the family wing? I was told that supplies are low over there."

Draco nodded meaningfully. "May I have a moment, Healer Prewett?"

"Yes. Actually, why don't you take a vial of Blood-Replenishing Potion also?" I retrieved the potions and handed them to Draco. "Is everything okay?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Mother said that we would be short one for dinner this evening. She seemed quite pleased. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Draco, what are you going on about? You'd better hurry. I seriously doubt you will have an enjoyable morning if you are late." Draco smirked. *Oh, heavens, even the boy was going to be a problem.*

"Elizabeth, you can deny it if you like, but there's something there, and it's good for both of you. Even if it's just friendship, he could use someone to spend time with that can hold their own with him."

"Draco, go." I shooed him down the hallway.

I turned and went to visit with my first patient. Lavender was sitting looking out the window. She looked so sad. "Good morning, Healer Prewett," she said without turning to face me.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"The pain is better. I feel more like myself." She paused, and her expression darkened. "Then I look in the mirror, and I see this." She gestured at her face angrily.

"I'm working on something there, dear. I have a few different ideas."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I don't want to get your hopes up. I don't think any of these ideas will remove the scars completely, but they might help lessen them."

"Well, anything would be better than this. I don't want to face the world right now." She turned to face me. Both of her cheeks had puncture wounds, probably from where he had gripped her face. The scratches on her forehead were healing fairly well. The bite marks on her neck and shoulder were probably not something I could help with, nor were the claw marks on her arms and legs. Though she couldn't see it, she was still a very pretty girl; the wounds hadn't marred her features, and you could still see her lovely skin in most places.

"In the meantime, how do you feel about charms and glamours to lessen the appearance?" I offered.

"Every make-up charm I've tried looks awful."

"What if someone could teach you some of the more advanced charms?"

"Would you? That would be amazing."

"I don't think I'm the most qualified for that. However, I know someone who might be just who you need. I haven't approached her yet. But it might be a sensitive issue for you; I wanted to talk to you about it first."

"Not Hermione Granger. Please, not her."

I had no idea who she was talking about. I dismissed the comment and continued, "I was thinking of Lady Malfoy. She is eager to atone for her part in the war."

"Lady Malfoy? Draco's mother? She's the most gorgeous witch I've ever seen. What would she know about how to cover ugly scars?" I smiled. Lavender was very naïve in some ways.

"Narcissa is a truly lovely woman, but don't you think that part of her image as the most gorgeous woman you've ever seen might be due to her magical abilities?" Lavender's brow furrowed; she seemed to consider my words.

"If she were willing to help me, that would be so great. I don't want to be stuck like this forever."

"I shall request a meeting and talk to her about helping. Are you sure the fact that she's a former Death Eater won't be too upsetting for you?"

"The Malfoys and I don't have any history. I appreciate the help."

I nodded. "That's all I need here today, Lavender. I'll send word after I speak with Narcissa."

I continued on my rounds, satisfied that Narcissa would be willing and able to help Lavender in the short term. I had hopes that between the efforts at St. Mungo's and those here, that someone would come up with something that would help longer term. St. Mungo's was in touch with some Muggle dermatologists and plastic surgeons for both Lavender's case and some others; there was a chance of a breakthrough there as well.

Aurora was my next patient. She was in good spirits, but she was feeling bored. We discussed the possibility of bringing in a master Legilimens to see if they could identify any locked areas of her mind. In the meantime, she requested books. Draco had ordered a telescope for her as well. I called Orby and asked him to speak to Lord Malfoy's elf about some books on various subjects. Aurora's mind, in its current state, was a blank slate; she wished to try and build up her knowledge base. I smiled at her positive attitude.

Marjorie and Rosalyn were both in good spirits as well. I didn't really have any news for them. I had been pleased that Marjorie had not had an adverse reaction to Draco.

She and I talked a bit about the possibility of taking her to a Muggle hospital for some tests. She seemed open to the idea, but that was another case where we would have to be careful. The last thing I needed was for the Muggles to think she was delusional.

Edward's wound had not opened during the night. I explained to him that we thought it would help to observe how it reopened. I told him to call someone on staff to observe when it happened again.

Dean's therapy was next on my agenda for the morning. He was waiting for me in the therapy room; he was still sitting in his chair surveying the equipment cautiously. It was all magical but based in Muggle concepts. Dean was a hard worker and listened well to my instruction, but the work was challenging. Towards the end of the session, I could see him grow frustrated with how little he was able to do.

"Dean, this is going to take a lot of time. It took your body months to learn how to walk the first time, right?"

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll try a different approach. Or we'll bring in someone who has more experience at this than I do. I'm your first line of defense here, but I'm not the only Healer out there. But for now, let's keep at this. The other thing for you to work on is your upper body strength. That will make it easier for you to take the stress off your legs. It will make you a little more mobile now, and it will help you down the road when we move you to a walker or a cane. Try to enjoy the rest of your day, and I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

With Terry, we didn't try and do as much with his legs, but focused mostly on his arm, which was going to be the easier of the tasks. The Healer who had set his arm had done a great job. His range of motion was severely limited, but you could see a slight improvement over the course of the session.

Jessica's therapy was also grueling, but the damage she incurred was less permanent in nature. She was able to do more; it was just very hard work and undoubtedly painful. By lunchtime, she was completely exhausted. I called Boppy to come help her bathe and bring her lunch, and I insisted that Jessica rest afterwards. I wrote a quick note to Narcissa requesting a meeting with her and asked that Boppy take it to Lady Malfoy when she had finished with Jessica.

I headed back to the cottage. None of the patients would need me that afternoon, so I wanted to have lunch and spend some time preparing for our research session later that afternoon.

As I was finishing my lunch, there was a call at the Floo.

"Elizabeth, it is Narcissa. You wished to speak with me about something?"

"Yes, Narcissa, I think there is something you can help with if you have the time and inclination.

"Is there now? Well, that sounds intriguing. Would you like to meet me in the parlor in an hour?"

"That sounds perfect."

"Oh, and Elizabeth, Lucius would like to invite you to use the library for your research. There are some very old items in the library of which Lucius is a bit protective, so just work with Tibby, Lucius's elf who maintains the library. Lucius has told him you have permission to use the library."

"Thank you, Narcissa, and please thank Lucius as well."

I finished eating and changed out of my Healer robes and prepared to head back to the Manor. It was a nice day, so I walked up the path to the house when it was time. Boppy greeted me and took me to the parlor where Narcissa was waiting.

"How are you today, Elizabeth?"

"I'm quite well, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm also well. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I believe there is. There is a patient who suffered significant facial scarring in the battle. Her neck, arms, and legs are badly scarred as well. Lavender is a pretty young girl, and the impact on her looks is tough for her emotionally."

"Oh, the poor dear, I can see how that would be trying. But what can I do to help?"

"There are a number of beauty charms, glamours, and other beauty tricks that she could employ that would help her cope with this, at least, for the short term. There are probably also tricks that can be performed with clothes that would lessen the visual impact. This is not my area of expertise, but I thought you might be able to teach her. The girl lacks confidence, and I think mentoring from someone of your social stature and obvious physical beauty could help prepare her to face the world again."

"That sounds like something I would enjoy. How would you like me to proceed?"

"Would you be willing to invite her to tea? Just spend a little while getting to know her and see if you think you can help."

"I shall send her a note inviting her to tea tomorrow. I will also contact my stylist and see if there are any references he can share that might help her."

"Thank you."

"It's not a problem. I'm happy to help. How are your other patients?"

"We've got some ideas of how to help them. Draco and I are going to do some research with Severus. Lucius might be able to help as well. If we can track down the cause of some of these curses and hexes, they will be easier to treat."

"I can see that. And I think you and Severus will work well together." She smiled sweetly.

"I hope so."

"I apologize for being indelicate, but I'm afraid I walked in on a rather private moment between the two of you yesterday. I'm glad to see that you two have decided to explore a personal relationship."

"Well, 'decided' might be a bit strong. I'm afraid that moment was a bit of an impulse on my part."

"It usually is, dear." We both laughed.

"I don't wish to kiss and tell, Narcissa. He undoubtedly would be less than pleased with that. I wouldn't like it if the situation were reversed."

"I understand, Elizabeth. In that case, I shall do the talking. First, I think having him help you with the patients is an excellent idea. The more useful he feels, the faster he will recover. The fact that he has admitted an interest in you is remarkable. I thought he would fight it much longer. Though, interestingly, you seem more cautious than he does."

"I'm cautious by nature, and this is certainly true in romantic matters. As we discussed the other night, I have been known to ignore my social life in the past."

Boppy popped in just then. "Lady Malfoy, Harry Potter is here to see you and Master Draco."

"Show him in, please. And let Draco know that Mr. Potter is here."

I started to go. "Well, I'll leave you now to your guest. Have a nice day."

"You really don't need to leave, Elizabeth."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. That might actually make this less uncomfortable."

Draco had just entered the room. "Yes, Elizabeth, I think it might be better if you stayed."

Boppy entered just then with a young man with messy dark hair, bright green eyes covered by glasses, and a nervous expression on his face.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter," Narcissa offered cordially.

"Good afternoon, Lady Malfoy, Draco." He looked at me, and his jaw dropped. He closed his eyes, and then he reopened them. He closed his mouth, and then he acted like he wanted to say something.

"Mr. Potter, this is Healer Prewett." I'm not sure Narcissa understood the boy's reaction, but she certainly didn't show that she was in any way disturbed by it.

"Please, call me Elizabeth. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Potter."

"Harry, please," he said, finding his voice. "I'm sorry; I wasn't prepared for the resemblance. I'm not sure if you know ..."

I cut him off, "I know. You don't have to explain, Harry. You aren't the first person to make that comment. It must be a bit unsettling for you."

"Thank you for understanding. It seems we're almost family anyway. I've spent most of my time away from school with the Weasleys since I was eleven. And Ginny and I, well ..."

"You and the Weaselette, that's on again?" Draco was clearly amused. Harry nodded, looking at his feet.

"Funny, I always thought it would be Granger."

"Nah, Hermione's like my sister. She and Ron are seeing each other now." Harry cleared his throat and ran his hands through his hair. "Look, I know this is awkward for all of us. But I want to see everyone move on. Lady Malfoy, you saved my life. I never thanked you properly for that."

The normally poised Narcissa seemed at a loss for words. She took a deep breath, looked down at her lap for a moment before turning to Harry. "You are welcome, Mr. Potter. You have done us all a great service by eliminating that creature." She winced at her own words.

"I understand now that your motivations," motioning to Draco and Narcissa, "were to protect each other. If my parents were still alive, I probably would have done whatever necessary to protect them, too."

"Draco, I have something of yours. I can't return it to you now, but I've given it to Minister Shacklebolt, and you'll be able to get it back after the trials." Draco look confused. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Your wand, Malfoy, you can have it back. I was able to repair mine. I know how it feels to lose the wand that chose you. If the Ministry says you can have it back, it's yours."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you. And thank you for pulling Goyle and me out of that burning room."

I shuddered. There was so much I didn't know about the battle. These young people had been through so much.

"I understand that there may be trials for each of you. I'm willing to testify for you, Narcissa, about what happened in the forest. And Draco, I could tell them that you tried to delay Bellatrix calling Voldemort by not identifying us immediately. I'm no help for Lord Malfoy, but Minister Shacklebolt seems to think he was helping the Order."

"Any assistance you can offer would be greatly appreciated," Narcissa had recovered her grace. "Would you like me to take you up to see Severus?"

"There's no need." We all looked up to see Severus standing in the doorway. He looked as delicious as he had the day before. Today, he was again casual, wearing tan pants and a dark blue shirt. His hair was tied back again, and his color was even better than before. The Invigoration Draught had done him wonders. Harry blanched.

"Sir," he started and then paused. "You look so healthy. I'm so sorry for leaving you in the Shack like that. I had no idea there was any chance anyone could help you." He turned to me. "Thank Merlin you were there."

"Well, honestly, Severus mostly saved himself. He had prepared an antivenin."

"Don't be modest, Elizabeth. Your actions gave the antivenin a chance to work. That alone would not have saved me. I do owe you my life." His tone was clipped, but his eyes were gentle. My throat went dry, and as I tried to speak, my voice simply made a tiny squeak. Draco did not succeed in stifling his chuckle. Narcissa shot him a disapproving glare. I would have done it myself, but I found I couldn't look away from Severus.

Harry spoke again, thankfully, breaking the tension between Severus and me. "Well, sir, I'm glad she was there. I have much to say to you. Mostly that I'm sorry for all the times that I disrespected you and treated you badly. You played your part very well, and I fell for it."

"Well, you always were a bit of a dunderhead." Harry looked horrified until Severus smirked.

"Lighten up, Potter, the war is over. Apology accepted. It's time to leave that behind. I have to admit; I took much of my frustration against your father and Black out on you as well. That wasn't fair to do to a child."

"Professor, sir, I have much to ask you, but I don't want to be too much of a pest. Would you be willing to sit down with me sometime and talk to me about Mum and what you knew of her from when you were children?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, but I hope you understand; I'd like some time to sort through it all. I do appreciate you coming here today to make peace, but anything more than that is too much just now. Honestly, I am still recovering, and I'm still trying to avoid the public as well."

"I understand that feeling perfectly. I should tell you, though; I don't know how much longer your survival will remain secret."

"Why do you say that?" I inquired, feeling very protective. My tone must have betrayed that as well. Narcissa smiled.

"Rita Skeeter was sniffing around the Ministry the other day. She asked why there is no public grave for you like the other fallen Order members. I'm afraid Minister

Shacklebolt was not well prepared for the question. She managed to wheedle out of him that your body wasn't recovered.

"That woman ..." Severus gritted out.

"I know," Harry said solemnly. "But Gringotts is making noise too. Bill came to the Burrow last night to talk to Arthur about it. I hope you aren't angry, but Arthur and I told Bill. We honestly thought he might be able to help get the goblins to back off for a little longer."

"That's probably a good idea. Bill's a good man."

"Apparently Professor McGonagall is having a little trouble as well. If you were deceased, there would have been a portrait, and the other portraits would have rearranged themselves to make room. Minerva can't allow anyone in her office that doesn't know of your survival, which leads to questions. And some of the portraits are gossips themselves, though they are sworn to uphold the privacy of the Headmaster. But since you aren't the current Headmaster, they've been using that as a loophole."

"I spoke with Kingsley earlier today," Lucius said as he swept into the room. "I have some news that affects everyone in this room. Well, except you, Mr. Potter, but I'd like you to be present. We may need your support."

"Severus, the story is going to break on your survival in the next few days. The Minister tried to keep it quiet, but that Skeeter woman put enough of it together. I shudder to think what she's going to print."

Harry jumped in, "Let's get Luna or her father out here. Give the Quibbler the real story before Skeeter has a chance to print rubbish." Harry's green eyes were on fire. I didn't know who Rita Skeeter was, but I was a little afraid for her right now.

"Severus, what are you thinking?" I crossed the room as I spoke to him. This was clearly distressing him. He had dropped onto the couch, and his head was in his hands.

"I can't stay here. Lucius, Narcissa, they'll hound you. You don't need this." Severus was paler than I'd seen him in days. I sat down next to him and took his hand in mine. I rubbed his shoulder with my other hand in an attempt to soothe him.

"Nonsense," Narcissa started to say. "Our wards are strong. We're under house arrest anyway; it's not like we can leave."

"Actually, dear," Lucius cut in, "there's more news than that. Severus has officially been pardoned for his part in Dumbledore's death and his other Death Eater activities. The signed order is on the Minister's desk. He wants to issue it before Skeeter's story breaks. Severus is a free man."

"Well, thank Merlin for that." Draco smiled and reached down to pat Severus's shoulder.

"So are you, son." Lucius smiled at his son. Narcissa choked back a happy sob.

"What?" Draco looked up at his father, obviously shocked.

"Our barrister has successfully argued to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that since you were underage at the time you took the mark, you cannot be tried as an adult for any crime that occurred before your 17th birthday. We argued that you were under severe duress for everything after you became of age. You will be able to avoid trial if you plead to a short list of smaller crimes. You will be on probation for five years, but the terms of the probation are fairly lenient. You will need to check in with your probation officer once per month, and any time you leave the country, you must give notice and get permission. There are other terms, but none of them seem overly onerous to me. Our barrister is waiting in my study to go over the terms with you and make sure you are comfortable with everything.

"Narcissa, there will be no charges brought against you. You did very little that brought anyone harm, and we were able to successfully argue that anything that you were a party to was coerced."

"What about you?" Narcissa looked horrified.

"Ah, that's the irony. It appears I'm to be made an example of, but there will be no prison time."

"What does that mean?" Narcissa looked worried.

"It seems that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has a sense of irony about them. Due to my acts against Muggles and Muggle-born wizards and witches, I am to be forced to live without magic for a period of two years. My magic will not be stripped, but it will be bound. My wands will be stored at the Ministry, and I will be forced to wear a locator bracelet that tracks my movements. There is also to be a hefty fine. The funds will be used to rebuild Hogwarts and to establish a fund for the families of the victims of the final battle."

The room was silent for what seemed like an eternity. "How do you feel about that Lucius?" Severus ventured to ask. He was still holding my hand, but his breathing had evened out. I continued rubbing his shoulder with my free hand.

"Well, I haven't read the terms in their entirety, as my offer is much lengthier than Draco's, but I get to keep my life, my soul, my family, my freedom, my home, and my business. My magic isn't gone permanently, and the terms don't seem punitive. All in all, I think it's quite fair and better than I hoped for.

"I can hire an elf to assist me, but they will be bound by the law first and my command second. I can still travel by Floo and by side along Apparition. I am forbidden from leaving the country during the two years. After the two years are up, I will be on probation for another five with terms similar to Draco's.

"The fine is sizeable, but the Malfoy endowment is so vast, the loss will be recovered in a few years. And Draco and I had been discussing making some significant charitable contributions to help rebuild the family name anyway."

Draco nodded. "It's a good offer, Father, assuming there are no surprises when you read the details."

"It's amazing," Narcissa said with tears in her eyes.

"You've done it again, old friend," Severus said with amusement. "Your skills at negotiation never cease to amaze me."

"I'm confused though," Harry interjected. "You said that this affected everyone here except me. How is Elizabeth affected?" His eyes cut down to where Severus was holding my hand and my arm was around his back. I detected a bit of protectiveness in his eyes.

To my relief, Lucius cut in again, "Elizabeth was considering an offer from me to be Draco's tutor. Severus was going to apprentice Draco in potions. At the time, we thought that Draco and Severus would both be here at the Manor for some time. That may have changed."

"Well," I began. "I have to stay here for another few months. I made that commitment to Minister Shacklebolt."

"I still haven't taken my N.E.W.T.s," Draco pointed out. "I think having the tutoring continue would be helpful."

"Severus," Narcissa said gently. "This is the best place in all of England to protect you from media scrutiny. You could come and go as you choose, and if it becomes too chaotic, you can reside at one of our other Floo connected properties abroad and just come here for Draco's training."

"Mr. Potter, what did you say about having the Lovegood girl interview Severus?" Lucius asked.

"Sir, why don't you scoop Skeeter? Give The Quibbler an interview. Work with Kingsley and time the release to be exactly when he releases the pardon. Stop the rumors

with the truth. The Lovegoods will add 'color' to the story, but they won't twist your words."

"What makes you think Luna will come here? Surely you remember the conditions of her last visit." Severus looked at Harry, not with anger, but merely pointing out the challenge.

"Dean came here." Draco pointed out. "And Lovegood is sturdier than she looks. Invite her father and have Harry escort them, and she'll come."

"I don't know," Severus look down, his voice breaking. His head went back into his hands. I looked pleadingly at Narcissa. He needed time to process all of this.

"Lucius," she said softly. "Does this all need to be decided right now?"

"Not right now," he said with understanding. "We have a day or two before we need to act. Severus, my friend, sleep on it. Let's talk tomorrow. I understand you have plans this evening." I detected a mild snarl at that.

"Harry, contact Miss Lovegood, make sure she stays available, but do not alert her as to the reason for your inquiry. She is your friend, correct?"

"She's close with Ginny. I can arrange to have her invited down to the Burrow for a few days."

"That will do. Draco, join me in my office to look over the terms."

"Father, I was supposed to work with Elizabeth today."

"Draco, go with your father. We'll start our research tomorrow. You have a lot to sort through."

"Yes, Elizabeth, thank you." He then motioned to Severus and mimed to me, *Take care of him*, as Lucius led him from the room.

"Harry, would you like to visit with your friends in the hospital wing? I'm sure they would love to see you."

I gave Narcissa a smile of thanks, and I shot Harry an imploring look. "Narcissa, that's a splendid idea. Dean and Terry will be especially pleased to see Harry. I do not know about Miss Brown. She might not wish to see Harry. Harry, it's nothing personal, but she's a bit fragile right now. She might not be ready for a male visitor. She hides from the other male patients and even Draco. Please have the elf check with her first. And also please be aware of Miss Davies."

"I understand, Elizabeth." She smiled sweetly as she led Harry from the room. He kept looking over his shoulder at Severus and me. He was clearly confused as to why I was charged with looking after the man.

After the room was clear, I leaned closer to Severus. "Severus," I whispered, "do you want to talk about this?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready for all of this to be public."

"Severus, you're free. For the first time in decades, you are your own man. There's a whole world out there. If this blows up here, you can go anywhere. With the combination of allies you have, you can rebuild your life any way you want."

He looked up at me, and I saw a scared child looking at me. "Freedom is terrifying. I've longed for it for the past twenty years, and now that I have it, I have no idea what to do with myself."

"Start small," I said, squeezing his hands. "What do you want right now?"

In a heartbeat, his lips contacted with mine, and he wrapped his arms around me. When he broke the kiss, he leaned over to my ear.

"Let's forget about all of this right now." His voice in my ear was husky and urgent. "For a few hours, help me forget that my life is in the middle of a massive transition and that I haven't a clue how to proceed. For right now, just let me be a man with a beautiful witch in his arms that he wants to be with. Let me escape from all this nonsense if only for tonight."

He kissed me again, and the heat was undeniable. After a few minutes of heated kisses, I found myself on my back on the couch with Severus leaning over me, his hand gently brushing my hair from my face. My hands were stroking his hair. I could feel my desire for him burning within me, and I could feel his desire as well, solid and formidable against my thigh.

"Severus, I don't just want to be a distraction."

"Oh, my dear, I assure you, this isn't just a distraction, though it is an amazingly effective one." He kissed me again, softly this time, gently, before pulling himself to his feet. In spite of myself, I whimpered at the loss of his body against mine. He smirked.

"I believe I promised you a picnic dinner and a tour of the stables this evening."

"With everything that has happened today, I understand if you want to wait until another time."

"No, I think that's exactly what we need. Tonight, I want to learn about you. You know so much about me, and I know very little about you."

He pulled me to my feet. "I want to know all about you," he paused, "including", he kissed my neck, "where I need to kiss you to make you whimper like that again. Give me five minutes," he placed another kiss, "and meet me in the gardens. I'll go inform the elves to bring the picnic basket out to the stables."

He gave me a small bow, and then he kissed my hand gallantly and stepped away. I was absolutely breathless. And I knew I was in huge trouble.

Forgetting

Chapter 9 of 20

Severus and Elizabeth spend some time alone together.

I wandered out to the garden and sat down on the stone bench to wait for Severus. I was still working on calming myself when he stepped out of the house.

"Shall we?" He held out his hand and helped me to my feet. He tucked my hand underneath his arm, and we starting walking towards the stables.

As we walked, he told me about the parts of the grounds we were passing. We stopped in a clearing; the stables were at the bottom of the hill. He conjured a blanket and placed it out on the ground. Sitting down, he pulled me down next to him and continued telling me about the types of creatures we would find in the stables. He really was quite knowledgeable on the topic.

"How is it that you know so much of the Malfoys? Were you raised in their circle?"

He laughed darkly. "No, my father was a blue-collar Muggle. I was raised in a poor neighborhood near the mill where my father worked. Mother was from a pureblood family, but most of them shunned us for her marriage to my father. My grandmother was the exception, but Grandfather was domineering, and she didn't dare defy him." He sighed.

"Grandmother was orphaned at a young age. She became a ward of the Malfoys; that's where my family link to the Malfoys developed. They introduced her to Grandfather Prince. Grandfather Prince died when I was twelve. Grandmother tried to make amends with Mother at that point, but it was always strained, and Mother died when I was sixteen. Grandmother was always kind to me, despite her history with my parents." His voice contained a trace of sadness.

"Is your grandmother still alive?"

"She moved to Ireland during the first war. No one has ever contacted me about the Prince estate, and I'm the only blood relative, so it seems she's still alive." He turned and looked at me. "But what about you, you seem very at ease with all of this? The Malfoys intimidate almost everyone, but you don't seem rattled."

"My mother's family is very upper crust. American Muggle upper crust, but you would be amazed at the similarities. My grandmother would find Narcissa to be positively delightful."

"And you don't?"

"That's not it; don't twist my words, Severus. Grandmother finds me less than delightful."

"And why is that?"

"There are a multitude of reasons. Probably the most damning element of my character is that I've never been all that interested in finding a husband. I've been known to attend society functions without an escort, and I sometimes skip them altogether in favor of attending a lecture or a conference in order to further my career."

"Oh, the scandal, Elizabeth, how do you live with yourself?"

"Mother isn't like them. She was a bit of a rebel as well. While attending grad school overseas, she married an older man who already had children. He was not considered a good choice. Then, when they found out he was a wizard, well, you can imagine how that went over with them.

"But, don't get me wrong. My grandparents are good people, but they don't deal well with change and differences from their own experiences."

"They sound a lot like the wealthy pureblood culture."

"Exactly, that's my point."

"Do you enjoy being a Healer?"

"I do. I like the puzzle solving aspect of it. I probably would not have made it as a Muggle doctor. Wizarding medicine is different. It's more formulaic, more mathematical."

"Less messy, too," Severus chuckled at me. I laughed at the joke at my expense.

"You are right. I wasn't prepared for the battle, professionally or emotionally. What we are doing here with research and developing treatment plans, that's the type of medicine I enjoy."

"You handled the battle just fine, Elizabeth. If it hadn't affected you, I would question your sense of empathy."

I smiled weakly, trying to hold myself together. "Thank you. I just wish I could have done more. There was so much death, so much loss." He pulled me close. I melted into him. The tears I'd been holding in all this time flowed. He wrapped his arms around me, strong and warm.

"Let go, Elizabeth. Let go. You've been so strong, and you've done so much." He tightened his arms around me.

"How can I fall apart when others have lost so much more? How selfish is that?" I buried my face in his shoulder.

"It isn't selfish. You are sad about the pain of others. You've been holding a sense of responsibility for things that you didn't cause."

I looked up at him through my tears. "Pot ... meet kettle."

He took my face in his hand and stroked my cheek with his long fingers. "Elizabeth, don't deflect. I told you; tonight is about you."

"I don't want to spend it crying, Severus." I wiped my eyes and tried to collect myself.

"I doubt this takes all evening. But you've bottled this up to the point that you are about to explode. And, even if it does take all evening, that's fine. I'm not going anywhere. I told you before, I've spent my whole life alone, and I'm not going to rush this."

I leaned in and kissed him. It was a kiss of gratitude rather than passion. Thankfully, he understood and just held me for several minutes.

"You don't have to atone for Fred's death, Elizabeth, or the loss of Remus and Tonks. Nor are you responsible for what happened to your father and brothers. You cannot accept responsibility for the actions of others. You can try to make it right when you have the opportunity, like you are doing with those eight people in the house. You saved me and many other people the night of the battle. Kingsley said he is considering nominating you for an Order of Merlin."

"That's absurd. It was my job." I huffed in annoyance.

"Shhh I told him you would say that. He still wants to reward you; I told him that a well-placed reference to your final choice of employment would please you more. I hope I did not overstep."

"How do you know me so well?"

"I've been watching your every move since I first laid eyes on you. I'll admit, at first it was probably not for reasons you would approve of; I was fascinated with the resemblance to Lily. But you, Elizabeth, are not Lily, and it didn't take long to see you as Elizabeth and not as the woman that looks like Lily."

"I've been carrying around the guilt from my father and brothers for years."

"Let me ask you a question. Is their death your mother's fault?"

"Of course not!" My voice was sharper than I intended. Severus raised an eyebrow at me. "I know. It's no more logical to blame myself."

"But it is in your nature, my dear. As logical as you are, as you try to project to the world, you are an emotional creature as well."

"Are you calling me a Gryffindor?"

"No, Elizabeth, I'm calling you human. It's okay to let the rest of us see that now and again."

I hugged him again. "Thank you, Severus. I've not had a confidante, not really, since I arrived in England. Actually, far longer than that, but my life in Boston was honestly pretty simple."

"Is that what you want out of life again?"

I considered his question. "Maybe not that simple, I shut myself off from others too much back then. I think I've learned some lessons this past year about taking risks. Those lessons probably apply in less chaotic times as well."

"So, am I a risk?" He turned his head to the side in question.

I laughed, "Um, yeah, this is definitely a huge risk for me. So far, though," I slid my arms around his neck, "the reward seems pretty appealing."

"This is out of my comfort zone as well, Elizabeth. I haven't had an emotional connection with a woman in over twenty years. It's both exciting and unnerving at the same time."

"Well, I guess it's good that we're similarly off-balance," I said. He laughed. He reached down and opened the picnic basket that had appeared next to him a moment before. He pulled out a plate of sandwiches, some lovely salads, and a bottle of wine. "It seems the house-elves approve of us spending time together. This is quite a fine vintage," I commented.

"Oh, I would imagine that was probably Lady Malfoy's contribution," Severus said gently. "She adores you; I hope you realize that."

"She's been lovely to me, really."

"You've been good to Draco, and she's appreciative of that."

"He's a good boy."

"May I ask you a personal question, Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty-two in the fall. And you?"

"I'm thirty-eight. I didn't mean to pry; I've just heard you make references to your age several times. I don't understand why it's an issue."

"That's probably my Muggle side coming through. Women are encouraged to start their families before thirty-five for medical reasons." He raised his eyebrow at me. I turned crimson. "Oh, heavens, that was awkward."

He laughed. "Don't worry, Elizabeth, I have no doubt if you were out to find a husband, you could do so without resorting to someone such as me. But, that does make sense if you've been told all your life that you are 'old' at thirty-five, why you feel outside the norm to be unmarried now. I think you'll find that the Wizarding world has far more variance on that front."

"I agree. It's just, old habits die hard, I suppose."

"I understand." He poured us each a glass of wine and handed me one. I pulled plates and utensils from the basket. I laughed when I pulled out two beautiful candles from the basket. Severus chuckled. He reached over and touched my face. "I hope you know; this is all completely unnecessary." My insides shook. My resolve to take things slowly was certainly going to be tested with this man.

"Trust me; it is for me as well." I took his hand in mine and squeezed gently. I had to look away to escape from the intensity of his gaze. For the moment, the spell was broken. I offered him the plate in my hand, and I tried to hide my blush. We continued talking as we ate. The conversation was light and pleasant: about the beautiful evening, the grounds and the view. We talked a little about my upbringing, my education, and how I came to be a Healer. After we finished eating, we lay together and enjoyed the wine and continued talking and touching gently. As the sun began to set, Severus stood and helped me to my feet. He called Boppy, and the contents of the picnic vanished as we started walking down the hill to the stables.

The stables were impressive, and I thoroughly enjoyed hearing about the different horses as well as the other magical creatures. We continued to walk through the grounds as the moon rose, talking and stealing the occasional kiss. The night was growing chilly, and he pulled me close to him. I felt amazingly close to the man next to me given the short length of our acquaintance.

He looked at the ground for a moment. "I know I said I didn't want to talk about the press and everything," he paused and looked at me. I could see in his eyes that he was torn. The evening was so lovely, but the decisions to be made were difficult to ignore.

"But it's hard to concentrate on much else, I know." I leaned into his shoulder.

"I think Potter and Lucius may be onto something, regarding controlling the media." It obviously pained him to admit this.

"There's logic to it. It may take the wind out of their sails if you tell the part of the story you are willing to share. They'll still dig for more, but perhaps with less ferocity. And even when they publish junk, at least, people have the original story to compare it to." I reached over and touched his hands.

"Would you be willing to be there? Miss Lovegood is quite the character, as is her father, but they are honest and trustworthy. It would be comforting to have a friendly face," he smiled, touching my hair, "there with me."

"Of course, Severus, I will be there if that is your choice. Do you think that might cause further speculation?"

"Probably, but again, control the story?"

"Surely I'm not part of the story?"

"You did save my life. I'd say you are part of the story, even apart from our current relationship."

"Well, but, that's the part I would think you would want to keep private?"

"I'm a single man, Elizabeth. You're a single woman. We've been thrown together, and we've found ourselves attracted to one another, and we're exploring it. What is

wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but don't you think that the 'Lily substitute' stories are going to flow freely?"

"Honestly, that's probably a bigger issue in our more immediate circle. As long as you know that I want you for you, that's all that matters to me. The comparisons to Lily are going to be more difficult for you than for me, I think."

"You are probably right. I don't mean to be insecure about this. Years of conditioning as the woman that is ignored by men."

"Elizabeth, I doubt men ignored you. I wasn't there, but I wonder if they ignored you or if you ignored them. You may have just been so laser focused on other goals that you didn't notice their attentions. Or you may have frightened them away. Not all men respond to women that are strong and intelligent. Or, at least, many require a great deal of encouragement to approach a woman like you."

"You evoke a very male response in Lucius Malfoy of all people. And he is married to, and very much in love with, one of the most objectively beautiful women in our society. The fact that he noticed you is a testament to your 'worthiness' in that regard. He was actually embarrassed by his reaction to you that day in his study."

I laughed. "Well, I didn't exactly play fair that day. I did enlist the assistance of a Veela."

"Don't think I didn't notice how stunning you looked. I could hardly bear to look at you. I'm afraid I treated you rather harshly. I didn't think I stood a chance with you, and it stung."

"Oh, Severus, I was already drawn to you. Not like now, but still, I was already experiencing very confusing feelings." His dark eyes were locked on mine again. His hands snaked around my body, and I was suddenly enveloped in an intense kiss. I wrapped my arms around him. He moaned as my hands slid up his back, and the kiss deepened. Strong hands slid up under my blouse where it had come untucked at my waist. The feel of his fingers against my skin was my undoing.

"Come back to the cottage with me."

"Elizabeth, we don't have to," he breathed, though I could see the desire in his eyes.

"I know." I kissed him again and concentrated on the cottage. The world spun around us, and as we landed in the living room, I smiled up at him.

"Are you sure?"

"Let's just take this as it comes. I trust you. Stay with me tonight."

"My control is hanging on here by a very thin thread, Elizabeth. If you don't intend to make love to me tonight, we need to slow down, right now. I'll stay with you either way, but it's taking every fiber of my self-control not to start tearing your clothes off right now."

That did it for me. My hands slid back around and started unbuttoning his shirt. With each button, the sight before me was more and more arousing. Pale skin, lightly covered by dark hair, greeted my eyes. He was very thin, but his chest was still nicely toned, probably from years of lifting heavy cauldrons as a Potions master. I pressed my lips to the uninjured side of his neck, and he let out the most delicious moan I'd ever heard. I ran my hands over his chest, then unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and pushed it from his shoulders.

He quickly shrugged out of it and caught my lips in another searing kiss. "I will have you, witch," he growled as we broke the kiss. He kissed me again, and as my hands released his hair from the tie and ran my hands through it, he began working the buttons of my blouse. His hands were unsteady and feverish, fumbling over the buttons. I moved my hands down and started helping him unbutton. He took advantage of the assistance and slid his hands up underneath my blouse in the back, making quick work of my bra hook. I slid my blouse off, and he quickly pulled my bra off and threw it to the side of the room.

The feel of his hands on my breasts was nothing short of glorious, and he was rewarded with the whimper he'd heard earlier that afternoon. I threw my head back, moaning his name as his fingers slid across my nipples. After a few moments, I was starting to feel dizzy, and I pulled him back up to my lips and kissed him deeply again. I took him by the hand and gently led him back towards my bedroom. Once in the room, I kissed him again, and then I whispered to him that I would be right back and slipped into the bathroom.

Thanking Merlin that I'd ordered the contraceptive potion after yesterday's events in the gardens, I quickly opened the package. I downed the potion and looked at myself in the mirror. My lips were swollen with his kisses, my eyes bright, my pulse was racing. There was no doubt. I wanted this more than I'd wanted anything in a very long time.

I exited the bathroom to find Severus lying relaxed across my bed. He was now wearing just his boxers. I stepped out of my shoes and made my way over to the bed. I tentatively unzipped my skirt and pushed it over my hips, letting it fall from my body. The look on Severus' face as his eyes roamed up and down my body sent an amazing shock down my spine. He reached for me and pulled me over to him. I gently straddled him and leaned down to kiss him.

The kiss was gentle, intense, but not frantic. We had reached a point where we knew that we were going to satisfy our lust, so it seemed somehow less urgent. He wrapped his arms around me and just held me against him for a few moments. Then he kissed me again, this time with more passion, and rolled me onto my back. He planted kisses from my earlobe, down my jawline, and then down my neck and collarbone. I was running my hands in small circles on his back as he did this. He reached my breasts, and I gasped, my body responding to his amazing touch. His mouth continued to worship my breasts as his hands slid down and removed my knickers. I slid my hands down gingerly and started to remove his boxers. I blushed at the awkwardness as we removed the last pieces of clothing between us; then, he captured my lips again, his tongue delving deep into my mouth. We kissed ardently for a long time; by the time we separated, we were both breathless.

"Are you ready?" he asked me softly. I nodded gently, nuzzling again into his neck. He quickly muttered a contraceptive charm before reaching down and touching me, making sure I was ready for him.

Our eyes locked as he entered me; I moaned shamelessly at the feeling. He whispered my name as we both stilled, enjoying the feeling and the connection of the moment. Ever so slowly, we began moving together, finding our rhythm and enjoying each other. I ran my hands up and down his sides, grabbing his backside and pulling him in as deeply as I could. I raised my legs and wrapped them around him as he started to quicken the pace, and he let out a string of obscenities that only drove my desire higher.

I could feel my climax building as we continued to move together, our bodies releasing intense heat. "Severus," I moaned, "I'm close."

"Oh, let go my dear, let me see you. Let me see your pleasure." I opened my eyes and we locked gazes again. He reached behind me and grabbed my backside and pulled me towards him, driving that much harder. I screamed his name in release, and my body convulsed around his.

"Elizabeth, gods," he breathed as his orgasm overtook him. I tightened my legs around him as he released, the amazing feeling of our bodies connecting causing my brain to go fuzzy.

He collapsed on me a few moments later, then pulled up and kissed me again, before pulling back and rolling onto his back next to me. I rolled onto my side and draped my body across him. He wrapped both arms around me and kissed the top of my head.

"Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Elizabeth." And even though it was quite early, the events of the day and the evening had worn us both out, physically and mentally. Sleep overtook both of us quickly.

Accusations and Explanations

Chapter 10 of 20

Lucius is displeased with the new relationship. Severus and Elizabeth visit the Burrow.

When I woke the next morning, I was the only one in my bed. I reached out for Severus, but he wasn't there. I sat up, clutching the sheet to my chest, trying to focus my eyes in the dim early morning light. I was pleased to see that he hadn't disappeared, but I wasn't thrilled to find him dressed and putting on his shoes.

"Good morning, Elizabeth. I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I had hoped you would wake me in a different way." I waggled my eyebrows at him and let the sheet fall from my breasts.

"Woman, you are wicked. I'm trying to get back to the Manor house before they notice I didn't spend the night there."

"Severus, they will know soon enough."

He smiled shyly at me. "I know, but there's a difference between knowing and coming face to face with the evidence. Lucius' wards will alert him when I enter the house, but I'd rather not have Draco arrive for morning rounds to find my bed hasn't been slept in."

"Yes, I suppose I understand your point."

"At least have breakfast with me," I said with a pout. "Orby can have something simple ready in just a few minutes."

Severus looked at the clock on the wall. "That sounds nice. It's only six. Draco probably won't come around until around eight."

"Excellent." I could already hear Orby rattling around in the kitchen. It was amazing how responsive the elves were to their names being spoken.

"Severus, I was thinking about something you mentioned last night." I stood up from the bed and threw a dressing gown on.

"Yes."

"You should contact your grandmother. If she was trying to make amends with your mother, she would probably appreciate hearing from you."

"I've thought about it a lot over the years. Recently, it would have been dangerous for her, but now that things have changed, perhaps I should. It's a good thought. Let me consider it a bit more."

"What about everything else, Severus? Are you going to take Lucius and Narcissa up on their idea to move you to another property?"

"Trying to get rid of me already?" Severus teased. I blushed.

"Of course not, Severus." I grabbed his hand. "I know you are teasing, but please don't think that. We could still see each other regardless of where you choose to live."

"And I wouldn't have to sneak back into the Manor in the morning," he said as he winked at me.

"I didn't think of that," I replied. "Though really, I'm not sure what the media could do to you here. The only people who have access to the grounds outside the family right now are the Aurors, Minister Shacklebolt, me, and a handful of hospital employees. Though, once the plea deals are signed, some of that will change."

"Narcissa was right, Elizabeth. There's no need for me to leave. This is the best place for me as long as the Malfoys don't feel I'm intruding. With our work with the hospital, Draco's training, you," he looked down sheepishly, "everything that I need is right here on the grounds." I felt my cheeks go warm again.

"And there's another thing, Severus, which you might not have thought about. Lucius is going to be experiencing a tough transition soon as well. Having a friend here that understands and can help him discreetly might be good for him as well."

Orby popped in. "Miss Elizabeth and Professor Snape, breakfast is ready. Would you like to eat in the kitchen, or should I bring trays to you?"

"We'll come to the kitchen." I smiled at Orby. "Thank you."

We went into the kitchen and enjoyed the breakfast Orby had prepared. Orby had left a vial of Invigoration Draught next to Severus' juice. He winked at me and asked if I was trying to tell him something, which earned him another blush from me. We finished breakfast, planning the day together and talking. It was surprisingly natural sharing my breakfast table with him.

He had decided that he would offer the Lovegoods an interview. He wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. I offered to send owls to Minister Shacklebolt and Harry to have the meeting arranged.

The antivenin was due to be finished the following morning, which was a Saturday. Severus would take the potion and rest to make sure he responded well. Sunday, I was due to spend the day at Molly's home. Harry and Luna would both be there as well. Since a good portion of the Weasley family already knew of Severus' survival, we decided that it would be a good first outing for Severus, assuming Molly and Arthur were agreeable. That would save Miss Lovegood from having to visit the Manor if she was uncomfortable.

Today would be spent on therapy and research, much like the plan was for yesterday.

As Severus was about to leave, my Floo burned green.

Narcissa's face appeared in the flames. "Elizabeth, I am sorry to trouble you so early, but Lucius went to speak to Severus this morning, and he was absent. Did he say anything to you last night about planning to get out and about early this morning? He was so upset last night. We are concerned for him."

Severus stepped forward. "Narcissa, I am quite well this morning. Elizabeth and I were just having breakfast, and I will be returning to the Manor shortly. If it is convenient for Lord Malfoy, I will meet him in his study in one hour."

Narcissa flushed. "Thank you Severus. I will let Lucius know. I am sorry to disturb you both." Once the call was broken, the two of us looked at each other and burst into

gales of laughter.

"We should have thought of that," I said between giggles. "They may have been genuinely worried."

"I doubt it. Well, Narcissa may have been, but odds are good Lucius knows exactly where I am. These old magical estates are keyed to the magic of their master. Very little happens without the knowledge of the current Lord Malfoy." I paled. Severus chuckled. "What I mean, Elizabeth, is that I'm sure he knew when you Apparated us here."

"So how will that work when Lucius has his magic bound?"

"It will probably be transferred to Draco for the duration of Lucius' punishment. If there were no heir, it might go to Narcissa, but since she's not a Malfoy by blood, I do not honestly know."

He stepped forward and kissed me. "I should go. I will see you this afternoon in the library."

"Have a good day, Severus," I hugged him and opened the door for him. He walked up the path towards the main house. I closed the door and went to shower and prepare for the day.

An hour later, I was ready to go and had sent owls to Harry, Molly, and Minister Shacklebolt.

I flooded to the hospital wing and checked in with the Mediwizard on duty. Edward's wound had opened up during the night, and both he and the Mediwizard had gotten a good view of the event. I gathered vials and showed Edward how to remove the memory and save it for examination later. The Mediwizard had already prepared his vial for examination.

Next, I visited Lavender. I was pleased to see that Narcissa had already sent up a few books with some cosmetology charms that Lavender had been reading through diligently. They were scheduled to have tea this afternoon. I was even more pleased to see that she had requested a sketchbook much like Dean's, and she had been drawing the day before.

"What is this Lavender?"

"Oh," she smiled. "I was playing around with some dress designs yesterday. Nothing too exciting, but it passes the time."

"That's wonderful, Lavender. Perhaps you could show them to Lady Malfoy."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly. She's so refined; my work would seem common and childish."

"Well, Lavender, do whatever feels best. I brought this for you. St. Mungo's sent it out yesterday. It is a special healing paste that they have been using for some patients there. They thought it might help. It was developed by Muggles for dog bites, but the Potions masters at St. Mungo's added some magical ingredients to amp it up a bit. Use it on just your legs first. And start with a small area today. If you don't have a reaction, you can start applying it to your legs in a couple days, and we'll see if it helps."

She smiled. "Thank you for everything Healer Prewett."

The rest of rounds went smoothly. The therapy sessions were tough as expected, but all three of my patients showed a fierce determination. As I was finishing up with Jessica, Boppy popped in.

"Lord Malfoy would like to meet with you in his study, Healer Prewett. And Auror Robards is waiting for you in the lounge."

"Thank you, Boppy. Tell Lord Malfoy that I will be there in just a few minutes. Please take Miss Wood back to her room. I shall go speak with Auror Robards."

Auror Robards rose as I entered the lounge. "I understand that you are gathering information about the attacks to help with your treatment plans," he said. "Here are the reports we've collected on the incidents regarding your patients. I had to scrub a couple of them, because they are still pending investigations. But most of them were hexed by Death Eaters that fell during the battle. Miss Wood's attacker is still at large, as is Mr. Thomas'."

"Well, for my purposes, both of those patients have injuries that I can treat without further information. This should be quite helpful for the others. Is it acceptable that I share this information with Lord Malfoy and my other colleague?"

Auror Robards smiled. "Yes, ma'am. The confidential information was removed. Don't share this with the press or the public at large, but with the residents here, it is acceptable to share the information. Now, if you will excuse me, if you have no other questions, I need to return to my post."

"Thank you, Auror Robards. I am due to meet with Lord Malfoy." I stepped into my office and placed the report on my desk.

"His study is on my way; shall I walk you there?"

"That would be nice, thank you." We walked down the halls of Malfoy Manor to Lucius' study. Auror Robards nodded and departed without a word.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Lucius said silkily, standing as I entered. He looked like a cat preparing to pounce.

"Auror Robards was kind enough to walk me from the hospital wing on his way back to his post."

"Indeed. It seems you are just the belle of the ball, Healer Prewett."

Lucius' tone shocked me. "You wished to see me, Lord Malfoy?"

"You have not contacted me about the contract I sent you to serve as Draco's tutor? Did you have any questions or concerns?"

"Nothing major. I completed my review of it yesterday morning. I apologize for not returning it to you. After your news of yesterday afternoon, the day slipped away from me."

"And the night too, it seems." Lucius smiled, but it was not a pleasant smile.

"I shall have it sent to you this afternoon, Lord Malfoy, if that is satisfactory." I stood and started to go. "Now, if there is nothing else, I shall excuse myself."

"Oh, but Healer Prewett, there is something else."

"Yes, sir?" I hoped that my tone did not reveal the nervousness that I felt.

"I understand that you and Severus have begun a personal relationship. I trust you remember our conversation the other day about toying with his emotions."

"Lucius, cut the intimidation tactics. Severus and I are both adults. Whether or not we choose to spend time together privately is not your business."

"Oh, but it is. If someone is using my dear friend, it is my business."

"Lucius, I don't know what you are talking about. Severus and I have similar interests and share a mutual attraction. End of story."

"And the fact that he's the sole heir to an estate that can only be rivaled by four or five other families in Wizarding England has nothing to do with your 'mutual attraction'. You expect me to believe that the idea of becoming Lady Prince has no bearing on your esteem for Severus." He sneered at my words.

"No, in fact, I have very little knowledge of Severus' family. The limited information I have, I only learned last night."

"The night you chose to take him to your bed? What a coincidence."

"Lord Malfoy, I will be leaving now. I won't stand here and let you call me a whore."

"Such language is not necessary, Elizabeth. Just watch yourself, my dear; you do not want me as an enemy."

"Lucius, I don't want anyone as an enemy. But don't flatter yourself into thinking you have any power over me. Good day, sir." I stood up and started to leave the room. He blocked my exit.

"You may have him fooled for now, Miss Prewett," Lucius spat my name at me. "But I am not fooled. Whatever you are playing at, you will regret it."

I drew my wand. "Lucius, move now."

"You don't have the nerve."

"I don't have the nerve to do what, Lucius? I may not believe in violence, Lucius, but I will protect myself, and my wand is not being tracked. You better hope that I choose to Stun you if I feel threatened. A well placed message to the Aurors would do a lot more damage to your tenuous little situation here. Now, let me pass."

Lucius stepped back and gave a bow, obviously mocking me. I didn't care. I needed to get the hell out of there. I rushed down the hallway, nearly running over Draco as I rounded the corner approaching the hospital.

"Elizabeth! What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Draco, please, don't start."

"Elizabeth, I don't believe you. Something has happened. Has someone hurt you?" He looked alarmed.

I looked up at Draco, trying to hide my panic. "Draco, I'll be fine. I just had an uncomfortable conversation."

"You had an unpleasant conversation with whom? I know it wasn't Severus, because I was just with him in the lab. Oh, Merlin, what did Father do?"

I pulled Draco into my office and closed the door. "It seems he doubts my intentions with regards to Severus."

"Father can be an old fool sometimes. What on earth does he think you are after?"

"The Prince fortune," I huffed, rolling my eyes.

"I didn't think you even knew about that."

"I didn't, not until your father accused me of prostituting myself in hopes of an advantageous marriage. What year is it, anyway? I mean, Severus told me yesterday that his grandfather was wealthy, but who knows what that means to anyone?"

"And it's pretty obvious that your interest in Severus began before yesterday. Merlin, did Father not see what happened yesterday when he broke down in the parlor? Elizabeth, I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Draco. That means a great deal."

"Try to ignore Father. He's lost much of his influence, and he's trying to exert what power he can in his own home."

"It's not acceptable behavior, Draco."

"I know." He suddenly looked panicked. "You aren't going to leave, are you? I really do need your help preparing for my N.E.W.T.s."

"No. I don't scare that easily." *What a lie. I was terrified.* "I do intend to strike the part of the contract that requires me to live here. If the situation becomes too uncomfortable, we'll have to come up with another place to tutor you. I'm sure Minerva would let us work in an unused classroom at Hogwarts."

"What about the hospital?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Draco. I'm not leaving over this. I just don't want to box myself in."

"That seems reasonable. And if Father doesn't consent to the revised contract, I can send you one. I have access to enough of the family funds now to hire my own tutor."

I smiled. Draco's support did mean a lot to me. "I shall see you in a couple of hours. I would prefer to work in my office here, rather than in your father's library. Could you have the books we need moved down to the hospital offices?"

"Elizabeth, that isn't going to work," Draco began hesitantly.

"Why?"

"Severus can't come down here."

"You are right, of course." I sighed. "Well, what about the cottage? I'll have Orby enlarge my office there to make it large enough for three people. What about the Pensieve?"

"If you owl Minister Shacklebolt and tell him you need one, I'm sure he'll loan you one from the Ministry. I shall collect the books and let Severus know that we are meeting in the cottage."

"Very well, I shall contact the Ministry. Thank you again. And, Draco, please don't tell Severus. If it needs to be explained to him, it should come from me."

"I understand."

I collected the vials containing the memories and Auror Robards reports, along with the charts I needed. I returned to the cottage feeling a bit deflated. I had owls from Molly and Harry waiting for me. I decided to request the Pensieve from St. Mungo's instead of Minister Shacklebolt. He really didn't need to know anything about the issue with Lucius. As furious as I was with Lucius about his behavior, I didn't want to hurt Draco or Narcissa.

As I ate my lunch, I looked over the letters from Molly and Harry. Molly's owl invited me to come out to the house for dinner that night. She wanted to better understand the plan for Sunday. She invited Severus as well, which I found curious. I wasn't sure how he would feel about that. She was quick to point out that it would only be her and

Arthur for dinner tonight. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were going into London on a date. Charlie was staying in London with George, helping him with the shop for a few weeks. Percy was back at his flat in London as well, and Bill and Fleur were back at Shell Cottage.

I Floo called her and told her that I would attend, but I did not know about Severus yet.

"Elizabeth, dear. Harry informed us that you and Severus have formed a friendship. We think it's lovely. He could certainly use a friend from the sound of it."

"I shall invite him Molly, but you know him."

"Well, if he's coming on Sunday when everyone is here, dear, he's going to have to face us soon enough."

"True, Molly. Like I said, I shall invite him."

Harry's owl confirmed that he had spoken to Luna; she would be there on Sunday. He expressed his surprise that Severus was willing to come to the Weasley home when everyone was there.

I spent the next hour looking over the contract again. I revised the residence section, stating that I would live on the grounds if mutually agreeable to both parties, but that could be revised by either party at any time. I signed my version of the contract, closed it, and placed it in the drawer.

I then called Orby, and we enlarged my office. A second desk was added, along with a small table and chairs.

Severus arrived shortly after I finished. He announced that Draco was collecting the books and would Floo in a few minutes. I smiled, and he kissed me hello, but then he became serious.

"What are we doing at the cottage, Elizabeth? Why did you change from the library?"

I groaned, "Severus Snape, you are too smart for your own good."

"Elizabeth, do not try and ply me with flattery. What is going on?"

"Lucius and I had a bit of a run in this morning. I decided to stay out of his way for the time being."

"What happened?"

"He does not seem to believe my intentions with you are sincere."

"Explain." His body tensed.

"He basically accused me of prostituting myself to get at your fortune."

He groaned. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. That was completely out of line." He wrapped his arms around me. "Elizabeth," he said gently, "I believe your intentions are sincere."

"I know; I just haven't ever been accused of being a gold-digger before."

"If he does it again, tell him if you were really after money, you would have gone after Draco." He was obviously trying to break the tension. I laughed.

"Now why didn't I think of that? Can you imagine his face if I'd said that?"

"Well, I think Lucius might have ended up in Azkaban had you challenged him like that, so it's better that you didn't," we both laughed again, "Seriously, though, are you okay?"

"Yes. It was just a rude comment, and I'm a big girl. But you know he scares me a little bit, and he's obviously trying to intimidate me."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "He does not intimidate me. And if he ever even comes close to threatening you again, we're both leaving. You got that?"

"Severus, he's your oldest friend."

"Oldest friend or not, that's no way to treat a houseguest. I won't have him treat someone I care about like that."

The Floo glowed green, and Draco stepped through. I turned my back and stepped into the kitchen to compose myself. Severus seemed to understand and distracted Draco with the books. A few moments later, the Floo glowed green again, and a St. Mungo's messenger stepped through with the Pensieve. Draco signed for the delivery and helped Severus set it up. I pulled the vials with the memories in them from my robes and handed them to Severus. As Severus poured the first into the basin, I opened Robards' notes and began reading.

Severus dove into the Pensieve. I read through the notes on Edward, not seeing anything I thought we could use, but marking a few things for Severus to review. On the other patients, there were some names of the assailants, so I thought those notes might be more valuable.

Draco had picked up one of the reference books and was cross referencing it with one of the patient's charts. He seemed to be deep in thought, so I didn't disturb him.

When Severus emerged from the Pensieve, he took a moment to collect himself. "I recognize the curse. But it's very complicated to reverse. It will be more difficult than I originally thought. I don't think it's a good idea for you to try this one Elizabeth. It will take someone highly skilled in the Dark Arts or possibly a curse breaker. I could probably do it, but I'd need backup."

"I could probably get Bill to assist you," I offered. "Are you willing to do this?"

"Yes. I'd prefer we wait until after Monday. I'll need to be at full strength."

"That seems reasonable. We'll probably have to talk to the patients about you pretty soon anyway."

"It will require two potions, both fairly simple. Draco can brew them in advance. You and Draco can observe, as it might be good for you both professionally to know how this is done, even if you don't ever undergo the training to do it yourself."

"Should we just talk to Bill on Sunday together?"

"Yes. I need to explain to him what this entails before he commits. It isn't easy."

"Oh, that reminds me. Molly invited us both to dinner this evening. I think she and Arthur want to see you before Sunday."

"Me, or us?" He looked cautious.

"Severus, we can handle that however you wish. I'm not going to lie to my sister, but we can downplay 'us' as much as you want to. I get that this is weird for you."

Draco cleared his throat and said, "I'm in the room here, you two."

"Draco, you're an adult now, act like it," Severus barked.

"Just don't act sentimental in front of me, Professor. I might die of shock."

"Don't tempt me, Draco. Elizabeth, I can go with you to dinner. It's probably best that I don't have dinner with Lucius tonight." Draco and I both stiffened at the threat in Severus' voice.

"Thank you." I scribbled a note to Molly, and Orby took it to the owlery.

"Draco, what are you reading?"

"I'm hoping that this might help Rosalyn. May I see Robards' report for her?" I handed it over to him.

"There's pretty good information in there for her," I pointed out. "There's even a name, Augustus Rockwood."

Severus bristled visibly. "What are her symptoms?"

"Paralysis of the arm," Draco offered. "I'm looking at the more complex freezing charms right now."

"That's probably a good path. Was it her wand arm?"

"No, it's her left."

"It sounds like he missed. Did the diagnostic charms reveal any nerve damage?"

"No, she can feel it when someone touches her arm; she just can't move it."

"That's what a freezing charm would do, if applied to the muscles, not the skin and not the nerves. And the muscles are intact; they are simply stuck, loosely speaking."

"Do you think a counter-curse is possible?"

"It's possible, but I'm not sure anyone would know it, except another Death Eater, and I'm not familiar with this one."

"Severus, I can hear your hesitation. What aren't you saying?"

"Lucius would know. He and Rockwood were always experimenting. Nothing either of you want to know about, I assure you, but if Rockwood created it, Lucius probably understands it." Draco looked like he was going to be sick.

"So, Draco may need to take point on this one," I sighed.

"Elizabeth, are you okay with that?" Draco looked concerned.

"You and Severus will have to get the information. If he resists, I'll get Minister Shacklebolt to apply some pressure. I'm sure that the terms of Lucius' probation say something about 'cooperating with authorities when requested'. After we know what we are dealing with, then we can decide on my level of involvement."

"I don't want you pushed to the side." Draco looked sympathetic.

"This isn't about me. It's about helping that girl."

Severus reached over and patted my shoulder. "Keep digging, Draco, the more you know going into these conversations with your father, the better." Draco nodded at Severus' words.

The three of us kept working for the next two hours. Severus was coming up blank on Miss Davies, so I decided to talk to St. Mungo's about the Muggle options there. We felt that Legilimens was our best option for Professor Sinistra, but we needed to wait until Severus was stronger. He had some ideas of some Potions modifications that might help Lavender, so he and Draco were going to experiment with that next week also.

All in all, it was a fairly productive afternoon. Draco and Severus left at 5:30. Severus let me know that he would Floo back at 6:15, and we would head to Molly and Arthur's. Draco ducked outside as Severus gave me a quick hug and a kiss before leaving.

When we stepped out of the Floo, the Burrow was quieter than usual. Severus was dressed casually again, wearing a dark green shirt and black pants. I was in a dark gray wrap dress. Arthur entered the room. He greeted us with a warm smile and crossed the room to give me a hug. He shook Severus' hand, and then turned to the both of us.

"I'm glad you both could make it tonight. We thought it would be easier to talk with just Molly and me here. Severus, Lizzie, we will try not to overwhelm you with questions, but there is much to discuss."

Severus looked at me sideways at the use of my childhood nickname. His lip twitched into a half-smile.

"I must say, Severus," Arthur continued, "you look quite well. I think it took me much longer after my run-in with that snake to be up and about. You look younger than you have in years."

"Well, Arthur, a significant stressor has been removed from my life," he said wryly, "thanks to Mr. Potter."

"Indeed."

"I am sorry for the loss of your son. And I am sorry for my role in any of your family's pain."

Arthur's kind eyes turned thoughtful and sad. "Thank you for that, Severus. And I am sorry for misunderstanding you. There is much healing remaining."

Severus nodded his acknowledgment.

Molly entered the room. "Lizzie, Severus, I'm so glad you could make it." I smiled sadly. Molly's greeting was warm and kind, but it lacked her usual liveliness.

"Thank you for inviting us," Severus said politely. "I am sorry for your loss, Molly."

"Thank you." She nodded, blinking back tears. She took a moment and collected herself. "You look healthy, Severus. Lizzie, you've done a good job healing him up. Now, I just have to feed him." Molly turned and headed back to her kitchen. I smiled, Arthur chuckled, and Severus looked mildly worried.

"Well, Severus, clearly all is forgiven if she's worrying about getting you properly fed," Arthur said with amusement.

"Indeed," Severus said. You could tell he found Molly's mothering foreign.

"I'm going to see if Molly needs any help," I said to Severus.

"Certainly," he said. "I'll be fine." To my surprise, he leaned over and kissed my cheek. I returned the gesture and headed to the kitchen. Arthur's face betrayed no reaction. His usual expression of kind indifference remained in place.

As I reached the kitchen, Molly was bustling as usual. "Molly, is there anything I can do to help you?"

Molly turned and smiled. "Could you help with the salad?" I crossed over to the kitchen and began working. Molly picked up her wand and cast a spell I did not recognize.

"Okay, Lizzie, what is going on with you and Severus? Now, don't look at me like that, I know you're a grown woman; I'm not going to lecture you; I just want to know what to expect here."

"Severus and I have been thrown together these last few weeks. Our relationship is very new and we don't know where it is headed, but we have grown close. And yes, this is a romantic attachment."

Molly looked like she had been hit by a Confundus charm. "Lizzie Prewett!" she whispered urgently. "Are you telling me you are in love with Severus Snape?"

"Molly! I'm telling you no such thing," I whispered back, shocked that she would jump so far ahead. "It's far too early for such talk. I care for him, but it's too soon to know exactly what that means. I simply didn't want you to be shocked if you saw evidence that our friendship has a romantic element to it."

"Severus showing affection would shock anyone," Molly breathed. "Lizzie, he's just so distant. Are you sure this is something you want to pursue?"

"Molly, I think he may be different than he was before the attack. With me, he's been fairly open and quite warm, at least warm enough for me. You know I'm more reserved with my emotions than you are."

"That is true. And he is a good man, deep down. Well, good luck to you, dear. You both deserve some happiness in your lives. I must say I thought Harry must have been imagining things when he reported to us at dinner last night that you seemed affectionate." Molly was saying the right things, but there was something questioning in her face. I had a feeling this wasn't over.

"Yesterday was trying for Severus. He needed my support." Molly raised her eyebrow at the cryptic response. I sighed, "Molly, you know how private he is. The story of his survival breaking will create a sensation. He's worried. It got to him yesterday. He broke down in front of the Malfoys and Harry. Narcissa had the good sense to clear everyone out of there and let me talk to him without a crowd. Apparently, there's some piranha of a reporter that everyone is afraid will drag him through the mud."

"Skeeter," Molly hissed and stabbed the roast.

I nodded. "That's why he's giving an interview with this Miss Lovegood and her father. I understand they publish another paper."

"Luna and her father are neighbors of ours. She is a classmate of Ginny's."

I gulped. "She's seventeen?"

"Yes." Molly didn't seem to understand my shock at the girl's age. "They are quirky people, but they are also honest and fair. And during the war, The Quibbler became the only independent paper. Xenophilius was forced to stop reporting when Luna was abducted." I gasped at Molly's words, but she continued, "Luna was rescued by Ron and Harry, along with Dean Thomas, a wandmaker, and an elf."

"She was held at Malfoy Manor as a prisoner."

"Yes, and she was badly treated. Not by the Malfoys themselves, according to her, but the other Death Eaters were less restrained. Ollivander nearly died."

"Miss Lovegood's experience at the Manor is the reason that Severus and Harry thought that holding the interview here would be better. I didn't understand the details, but it makes sense now."

"That does seem reasonable."

Molly and I had finished setting the table. She motioned for me to go get Arthur and Severus. When I walked into the kitchen to retrieve them, both men gave me warm smiles and followed me into the kitchen.

We all sat down and started passing around the dishes. "Molly, this looks lovely," I commented.

"As always," Arthur looked at his wife.

"Thank you for the invitation, it smells delightful." Severus nodded to Molly politely.

"It's probably a little different than the elf-prepared meals at the Manor," Molly's tone was sheepish and a tad defensive.

"I assure you, it is a welcome change of pace."

Molly beamed. I smiled. Severus seemed to know a thing or two about flattery after all.

Arthur took the opportunity to get down to business. "Lizzie, Severus, if you don't mind sharing with us, what exactly happened in the shack during the battle? At first we heard from Ron that you had died, and then Harry told the story of how you'd been with the Order all along, and the next thing I know, Kingsley is pulling us aside, telling us that Severus is alive and Lizzie is going to Malfoy Manor to treat him and some others. It was all rather confusing, to be honest."

I retold the story of how I had followed Ron to the shack and witnessed the attack on Severus. I recounted those horrifying hours trying to revive him. Severus explained that he'd been carrying the potion for weeks, and he told them how I had entered his mind and learned of the antivenin. I explained how Minister Shacklebolt and Professor McGonagall had come up with the idea to use Malfoy Manor as the hospital for some of the cases that needed to be kept out of the limelight.

"So that's why Kingsley came and got you that day." Arthur nodded his understanding.

"Yes. I've been working with both St. Mungo's and Hogwarts to get the other patients transferred to the Manor. They only arrived a few days ago."

"Severus, you seem to be doing remarkably well, considering the severity of the attack."

"Well, Elizabeth is very good at what she does. The next dose of the antivenin should be ready in the morning. Hopefully that will restore my energy levels and eliminate my need for the other potions I've been taking. If all goes as planned, I should be back to full health in another two weeks. The scarring is permanent, but it's a small price to pay for finally being free." He looked at me and squeezed my hand under the table. Arthur smiled. Molly still looked hesitant.

Arthur ventured to ask, "Do you know what you plan to do after this is all behind you? Will you go back to Hogwarts and teach?"

"Definitely not. Teaching wasn't my strong suit, at least not at that age level. The apprenticeship with Draco is something different. Depending on how that goes, I might consider teaching on a one on one basis like that in the future. Also, in the years between the wars, I completed some research and development of new potions, and I found that gratifying. I have a few patents and potions that I've sold to companies over the years. We'll see how this endeavor goes with the hospital. Consulting on difficult

cases or doing some of their more complex brewing might be something I'd be interested in dabbling in also."

Molly stepped in. "What about you, Lizzie? Are you staying in England?" I looked at Molly, surprise evident on my face.

"For the time being, I'll be working with the hospital and tutoring Draco. As the patients are released, I may pick up some shifts at St. Mungo's. I have a couple interesting offers for when Draco is finished with his exams. There are all within the U.K., but they are spread out in terms of location and field of practice.

"What about family, Severus?"

Severus choked on his dinner. "Molly!" Arthur and I exclaimed simultaneously. *What was she doing?* I reached over and patted Severus on the back. He took a drink of water and composed himself.

"Honestly, Molly, I haven't given it much thought. I didn't really expect to survive this war, and I've been a bit distracted with trying to heal for the past few weeks." The level of sarcasm in his voice escalated with each word.

Molly was not satisfied with this answer. "Well, Severus, if you two are embarking on a relationship, you need to be on the same page long term."

"Molly," I breathed dangerously, "this is a private conversation that Severus and I will have when it is appropriate for us to do so. Please cease with your meddling."

"Well, Lizzie, you aren't getting any younger."

Severus' eyes narrowed. I was growing agitated as well.

"Molly, stop, that will be enough." Arthur looked at his wife sternly. His words calmed both Severus and me. Arthur didn't step in often, but when he did it was usually effective.

"I'm sorry, Lizzie, Severus. I'm just worried about you, both of you. Frankly, you have just been thrown together and this is all just so fast."

"What happened to, 'we think it's lovely'?"

"A friendship is lovely, but a romantic attachment is a lot more complex."

Severus cut in. His voice was firm, but not harsh. "Molly, we both appreciate the complexity of the situation. Your concern is understood, but we are both adults. This relationship is based on mutual respect. Elizabeth's well-being is paramount to me, and I know the feeling is mutual. Neither of us is going to do anything to hurt the other."

Arthur smiled. "Thank you Severus. I'm afraid Molly is a bit overprotective of her babies."

Severus' answer seemed to have finally satisfied Molly. "Just be careful, both of you."

Arthur cut in, trying to change the subject. "How are the other patients doing?"

I smiled, relieved for the new topic. "Reasonably well, or at least I hope so. I can't talk about the details, but we are using a blend of Muggle techniques, help from St. Mungo's experts, along with some assistance from Severus and Lucius, given their history with some of the assailants."

"Is it true that Draco is your assistant?"

"He is my trainee, so yes; he is helping, as is Severus."

"How is that working?"

"Draco is a bright boy. He is eager to learn. But anyway, how are your children?"

"Well, Bill is back with Gringotts, and Fleur is working at the Ministry for now. Charlie, Ron and Ginny are helping George with the shop for now. Charlie is heading back to Romania in a month. Ron is going to start Auror training soon, and Ginny will head back to Hogwarts when it reopens."

"It sounds like everyone is moving forward as well as possible."

"Yes," Arthur said solemnly, "that's what Fred would have wanted."

"Where is Teddy Lupin?"

"Teddy is with his grandmother, Andromeda Tonks."

Severus cut in, "How is she?" I looked over at Severus. "Andromeda was a seventh year at Hogwarts when I was a first year. She was very kind to me."

"Andromeda is doing as well as can be expected. She is struggling with the loss of her daughter so soon after losing Ted. I think the baby is helping her cope."

"Does she have other family?" I inquired.

"Actually, she is Narcissa's older sister," Arthur stated simply.

"They have not spoken since her marriage," Molly sniped. "Ted was not acceptable."

Severus stepped in, mildly annoyed. "What happened with her family was very unfortunate. I know Narcissa regrets it, though she doesn't speak of it. Their parents were fanatics, and Bellatrix obviously was completely insane. Narcissa did what was expected of her, but Andi had to go her own way." He smiled sadly. "Ted was good to her; I'm just sorry she's alone now."

"I wonder if Narcissa has ever considered contacting her now," I mused.

"I don't know," Severus said. "It might still cause issues with Lucius." I rolled my eyes.

Severus patted my leg gently under the table. "I know. I know." Arthur and Molly look puzzled.

"I'm fond of Narcissa, Molly. I hate to see her miss out on knowing her sister because of her husband's views. If she doesn't wish to reconcile, or if Andromeda doesn't, that's one thing, but it should be their choice."

Arthur chuckled, "You always were the independent one, Lizzie. The nickname suits you."

Severus looked confused. I laughed. "Mother is an Austen nut. Father started calling me Lizzie when I was about five."

"Lizzie, as in Lizzie Bennet?" He laughed. "I'd say that fits pretty well." I blushed.

We had just about finished dinner by that time. It was decided that we would come out to the Burrow mid-afternoon; Severus would meet with the Lovegoods before the

rest of the clan descended for dinner. Percy, Charlie and George still needed to be informed about Severus' survival. Arthur said he would Floo to their homes on Sunday morning and talk to them then. He didn't want to increase the chance of a leak before the story broke. At the same time, he also didn't want them to walk into the living room to that kind of a shock. Harry had already informed Ron and Ginny, and Arthur had told Bill.

We talked a few more minutes about the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix meetings since the battle. Then we said our goodbyes; Severus and I took the Floo back to the cottage. I walked out of the Floo and sat down on the couch and groaned.

"Oh, now, Elizabeth, it wasn't all that bad. We survived, didn't we?" He sat down next to me and started gently rubbing my shoulder.

I turned to face him. "Yes, and thank you for helping me keep my cool."

"She means well, Elizabeth. This is just a big change for them. For years, I've been the stony professor, overly tough on her children. Then, a year ago, I became a traitor in their eyes. To find out that was all an act, it's a major shift in thinking. My job for years has been to deceive people. It makes them hesitant to trust me."

"I suppose that's especially true for people who see things as absolutes, which has always been Molly's way."

"Yes, that is definitely true. But, let's not dwell on that any longer. I need to go to the lab and check on the potion for tomorrow. If you'd like, you are welcome to come with me, or else I can come back here when I am finished."

"That's fine; you are welcome to stay here with me tonight if you like."

He leaned in and kissed me. What started as a simple goodbye kiss quickly grew heated as our tongues danced together. I climbed onto his lap, never breaking the kiss. He untied my dress and hurriedly pushed it off my shoulders. The kiss broke, and we stared at each other, panting. He ran his hands along my sides, and I relished the feeling of his hands on my bare skin. It wasn't enough contact; I couldn't get close enough. My hands were on his belt, unfastening it as quickly as I could. My bra was disposed of then, and he started rubbing his hands in small circles around my breasts. I finally succeeded in getting his belt and pants open, and I slid down his body until I was on my knees in front of him, and I pushed his legs apart. His eyes grew wide as he realized my intent.

"Is that what you want?" he asked sincerely. I looked up at him, my eyes undoubtedly filled with lust.

"I want to make you lose control, Severus. I want to give you pleasure right now."

He grabbed his wand, and in a moment, we were both naked. I slid my hands and my mouth over him, slowly at first, teasing. He was making the most fantastically wicked noises. I kept the pace slow, but increased the pressure and took him a bit deeper. He threaded his hands through my hair and pulled me further down as I started to speed up. I was watching him through the curtain of hair falling across his lap. His head was thrown back, his eyes closed, his grip tightening in my hair. My hands were running up and down his thighs as I took as much of him as I could in my mouth. He was lifting his hips and pulling me down, and he was practically growling at this point. My body was responding to the feel of him and the noises he was making. His hands clenched in my hair even tighter, and I began to moan with him. When he found his release, I rode it out, sliding my hands up his bare chest. I slid off of him, and he pulled me up his body and pulled me close.

"That was amazing, my dear. Now it is my turn to make you writhe and scream." He laid me on my back, leaned over and kissed me passionately. He was holding my hands, and he slid his fingers up my arms slowly, past my elbows, rubbing tiny circles on my skin as he slid up to my shoulders and together to my neck. His touch ghosted down past my collarbone, and his lips left mine, sliding down my neck as his hands trailed lower. He took a breast in each hand and kneaded gently with his palms, his fingers playing tenderly with my nipples. His lips and tongue played at my neck, making me moan and squirm. He chuckled as one of his hands left my breasts and trailed down my stomach. He looked at me lustfully, bringing his mouth back to my ear.

"It made me crazy today to be so near you and not be able to touch you." I moaned as his hand found its destination. "So soft, so beautiful, you are amazing to touch." He nipped at my earlobe as a long finger found my heated body. "You're so eager, my darling. Do you want more?" I gasped. Another digit worked its way inside. He began to move, and I couldn't help myself; I moved against him. He continued playing with my earlobe, whispering how good my body felt, and asking me if I wanted him to speed up. He rubbed his free hand across one nipple, then the other, as he worked me into an absolute frenzy. I could see that he was growing excited, and I knew he was enjoying this nearly as much as I was.

I couldn't speak. My head was spinning; I could feel my release building. He hit the perfect speed and pressure, finding the spot that made me go crazy. My body shattered under his touch, and I called out his name several times as I rode out the intense pleasure. He moved his hand to my stomach, then to my sides, and finally captured my hands above my head and locked his fingers with mine.

"You're perfect," he whispered. "I'm almost afraid you aren't real."

"I'm not perfect," I protested. "And I am real. And I'm thrilled you are in my life."

His lips found mine again, and soon we were kissing passionately once again. I couldn't even tell you the moment he entered me, as the melding of our bodies and minds was so smooth, it was one fluid motion. We moved together for a long time, neither fast nor slow, just enjoying the feeling and the moment, enjoying the slow build of pleasure. We touched and kissed, alternating between looking into each other's eyes and closing them to just feel one another. Eventually, the heat built, and the pace picked up, until we climaxed again, together this time.

"You're amazing," I whispered to him. We curled up together on the sofa, content in each other's arms for several minutes. I was starting to feel my eyelids growing heavy when he nuzzled against me.

"I really do have to go check on that potion. It should be ready in just a few hours." He kissed me on the forehead and stood up.

"Are you able to come back, or does the potion need your attention?"

"I'd like to come back." He had pulled his boxers on and stepped into his trousers.

"I'd like that, too."

"I'll pick up a few things from my room while I'm at the house."

"Feel free to bring some extras." I smiled shyly.

"I'll do that. I like the sound of that." He finished buttoning his pants, pulled his shirt on, and started buttoning it.

"Tomorrow is Saturday, so I'll check in with the clinic in the morning, but I don't have anything planned."

"I may be a bit run down tomorrow. The potion takes a while to kick in, and I won't be able to take any other potions. Even tonight, with the Invigoration Draught, I've been feeling a bit tired."

"You could have fooled me." I grinned.

"Well, you give me incredible incentive to find the energy, Elizabeth."

"I'm teasing you. We'll have a lazy day tomorrow."

"Sounds divine, I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Severus returned a few minutes later to find me showered, dressed in a nightgown, and reading an owl that had just arrived from Minerva. He paused to squeeze my shoulder and kiss the top of my head before going into the bedroom to deposit his bag.

"Everything okay?" he inquired, nodding toward the parchment in my hands.

"Yes, it's from Minerva. She is curious about your progress, but she didn't know if you would welcome an owl from her directly. She also has provided some information regarding the dates and times of Draco's N.E.W.T.s. I'm not sure she's been notified of his change in legal status. This implies that the testing will happen here at the Manor."

"Well, depending on when they are, that might make sense. Mr. Thomas, Miss Brown and Mr. Boot are also Draco's age. If they wish to take their N.E.W.T.s as well, perhaps they could be tutored here. Not necessarily by you and me, depending on the subject, but it is a possibility. Mr. Thomas missed his seventh year, so he might need more tutoring than the others."

"What about Jessica and Edward?"

"Miss Wood graduated two years ago and Mr. Macmillan graduated last year. I should send Minerva a letter. I never did congratulate her on her position as Headmistress." He stifled a yawn.

"I think I'm ready to turn in, Severus. Was everything good with the potion?"

"Yes, Draco had already performed the last step, so it should be ready by morning. I'm pretty tired myself. I'll be out in a moment." He turned and headed towards the bathroom. I finished reading Minerva's owl and went to get a glass of water.

When I got to the bedroom, Severus had already crawled beneath the covers. I climbed in beside him, snuggling into his side. He leaned over and gave me a quick, chaste kiss, tucking my hair behind my ear as he did so.

I extinguished the lamps and draped my arm across his chest, gently sliding my fingers across his skin. "I could get used to this," I whispered to the dark.

"You had better, my dear. Because I don't have any intent of letting you escape."

A Setback

Chapter 11 of 20

Severus is reminded that he is still healing. Draco faces a new challenge.

I woke the next morning to the sound of Severus stirring next to me. Thinking that he was having a nightmare, I reached over and touched his chest, hoping to gently wake him. His skin was hot to the touch, and he was peppered with sweat. I jolted up as I realized that something was seriously wrong. I grabbed my wand and cast several diagnostic charms. He was running a very high fever, and while he wasn't unconscious, he wasn't lucid either.

"Orby! Orby, I need you!" I leapt to my feet and ran to my bag. There were no potions. I had not refilled since the battle.

Orby popped in. "Miss Elizabeth, how can I help you?" He glanced over at Severus. His ears shot back in alarm. "Miss Elizabeth, what should I do to help Professor Snape?"

"I need potions and another set of hands. Get Draco on the Floo. Tell him Severus is in trouble, and I need his help." I threw the covers off the bed and began casting cooling charms.

"Elizabeth!" Draco's voice rang over the Floo. He sounded as frantic as I felt. I covered myself with my dressing gown and ran into the living room.

"Draco, thank gods. I need a Fever Reducer, the antivenin, Calming Draught, and Blood-Replenishing Potion. He'll be okay, but we need to work quickly. Please hurry."

"I'll be right there. Leave the Floo open."

"Thank you." I dashed back into the bedroom.

Orby was in the bathroom, running water on towels. "Will this help, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Yes. Good thinking. Not too cold. Wrap each leg. That should help pull the fever down."

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth."

"Come on, Severus." I put my hand on his forehead in an attempt to calm him. "I'm here; it's okay. Draco will be here soon with the potions. Hang in there, Severus."

"What else can Orby do?" Orby asked, his eyes wide with fear.

"We may need smelling salts. I'd rather not rouse him with a spell."

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth." Orby popped from the room.

A crash in the other room announced Draco's arrival. "Damn! Elizabeth, where are you?"

"Draco! We're in here."

Draco rushed in, looking disheveled. He was wearing pajama bottoms and an old t-shirt, which was inside out. His normally perfect hair was mussed, and his eyes were bleary. Orby had obviously woken him.

"Here are the potions," he said, handing them to me one at a time. "Fever reducer, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Severus' antivenin, and Calming Draught. What is that for anyway?"

"Me," I said, uncorking the bottle and swallowing a healthy dose. "I'll be useless if I don't get my nerves under control."

Draco nodded and gave me a little smile of understanding. "What do we do?"

I took a deep breath and collected myself. "Help me sit him up. We need to give him the fever reducer first. The cooling charms and the towels have kept the fever from spiking any further, but they aren't bringing it down." I sighed and whispered, "Damn it, Severus, why didn't you tell me you were feeling badly last night?"

Draco laughed. "I have an idea why not."

"Draco, now is not the time."

"Sorry," he said, but the look on his face told me he wasn't sorry at all. "He's going to be okay, Elizabeth. You've gotten him through much worse."

We each took Severus under an arm and pulled him into a sitting position. Orby popped into the room with the smelling salts. I motioned to Draco to get the fever reducer, and I sat on the bed next to Severus. Placing one hand behind his head, I waved the smelling salts under his nose. He jolted awake, my hand behind him kept him from hitting his head.

"What? Elizabeth," he groaned, "I feel terrible."

"Shh ... it's going to be okay." I took the fever reducer from Draco. "Drink this, honey. We need to get your fever down."

Severus complied, swallowing the potion slowly.

"Draco, he needs the Blood-Replenisher next."

Draco handed me the next vial. Severus swallowed it dutifully.

"Now, what do we do?" Draco asked.

"Now, we wait until the fever goes down. Hopefully, it will work within the hour. After that, we'll give him the antivenin. Severus, you may lie back down and rest if you prefer."

He looked at me. "Stay with me, please." He patted the mattress beside him. I nodded, and then I turned to Draco.

Draco grinned mischievously. "Okay, I do not need to see this. If you don't need me right now, I'm going to go back to the house. Mother would kill me if she knew I was here looking like this."

"Probably, although your father would probably kill me first if he saw you near me dressed like that."

Draco chuckled. "I'll be back in less than an hour. I'll go get cleaned up and get some breakfast."

"Thank you, Draco. This would have been much more difficult without the help."

Severus waved weakly to Draco. "Thank you."

"It is my honor, sir. Elizabeth, if you need me, send an elf for me. Otherwise, I will be back in an hour." Draco left the room, and a moment later, I heard the Floo activate.

I crawled into bed with Severus. I took his hands in mine. "You, my dear, frightened me."

"I'm sorry. I heard you swearing at me." He smiled weakly.

"You'll feel better after we get the antivenin in you, but I want to get your fever down first. Are you hungry at all?"

He nodded.

Orby stuck his head in the doorway. "What can I get for you?"

"How about some juice and toast?" I asked Severus. When Severus nodded, I turned to speak to Orby. "I'd like the same, please, Orby."

Orby smiled and nodded; he turned and went to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry I gave you such a scare. I honestly felt fine until right before we retired for the night. I felt ill, but figured I just overexerted myself," he said with an impish grin, and then his face turned serious. "I didn't have any idea it was serious." He looked into my eyes. "I don't want to cause you any pain; though this probably won't be the last time my stubbornness causes a problem."

"I think your body reacted badly to the Invigoration Draught. Combined with the other potions and a system that was already overtaxed, it was probably just too much. You'll be okay. But, you let me know if you feel badly in the future, especially while you are still healing."

He nodded and pulled me to him in a hug. A tray with two glasses of juice and several slices of toast appeared on the table beside Severus.

I reached across him and handed him the juice. "If you can, you should drink this."

He sat up and began sipping the juice and nibbling on the toast.

After about a half hour, I checked his temperature again. "That's much better. It's not normal yet, but the potions are working."

"I'd like to shower and dress before Draco gets back," he stated, but I could tell it was as much a question as anything.

"That should be fine. I'll be in the living room. Call me if you need me."

He grabbed his bag and closed the bathroom door behind him. I got up, laid out my clothes for the day, made the bed, and then went into the living room.

Orby was in the kitchen tidying. "How is Mr. Potions Master?"

"He's much better, Orby. Thank you for your help."

"Orby will always help Miss Elizabeth and her friends." I gave him a warm smile. How anyone could think this elf useless was beyond me.

I sat down and replied to Minerva's owl. As I was finishing, Severus walked out of the bedroom, fully dressed, but with his hair still wet. He still looked worn out, but from looking at him, you would not have known he was suffering from a dangerous fever less than an hour ago.

"I'm going to shower and dress now," I said, kissing him as I passed him on the way to the bathroom. "You look much better, Severus."

"Trust me, I feel better."

While getting ready, I reflected on the morning. I'd learned a few things. Draco was going to make a good Healer, as he could keep his cool in an emergency. Severus was too damn stoic for his own good. And finally, I was dangerously close to falling for him, if I wasn't already gone.

I was dressed and braiding my hair when Draco returned. He asked Severus how he was, but he barely responded to Severus' answer. He went to start reading the materials on the patients, but he was slamming things around. It was clear something was going on.

"Draco, is something the matter?"

"I'm not sure I want to talk about it. There's nothing either of you can do about it. This is just my life."

"Well, Draco," Severus began, "as your Potions master, your life impacts mine. Assuming it isn't a personal matter."

"Oh, it's personal. Don't worry, not THAT kind of personal, but I don't know how you get more invasive than forcing your son to marry at eighteen."

"What?" Severus and I shouted at the same time.

"Father cornered me just a moment ago. He and Mr. Parkinson have been 'talking'. Apparently, there have been back room deals in place since before Pansy and I entered Hogwarts." He shivered.

"An arranged marriage?" I knew this wasn't unheard of among pureblood circles, and Lucius had hinted about Draco producing an heir, but at eighteen?

Draco threw a piece of paper down in front of Severus. "Read it," he fumed.

Severus scanned the paper. I looked from Draco to Severus, bewildered. I was definitely out of my element here.

After a few moments, Severus looked up. "Okay, this isn't as bad as I feared. This is not a marriage contract or a betrothal. It's a courtship agreement. According to this, if you sign this, you and Pansy will begin a six month courtship, with the intent of becoming engaged at the end of the six month period, to be married a year after that.

"But, but, Pansy?"

"I thought you and Miss Parkinson were an item."

"Years ago, but I ended it when things got crazy. I blamed the war, but that was just an excuse."

"May I ask what your objection to Miss Parkinson is?" I ventured in carefully.

Draco snorted, "Clearly you have not met her. I'd sooner marry Lovegood and all her craziness."

"Draco," Severus warned. "Miss Lovegood has done nothing to you."

"I know, and I'm sorry, it's just the first name that popped into my head. It's probably because of all the talk while she was here. Replace it with any name. Granger, the Weaselette, one of the Patil sisters, anyone else would be better."

I chuckled. "Is Miss Parkinson that bad?" I asked Severus.

Severus shrugged, but his eyes showed that he shared Draco's opinion of Miss Parkinson.

I continued, "I don't think the girl is the big issue here. This seems poor timing. You're just starting an apprenticeship and your N.E.W.T.'s are coming up. You've got your duties at the hospital. How would you have time to properly court the girl?"

Severus' eyes lit up. "I shall be right back." He stood up without another word and stepped through the Floo.

"What is he up to, you think?" Draco asked.

"I have no idea, Draco. But you'll think of something. What does your mother think of all this?"

"Mother just wants me to marry a proper young lady. I'm sure there are many other names that would make her happy."

"What about Lucius? Is it this contract he wants, or does he just want to see you settled?"

"Who knows with Father? He's probably just trying to make sure I don't strike off on my own and make an unpleasant match."

"Which means?"

"He would disapprove of a non-pureblood, a non-society family, or a non-Slytherin."

"Well, I don't have a little sister, and it sounds like Ginny is taken."

Draco laughed.

The Floo activated, and Severus stepped back through. He was carrying a stack of parchment. "Well, Draco, I'm sorry to tell you, but you have to decline this agreement. Under the terms of your Apprenticeship contract with me, you are not to enter into any marital contracts for the duration of your apprenticeship. Given that could take two to three years; it seems imprudent at this time to enter into a Courtship Agreement. Miss Parkinson undoubtedly does not want to wait three years to know if you are going to be a fully accredited Potions master, nor would she want to wait that long to proceed with an engagement. It hardly seems fair to Pansy."

Draco's face visibly brightened. "Is that seriously in the contract?"

"It's right there in Paragraph 27, Subsection 14. If mutually agreeable, you and I could write an addendum modifying this paragraph, but I think it imprudent to modify the contract when we've barely started your apprenticeship."

"Do you want to cross Father like this?"

"I'm not crossing your Father. His barrister provided the contract. He probably didn't read it, but that's not really my concern. I would advise any apprentice to hold off on beginning a formal courtship this early in their apprenticeship. In a year or two, sure, maybe, but a six month agreement this early is a bad idea.

"Go to Lucius with the contract. Tell him that you are concerned that it would be disadvantageous to request a modification this early and that if others in the profession were to learn of it, it could hinder your career."

Draco's face broke into a broad smile. "Thank you, Professor."

"But, Draco," I said, "this probably means that the clock is ticking. It might be good to think about who you might actually like to enter into an agreement with, eventually. You might want to start getting to know some 'appropriate girls' if you don't already have one in mind. And if you do have someone in mind, talk to your mother."

"That's good advice, Draco. Narcissa will hold a lot of sway here. If you don't want to defy your father, pick someone your mother will agree to. Your parents are afraid of losing their traditions here; if you want to follow their traditions, just not now, and not Pansy, tell them that."

Draco grinned and blushed a little. "I'll think about that."

Severus looked at me, and we tried not to chuckle. It seemed Draco did have someone in mind.

"Okay, Severus," I said, trying to take the spotlight off Draco and his secret crush. "Let's check your temperature again and see if you are ready for the antivenin." I pressed my wand to his temple.

"Normal," I said with a smile. Draco summoned the bottle from the bedroom and handed it to Severus. Severus measured out half of the contents and swallowed it, making a horrid face.

"Damn snake," he grumbled. "That is the foulest substance I've ever had to take." He waved his wand at the remaining potion, putting it in stasis and floating it over to a resting spot on my counter.

"What now?" Draco asked.

"I'm not sure, Draco. Last time I took it, I was nearly comatose."

"I imagine it will make you tired. Most powerful medications have that as a side effect. But hopefully, in a few hours, you'll start to see some results."

"Do you want me to stay?" Draco asked.

"I don't think it's necessary, Draco."

"I was going to Diagon Alley and get some books from Flourish and Blotts to help me prepare for my N.E.W.T.s, but I don't have to if you need me."

"You are allowed to leave the Manor?" Severus asked.

"Yes. I signed the paperwork yesterday morning. The sealed copies came back from the Ministry late yesterday evening. It was waiting for me when I got back from the cottage last night."

"What about Lucius?"

"His deal isn't quite finished. There are a few minor points that they are working out. It didn't sound serious; Father just had to get the last word in, as always. Mother received a formal letter from the Ministry lifting her house arrest yesterday."

"That's great, Draco. But you aren't going alone, are you?" I wasn't sure how the public would react to Draco.

"No, Mother," Draco crinkled his nose at me. "Blaise is going with me."

"Draco, do not get into any mischief with Mr. Zabini. Let the ink dry on the deal first, please."

"I will endeavor to behave myself, Professor." He nodded to me and headed back through the Floo.

I turned to Severus. "That was a great thing you just did for Draco."

"What do you mean?"

"Paragraph 27, Subsection 14. You just added that, didn't you?"

"Actually, I didn't. Lucius' barrister would know if the contract was modified after it was signed. There are all kinds of archaic clauses like that in those contracts. Nobody ever enforces them, very few people even read them; however, if it suits the purpose of both Draco and me, you know what they say."

"Once a Slytherin ..." I smiled.

"Always a Slytherin." He grinned at me.

"I have another question. I don't want to gossip, but what did Draco's comment about Miss Lovegood mean? What was this 'talk' about her?"

Severus' expression darkened. "Elizabeth, you have to understand the horrible things that happened under Voldemort. When Miss Lovegood was brought here, we knew she was in horrible danger. A young girl, branded a blood traitor, I shudder to think what might have happened to her. Draco went out on a limb and protected her."

"How?"

"He was assigned to be the one in charge of her. Draco was fairly distraught after the murder of one of his teachers in front of him. When Miss Lovegood was brought here, he really started to crumble. In an effort to protect them both, Draco and I devised a plan.

"There's no doubt Miss Lovegood would have been abused mercilessly had nothing been done. The werewolf that attacked Miss Brown was here, and he showed interest in Miss Lovegood. I convinced Voldemort that we needed to keep the girl alive. I told him that Draco was too soft, and he needed to learn to turn off his unfortunate sympathies to his victims. Voldemort ordered that nobody but Draco was to touch her. Draco didn't harm her, but he made the rest of the Death Eaters believe he had. Miss Lovegood understood that going along with the charade was in her best interest. She was quite the actress. If I hadn't known it was a ruse, I would have believed it myself."

"Dean knows this, too, doesn't he? That's why he is so accepting of Draco."

"Probably."

"These young people have been through so much, and they are barely more than children."

"I know, Elizabeth. I know. I did what I could to shield them, but there was only so much I could do."

"It sounds like you did a tremendous amount. And it sounds like Draco risked his life more than once to protect others, too."

Severus nodded.

Orby prepared us a light lunch. We ate the pleasant meal in the garden behind the cottage, and then Severus went to rest for the afternoon. Draco had left the outline for the N.E.W.T.s syllabus for me to review while Severus napped.

In order to be become a Healer, Draco needed to achieve a score of 'E' or 'O' in Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Potions, and Defense. Severus would obviously handle Potions and Defense. I could handle Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration if it was just Draco, but if the other students were taking N.E.W.T.s this fall, we might need more than just Severus and me to handle the tutoring.

There was a special session set up in November, as the end of term tests were cancelled due to the battle. I sent a note over to Lavender, Terry and Dean asking them if they had any plans for the fall N.E.W.T.s.

Severus woke around four feeling significantly better. A round of diagnostic charms revealed that his levels were better than they had been since the attack. We took the chess set to the garden. After he had soundly beaten me three times, I conceded defeat, and we took a walk down by the pond on the grounds.

As the evening wore on, we both started to get hungry. Orby brought us another lovely picnic dinner, which we enjoyed by the pond. We watched the sun set together, and we talked about the coming days.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" I asked.

"What part, the interview, or being subjected to the whole Weasley clan at once, plus Potter and the Lovegoods?"

"Yes," I said.

He laughed. "Not really. Miss Lovegood is likely to have some unique questions, but as for the truly tough questions, I've gone over those in my head a thousand times, I think. I always figured it would be Potter asking the questions. Somehow, I think Miss Lovegood will be an easier audience."

"And the Weasleys plus whomever else they invite?"

"Oh, Merlin, what does that mean?"

"I'd put money on Minerva, or Minister Shacklebolt, or perhaps both, oh, and Ron's girlfriend and Luna's boyfriend. There may be one or two others."

"I assume Weasley's girlfriend is Granger. I'm almost afraid to ask who Miss Lovegood is dating. Did you get a name?"

"The last name started with an L. Longfellow, maybe?"

He groaned, "Kill me now. Was it Longbottom?"

"Yes, that's it. What's wrong with him?"

He hesitated. "Nothing, really. He's a well-meaning young man, but he has major confidence issues, or at least he did. He stumbles all over himself. Some people find it endearing. Others find it endlessly irritating. I happen to be in the latter category."

"Teaching really wasn't your thing, was it?"

"No, it really wasn't."

I laughed heartily. "How did that happen again?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Dumbledore. I don't know. Maybe under different circumstances, it would have been better. But part of my cover was being generally unlikeable. It made it easier to keep anyone from getting too close, which would have just made them a target."

"Harry in particular?"

"No, my animosity towards Potter wasn't faked. It was primarily based on my dislike of his father and my inability to shake the association. Every time I looked at him, I saw James. It wasn't just that James married Lily. James and his buddies were bullies when we were at Hogwarts, and I was their favorite target. Though, it's possible that part of the reason James took an instant dislike to me was my friendship with Lily."

I tried to lighten the conversation. I asked him questions about Muggle London and if he had any urge to revisit that side of his background. Given his father's cruelty, he saw his Muggle background as ugly. He talked about some of the little known Wizarding history of the region, and how some of the landmarks had significant magical history.

We talked a little more about his grandmother and the rest of the Prince family. He had decided to contact her, but he still wasn't sure the best way to approach the situation.

We compared stories of the Princes and my grandparents.

He learned that I was getting restless at the Manor; I learned how he feared facing the outside world. I had never before considered what a luxury it was to be unknown.

"Would you ever leave England?" I asked cautiously.

"I don't know, why do you ask?"

"You've repeatedly said how much you dread being known throughout all of England. What if you moved somewhere else entirely?"

"You mean like somewhere on the continent?"

"I don't know, maybe. You've got skills that will transfer anywhere in the world. You've got incredible contacts here; they are powerful people with global reach, and they would help you in a heartbeat. I've got a fair number of decent contacts in the U.S. that could help you."

"It's an interesting idea. If I can't live a normal life here, I might consider it. What about you?"

"What do you mean, what about me? Would I leave England again if I had a good enough reason?"

He nodded.

"Yes, I would. I mean truthfully, I've been shut up almost the whole year I've been here. I haven't seen much. I'd like to spend some time here and actually experience it first. But, in terms of ties, I've already got family on two continents, it's not like I can be close to all of them. If I had the right motivation, there aren't many places I wouldn't be willing to try."

"And would you consider a relationship proper motivation?"

"If I thought it had long term potential that would be pretty solid motivation."

"Do we have long term potential, Elizabeth?" His voice was low and tentative.

"I sure hope so, Severus. I don't want to scare you away, but my feelings for you run very deep. I find myself thinking about how my life fits into yours and how yours fits

into mine, and I feel completely out of my depth."

"You aren't the only one out of your depth. When I think about where to go from here, keeping you near me is an important part of that. We may not be ready for promises or platitudes yet, Elizabeth, but I honestly can't see past you, and I don't want to. I see you by my side. In all of the ever changing images I picture of the future, you are the one constant. And if you are feeling the same way, I find that reassuring, not scary."

I grinned, an idea taking hold. "Do you need anything from your room for tonight?"

"Are you inviting me to stay?"

I fluttered my eyelashes in mock innocence. "I have to watch over you tonight and make sure you are recovering properly."

"Then I'll go get clothes for tomorrow and meet you back in the cottage in a few minutes." Severus turned his back and started to walk away.

I Apparated back to the cottage to prepare. By the time Severus returned, I was stretched out and relaxed in a very warm bath.

He immediately smiled and leaned over to kiss me. "Do you want some company?" His voice sent a shiver through me.

"I thought you'd never ask."

He smiled devilishly and removed his clothes without a word. They appeared in a neat little pile, folded perfectly. I couldn't hide the giggle.

He climbed into the tub and knelt in between my legs for a moment. "Don't laugh at me, woman, or I shall be forced to punish you later," he purred, before leaning in and kissing me thoroughly. By the time he pulled back, I was completely breathless and beyond aroused. He pulled me to the other end of the tub and positioned me with my back to him. My hair was pinned up, so he took the cloth and slowly started washing my body with slow deliberate motion. He started with my neck, then my back, then worked his way down from my collarbone to my lower stomach. He then turned me to face him again. Starting with my feet, he worked his way up each leg, stopping where my legs met my torso. He pulled me to him and kissed me again. Next, we reversed the process, with me running my hands all over his body. After I finished, we rose from the tub and summoned towels. Once out of the tub, we dried each other thoroughly. The towels were soon forgotten, and we continued to touch and tease one another, both of us paying special attention to the areas of the other we had skipped while in the water.

We stumbled over to the bed, our bodies a tangle of limbs, whispering and moaning one another's names. He lay back on the bed and watched with rapt attention as I climbed on top of him. I took hold of him and guided him inside me and eased down, just as slowly as I could stand it.

I tilted my hips and slid back down on him, giving him slightly deeper access. His hands dug into my hips, and he was clearly fighting the urge to take control. I happily increased my pace little by little, pushing down onto him harder and faster with each thrust. He grabbed me tighter and his hips started to rock in time with my motion. Soon, we were slamming into one another with abandon, grunting and crying out with each thrust. I couldn't think; I could only feel. Pleasure washed over me in waves, and I called out to him, begging him to take over as I didn't want this to stop.

In a heartbeat, he had rolled me onto my back and was pounding into me. His lips crashed down on mine, and all the while we were thrusting hard into one another. He broke the kiss, breathless. He leaned down near my ear and moaned loudly.

"Severus, I'm close again, please, come with me."

"Elizabeth, my gods," he cried out as his movements became erratic. My body started trembling as my release took hold. My body shuddered under his, and I screamed out. I felt the beginnings of his release and mine continued as ribbon upon ribbon of passion filled me while I quaked beneath him.

"Wow," I whispered when I felt I could speak again. He was lying on me, our hearts pounding together, our breath ragged. He kissed me, the slow, sweet kiss of afterglow. Overcome with emotion, I started to laugh.

"What's funny?"

"Truth?"

He looked me in the eyes and nodded.

"I've bitten my lip a dozen times tonight."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"I'm fighting with myself. I'm so close to getting carried away and saying something I don't think we're ready to deal with. I don't even know if I mean it, or if it's just the moment."

He smiled. "I know exactly what you mean. I've had that same sensation many times these last few days with you. I don't know if it's real or not either. I know it's an incredible feeling, and for right now, that's enough."

I laughed. "How is it you are so at ease about this?"

"Because, unlike you, I've never had life figured out. Nothing has ever made sense. You had a childhood marred by tragedy, but since you've been an adult, you have had the world on a string. This past year has shattered that security, and these past few weeks have surprised you in a completely different way.

"I, on the other hand, have never had stability. So right now, the changes I'm experiencing are exceptionally pleasant, and I'm determined to just enjoy it and go with it. You're still trying to figure out which way you are going to spin next."

"So you don't think the fact that I'm laying here fighting saying I love you isn't the most embarrassing thing ever?"

He rolled off me, onto his side and turned me to face him. "No, because I'm laying here tempted to say that 'I think' I'm in love with you for similar reasons. I don't think it's the passion of the moment, but I can't be sure. I don't think I'm being influenced by the fact that you saved my life, but who knows. It's how I feel right now, and yet I don't want to say it and later discover it was an illusion. We're both afraid of getting hurt and probably even more afraid of hurting each other. But we're still here, and we're trying to figure it out, together. I don't think that's embarrassing at all."

I kissed him again. His hands slid down my body.

"Severus?"

"Yes, Elizabeth."

"We have a really long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"I know."

"We should get some sleep."

"I know."

"What you are, oh, doing with your hand right now, that, ah, isn't going to help me sleep."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Noooo."

"Then why are you talking about sleep?"

He increased his efforts with his hands, and shortly thereafter, he slid down my body to allow his lips and tongue to join his hands in driving me to incredible heights yet again. After he was sure I was thoroughly satisfied, he rolled on his back and allowed me to return the favor quite enthusiastically. Sleep found us eventually, completely sated and tangled up in one another, both physically and emotionally.

Sunday Dinner

Chapter 12 of 20

Dinner at the Weasley home does not go as planned. Elizabeth gets her first glimpse at Severus' darker side. Please note rating change.

The following morning, Severus and I slept late, enjoying just being together as long as possible. We took breakfast in bed, and we talked about the day. We followed that with an unhurried round of lovemaking where we both experimented and focused on learning one another's triggers.

By the time we showered and dressed, it was nearly noon. Severus sat down to compose a letter to his Grandmother while I wrote out a tutoring schedule for Draco for the upcoming week.

We had all agreed that the first step was to evaluate Draco's knowledge and skills in each subject. Since Severus had experience with England's exam procedures, he volunteered to handle this for all the core subjects. After we knew Draco's strengths and weaknesses, we would discuss how to proceed.

I had two meetings at St. Mungo's this week. The first was on Tuesday to report on the general progress, and the second was scheduled for Friday to report specifically on Severus' case. I spent a few minutes reviewing the chart updates from yesterday for Tuesday's meeting.

"Damn!" Severus crunched the piece of parchment he was writing. He rubbed his brow in frustration. "How do I say this? Grandmother, I know you haven't heard from me in 15 years, and you may have heard that I died last month, but guess what? I'm alive after all, and that whole Death Eater thing, don't worry, that was mostly an act."

"Why do you want to contact her?"

"She was always kind to me. And she's the only family I have left."

"Okay, that sounds like a good start. This letter doesn't need to be long. Open by saying you know she may be surprised to hear from you, but you remember how she was always good to you as a child. Now that the war is over, you hope to reconnect. Use your own words of course, but keep it simple. Offer to either go to her or meet her somewhere of her choice. You could invite her here, but that depends on her relationship with the Malfoys."

"Actually, she adored Narcissa. Narcissa and Lucius were newly married at that point; it was before Draco." He pulled out a new piece of parchment and started writing. A few minutes later, he signed his name and put the parchment into an envelope.

Orby appeared, took the note, and then disappeared without a sound.

"It's about time, Severus, are you ready?"

"One moment," he said with a smirk. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me deeply. I wrapped my arms around him and returned the kiss with enthusiasm. He ran his hands through my hair as we kissed, and I clutched his back. When the kiss broke, he took my hand and led me over to the Floo.

I stepped through first, finding Arthur and Bill in the living room. I greeted them both with hugs. Bill gave me a quizzical look, and then his face broke into his usual easy smile.

Severus stepped through behind me. He shook Arthur's hand.

Bill stepped forward and offered his hand to Severus. "Sir, it's good to see you looking so well."

"Thank you, Bill. You are a grown man now; you may call me by my first name." Bill looked astonished, but he nodded. Fleur called Bill from the back door; he excused himself and went to join his wife.

Out the window, we could see a group playing Quidditch at a distance. I could see George, Ginny, Charlie, Ron, Harry, and a lanky, dark-haired boy I did not recognize.

"Who is that?"

"Oh, dear Merlin, Longbottom is on a broom. Do you have your bag with you, Elizabeth? You might need it."

I gave Severus a sideways look. "That means the Lovegoods are here already."

"Right you are, Lizzie," Arthur said as he led us into the kitchen.

I was introduced to Luna Lovegood and her father. I recognized Luna from the battle. She was petite with long blonde hair, large blue eyes that somehow seemed both wise and vacant at the same time. Her father was even more unique, and his overall demeanor was unsettling, but not in a threatening way in the least.

Severus and Mr. Lovegood shook hands, and Arthur offered the use of the small sitting room to conduct their interview. I smiled and nodded as Severus followed Arthur.

Molly was in the kitchen working away with a young girl. Molly introduced the girl as Hermione Granger. She was also familiar to me from the battle, though we had never

officially met.

"It's nice to meet you, Healer Prewett," she said politely.

"It's nice to meet you; call me Elizabeth, please. How are you?"

"Good, thank you. How are you? You are living at the Manor and taking care of some of the injured from the war, is that right?"

"Yes."

"I believe you are treating several of my classmates. How are they?"

"I can't give specifics, Hermione. But everyone is in reasonably good spirits, and we are working on their conditions. With several of them, it's just a matter of time."

"That's good to hear."

"Now, Elizabeth," Molly began, "Hermione and I have this under control. Go on outside, some of the kids are playing Quidditch."

I nodded and walked out back.

Bill and Fleur were seated in the garden, watching the game. I greeted Fleur and sat down at the table opposite them. Bill was only four years younger than me, and we had known each other as children, so I was closer to him than most of Molly's other children.

"Bill, Severus wants to talk to you later about one of the cases at the hospital. It's a complex dark curse; he thinks it will take two wands to break it, and I am unfamiliar with it."

"I shall talk to Snape, I mean, to Severus about it later. Merlin, that feels weird."

"Thank you, Bill."

"How are you doing, Lizzie? They better treat you properly over there. You know they'll answer to Charlie and me if they don't." Bill's tone was light, but there was no doubt that he meant his words.

"It's going fine, Bill." I looked up at the game. "My, that boy isn't very comfortable on a broom, is he?"

"No," said Fleur, wincing as she watched Neville try to maneuver around. "No, he is not. I wish someone would rescue him."

Almost on cue, Harry and Charlie started tearing down the field. It was a spectacular race. They both reached into what appeared to be thin air. Judging by the look on Charlie's face, he was triumphant.

The group landed their brooms and walked over to greet us. George and Charlie sat down on either side of me. Ron said hello and headed into the house with Neville. Ginny and Harry disappeared around the side of the house.

"How are you, Aunt Lizzie?" Charlie asked with a smile.

"She was just telling us about life at Malfoy Manor," Bill chuckled.

"As I was saying, it has been fine. Lady Malfoy has been very gracious, and Draco is trying very hard to put the past behind him."

"Well, I hope he is successful. How was your dinner earlier this week?" Fleur inquired.

"It went well. Your dress design was a rousing success. Lady Malfoy was very impressed."

Fleur smiled proudly. "And was anyone else impressed? Perhaps they noticed the witch more than the dress?"

"Draco said I cleaned up nicely."

"Oh, Elizabeth, you know I do not mean Draco. Did Auror Robards notice you?"

Bill laughed, and Charlie nearly choked. I looked from one to the other, shocked.

"What is that all about?"

Charlie spoke first. "Well, I mean no offense to Lizzie, but Gawain wouldn't be interested in her."

"Gawain?" George looked confused.

Bill's face registered recognition. "And you?" Bill questioned.

Charlie stared at the ground.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Bill asked gently.

"Do you mean about Gawain and me specifically?"

"No, Charlie, I mean in general."

"Yes, they've known for years. Since before I even left Hogwarts. But they don't know about Gawain; don't say anything." Everyone at the table nodded.

Suddenly, George look confused. "So, Bill, you didn't know that Robards prefers wizards?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then how did you know that Fleur was mistaken about Elizabeth and Robards?"

Bill froze. He looked at me apologetically. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I didn't mean to say anything."

"Oh, sweet Merlin. Werewolf..." I buried my face in my hands.

Bill nodded, embarrassed, but also amused. "He's all over you, Elizabeth. I've known since you hugged me when you walked in." He was trying to control his laughter, quite unsuccessfully.

"WHO?" George shouted.

Bill couldn't speak. He was too busy trying not to laugh.

I, on the other hand, was mortified. I wasn't sure if either Severus or I was ready for this.

Charlie's eyes widened and then he burst out laughing. "No! Lizzie! Bill, you're having one over on us!" As Bill shook his head, Charlie covered his face.

"For Circe's sake, somebody tell me who you all are talking about." George clearly couldn't handle not being in on the joke. "Oh gods, not Lovegood's father!" That even made me chuckle, but it completely destroyed Bill and Charlie's composure.

Charlie fell over clutching his sides. Bill was completely red from laughing so hard.

Realization finally dawned on Fleur. "Have you been kissing Professor Snape?"

I turned crimson and looked at my hands briefly. Reminding myself that I needed to show confidence in this if we were to be taken seriously, I raised my chin and nodded discreetly to Fleur.

George looked over at me, gobsmacked. "Are you Confused?" His question was sincere. The anger had diffused, and there was no trace of George's normal joking demeanor.

I was quickly getting over my embarrassment because I was starting to get angry. I deliberately lowered my voice, but it was difficult to keep the tremor out of it. "No, George, I am not Confused, Imperiused, or under a Love Potion. Severus and I have become close recently. I hadn't intended to broadcast it just yet, as I wanted to let you get to know him as he is now, but there it is. Severus and I are involved romantically."

"Okay, please, no details." Charlie threw his hands up in front of his face in mock surrender.

Bill was still trying to get himself under control. "I'm sorry, Lizzie. I didn't mean to tell your secret."

Charlie smacked his brother jokingly. "You've been doing a lot of that tonight."

George looked at me curiously. "You care for him, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." I swallowed. "Very much."

George considered that for a minute. "Dad said he was different. Remember, Charlie?"

Charlie nodded.

Fleur stepped in. "Elizabeth, if you see something in him that we haven't seen before, that is wonderful." She turned to the Weasley men. "We have all heard Harry's story. We know how he suffered. Maybe he deserves some good," she motioned to me, "in his life."

George reached over and mussed my hair. Then he grinned at me. "Where were you ten years ago? I mean seriously, Lizzie, do you know how many detentions we could have avoided if Snape had a woman in his life back then?"

Everyone laughed at that, and this time, I joined in. As we were settling back down, we heard more voices in the living room. Professor McGonagall and Minister Shacklebolt had arrived sometime in the past few minutes, as had Percy and his girlfriend, Audrey. But all the carrying on was over the newest arrival. A brown-haired witch had entered the house. She was holding a baby. I realized I was looking at Andromeda Tonks, and therefore that made the baby Teddy Lupin.

Fleur jumped to her feet and ran into the house to greet the baby. Audrey had already taken the baby from Andromeda's arms and was cooing over him.

George started laughing again. "I sure hope you and Percy are ready for fatherhood," he chuckled.

Charlie looked at Bill pointedly.

Now it was Bill's turn to blush. The boys kept poking fun at him, and their jokes became more and more raucous.

I excused myself and headed back into the house. I doubted anyone was fooled. I wasn't leaving because of lewd jokes. I was dying to see if Severus was finished talking with the Lovegoods.

When I walked into the house, I saw Severus talking quietly with Andromeda. I smiled. It was nice that he was getting to catch up with someone of whom he had pleasant childhood memories. It seemed he had so few of those.

I looked around at Molly's domain. Fleur and Audrey were still fussing over the baby. I could see Ron and Ginny and their friends on the front porch chatting. Minister Shacklebolt, Arthur, Percy and Xenophilius were talking politics on the other side of the room from Severus and Andromeda. I joined Molly in the kitchen getting things ready. Minerva walked out back and fussed at the boys, and they were soon scurrying about getting the tables and chairs together. A few minutes later, Ginny and Hermione slipped in from the front and gathered up the dishes to go set the table.

Molly started handing dishes of food to people to carry out to the backyard. A few minutes later, we were all seated around the table, talking and laughing. Severus was at my left; Audrey was seated to my right. I learned quickly that she was a bright girl. She was working at the magical history museum in London with aspirations on becoming a historian.

A few minutes into dinner, Percy stood up and cleared his throat. He pulled Audrey to her feet and announced that he had proposed to her the previous evening. They were planning a winter wedding. Everyone at the table smiled and applauded; there were a few wolf whistles as he kissed her chastely. They sat back down and accepted the congratulations of the family and friends present.

The meal continued, loud and chaotic, with occasional howls of laughter or screams from the baby. There was much to be thankful for this Sunday afternoon.

Very few people noticed when Arthur suddenly became quiet.

A moment later, Bill stood up from the table and walked a few yards away.

"Quiet!" Arthur shouted, clearly agitated.

"I feel it, Dad. It's at the north edge of the property. Something smells off, too. There's a strange presence."

"What is it, Arthur?" Molly looked worried.

"The wards have been breached."

Molly stood up and ran over to the door and looked into the house. "Arthur, the clock! Whoever it is, they are dangerous."

"I know, Molly. Everyone, get your wands out!"

We all jumped to our feet.

Andromeda grabbed Teddy. The poor little boy had started to cry. The fear in the air was palpable.

"Neville, take the Minister and the other guests to safety!" Arthur shouted at his guests.

Neville quickly took Andromeda's arm and pointed into the house. "We'll Floo to the Ministry and get help!"

Kingsley hesitated, then grabbed Minerva by the arm and started pulling her gently but firmly to go with him. Percy was pleading with Audrey; she finally nodded and kissed him, fear in her eyes. She followed Minerva into the house. Xenophilius physically picked up Luna and was carrying her into the house. Molly was trying to get Ginny into the house, but Ginny was fighting her mother. Charlie grabbed his mother and sister each by an arm and pushed them through the door.

"Hermione, go!" Ron begged.

"Ronald Weasley, if you think I'm going to run and hide, you've got another thing coming!"

"Ron, give up, man. You won't win." Harry shook his head.

Severus had ahold of me, preparing to force me into the house as Charlie had done with Molly and Ginny.

"Severus, I'm not leaving you. You can just forget that idea."

"I can't watch you get hurt." His eyes were insistent. "Please, go."

"No, Severus. This is my family." He sighed and kissed the top of my head.

"Then stay by the house. Guard the door. Block any errant spells to protect the people inside. We need to know where you are in case anyone needs a Healer."

"Okay." I nodded and embraced him quickly.

Severus ran to join the others, who were huddled a little way from the house.

Mr. Lovegood came back out of the house. I told him what I was doing. He told me he'd go cover the other side of the house.

I could hear that Harry had taken charge. He was shouting out instructions.

"We're going to build a perimeter and then fan out. We know there's someone to the north, but we need to keep the house protected too. Bill, Ron, Percy, and I will go north. Severus, Arthur, take the west. George, Fleur, cover the east. Hermione, Charlie, go south.

"If you need another fighter, shoot up red sparks. For medical attention, the signal is purple." Harry looked over at me.

I nodded my understanding. I watched as the group split into four. I stood sentry, not knowing what I would really do if I had to fight. They were right. I was more valuable as a Healer than a warrior.

It wasn't long until the door burst open again. Neville had returned with Auror Robards and two additional Aurors. I told them that the group had split up in four directions, and the main disruption had been towards the north.

Robards and his men went north. Neville followed.

I know I didn't wait long, but it felt like an eternity. Over the ridge from the south, I heard shouting. Hermione came trudging up the hill. She was looking over her shoulder as she walked with her wand in one hand and a rope in the other. As I looked closer, I saw what she was doing. Charlie was standing a short distance behind her, and in between the two of them were two bound wizards in Death Eater robes. When they reached the house, Charlie shoved them to the ground roughly.

A few moments later, I heard Xenophilius shout from the other side of the house, "Do you need help?" Charlie motioned for me to run around and look while he and Hermione guarded the prisoners.

Ron had a Death Eater bound in front of him, leading him at wand point. Harry was levitating a Stunned Death Eater in front of him. Neville and Bill had yet another in between them.

Neville had his hand on the prisoner's back; Bill was holding his wand on him. Every few steps, Neville would roughly push the prisoner. Robards was behind them, walking with Percy, who had a nasty cut on his arm. I ran down to check on him.

Luckily, the wound wasn't all that deep and looked like it was caused by a physical injury, rather than a curse directly. I took Percy into the house where an expectant Ginny, Luna, and Molly waited.

"Molly, if you have any Essence of Dittany, we can fix this right up," I called to her when I saw her terrified face. "It's not a cursed wound. It's just an ordinary gash."

Molly bustled off to get some dittany.

"Yeah, Mum, I'm fine. He threw me up against some rocks, but I managed to hit him with the Stunning Spell anyway," Percy told Molly proudly when she returned. I treated the wound, and it knitted up in about a minute.

Soon, we heard shouts from outside and looked out the window. My heart skipped when I saw Severus and Arthur approaching. The two other Aurors were behind them. They, too, had bound Death Eaters between them. Fleur and George had returned too, but the boundary they had checked was clean.

Robards had the prisoners on their feet and on the move. Harry, Ron, Bill and Percy assisted as Robards and his men took the Death Eaters through the Floo to the Ministry.

Luna and Xenophilius told everyone that this would be reported in the Quibbler. They listened to Severus, Charlie, Arthur, and Hermione report what happened in the skirmish.

A few minutes later, the Floo glowed, and Harry, Ron and Bill returned. Percy had gone on to take Audrey home.

"What I don't understand, Neville, is how you got to the Aurors so fast," Ginny asked. "You were barely gone five minutes."

"We got lucky," Neville said. "Robards and about five other Aurors were in the corridor. When the Minister told them there was a disturbance at the Burrow, two of them grabbed him and headed to a safe location, one took Audrey, Andromeda and Teddy, and Robards and the other two came back with me."

"That does sound exceptionally lucky," Bill said, his tone questioning.

"I know, it's almost like they knew something was going to happen."

Severus froze. His face had turned cold and hard. "What did you say, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville looked nervous. "It's almost like they were expecting something to happen tonight."

Severus stood up abruptly. He paced the room twice, and then he swore, drawing his wand. The look on his face was beyond frightening. Neville and Ginny visibly pulled back from his path.

He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and yelled, "Malfoy Manor!" disappearing into the green flames. The room was dead silent.

Knowing what Severus was about to do, I jumped up.

"Elizabeth! Don't go alone!" Bill called out. "I'll go with you!"

"You can't. The Floo will be blocked to everyone here but Severus and me. I have to stop him from doing something foolish!" I pulled my wand, called out my destination, and stepped into the flames.

"Severus, wait, please! Don't do this!" I ran through the house after Severus. Lucius may not have been able to harm Severus, but if Severus hurt Lucius, Severus might be facing Azkaban.

Severus barged into the dining room where the three Malfoys were finishing their dinner. He pointed his wand directly at Lucius.

Narcissa gasped. Draco froze. I inched closer to Severus.

"Lucius, you bastard! Did you know about this? Did you ORDER this?"

"Severus, I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't test me, Malfoy," he growled.

"Severus, let's be rational here. Tell me what you are talking about." Lucius appeared frighteningly cool.

"Father, what's going on?"

"You bloody hell know what I'm talking about, Lucius! Seven Death Eaters attacking a family dinner! That I was attending! There was an infant there, you asshole. That could have turned into a massacre! Is that what you wanted?"

I had to do something. "Lucius, scoot your chair out from the table."

Lucius looked up at me, confused.

"Now, damn it!" I pointed my wand at his heart.

Lucius looked both horrified and mildly impressed. He did as he was told.

"Incarcerous." Ropes snaked around Lucius, binding him in the chair.

"Severus, please lower your wand. I want to know what the hell happened tonight, too. But I don't want you sent to Azkaban. Please."

Severus was shaking with anger. He hesitated, then he saw the look of fear on my face. He lowered his wand to his side. I reached out and took it from him.

"Lucius," Narcissa pleaded.

"Father, please tell me you didn't do what they are saying."

"Narcissa, Draco, do not move." I pointed Severus' wand at Draco, but I kept mine trained on Lucius. "Draco, I mean it, don't make me stun you. Narcissa, keep your hands where I can see them. Do not speak unless you know something about the attack. We're here for information. Nobody is going to get hurt. Lucius, if you caused this, the Aurors will deal with you.

"The Burrow was attacked tonight by Death Eaters. Nobody was hurt seriously, but Severus is right, it could have been a bloodbath. Either Severus or I could have been killed, or any of the Weasleys, or Andromeda or Teddy Lupin," I said, looking at Narcissa meaningfully. She clapped her hand over her mouth as I continued, "Hell, Minister Shackbolt was there tonight." Lucius suddenly looked decidedly uncomfortable.

I turned back to Lucius, seething. "Yeah, Lucius that's right. Minister Shackbolt, who you've managed to successfully negotiate for your freedom, was there. Imagine what would have happened to you if he had been injured or killed."

Severus found his voice again. His tone remained lethal, but he seemed more controlled. "Lucius, you know something. You better start talking right now, or I'm going to show Elizabeth a side of me I really don't want her to see."

"Severus, I do not wish the Weasleys any harm. I have no desire to see any more bloodshed. I did not order the attack. If I had, would I have chosen a night when you were there? Would I have chosen a night when all the Weasley men were home, plus Potter, Granger and a half dozen other capable fighters?"

Severus voice shook, "But you knew...."

Lucius sighed and continued in a bored tone, "It was a trap for the Death Eaters. Lestrange wanted revenge for Bella's death. He's been plotting since the battle. I enticed him into attacking today, because I KNEW that there would be ten or more highly trained wands there. I had no idea there was a child there, or Andromeda, or the Minister.

"How the hell are you communicating with Lestrange?" I hissed. "That alone could nullify your deal, Lucius."

Again, Narcissa and Draco looked at Lucius in shock.

"Do you really believe the Ministry knows all of my tricks, Elizabeth? As for my deal, I told Robards the last time he was here. He had extra Aurors on staff tonight. They were waiting right by the Floo. The Weasleys are so damn noble; I knew the worst thing that would happen was a few stunned Death Eaters."

"You used innocent people as bait! Have you learned nothing?" Severus raged.

I tightened my grip on my wand. Lucius certainly wasn't showing any remorse. That was making Severus even angrier.

"There are seven Death Eaters off the streets because of me!" Lucius wasn't pleading, he was boasting.

"No, you prick!" Severus shouted. "There are seven Death Eaters off the streets because of Arthur Weasley's heralding wards, Bill Weasley's werewolf nose, Molly Weasley's clock, and ten wands!"

"Lucius," Severus hissed, "how would you have felt if someone used Draco and Narcissa for bait without their knowledge? Or even yours? How did you feel when it was done to you?"

"This is different!"

"Why, Lucius? Because it benefited you? Because it worked? Do you have any idea how wrong that could have gone? They could have all been killed because of your brilliant plan, because of your arrogance not to warn us." Severus was still angry, but he seemed to be regaining control.

"Lucius, you better be glad the Weasleys and their guests are quick with their wands. If any of them had been harmed tonight, you wouldn't have even heard me coming for you." He started to back out of the room.

I followed Severus. When we had almost reached the doorway, I cancelled the Incarcerous on Lucius.

"I probably saved their lives, Severus."

Severus crossed back to him quickly and grabbed Lucius by the lapels, tossing him up against the wall. Lucius was very lucky his head didn't connect with the wall.

"You did it to help yourself, you bastard. They probably called it cooperating with the authorities. Let's just get one thing straight, Lucius Malfoy. If you ever, and I mean *ever*, endanger someone I love again, I will rip you to shreds with my bare hands. You got that?" He shoved Lucius once more into the wall for good measure and took a step back.

"You disgust me." And with that, Severus grabbed his wand from my left hand and stormed out of the room.

I turned to follow him.

"Elizabeth," Narcissa called out pitifully.

I didn't stop. Severus had a head start, and he walked much faster than I.

By the time I got to the cottage, Severus had worked himself into a rage again. He was pacing up and down in the bedroom. I tried to calm him.

"Severus, please calm down. I know how awful it could have been, Severus, but it's okay."

"No, it's not okay!"

"That's not what I meant. I meant we're okay. The family's okay. There are seven Death Eaters off the street tonight. Lucius Malfoy is an unimaginable bastard, but it's over."

"Do you know what kind of danger you were in tonight, do you, Elizabeth? You think them killing one of you is the worst thing that could have happened? Not even close!" His eyes shown with pain, anger, regret. "Do you know what they would have done to you in particular had they gotten a hold of you and known what you mean to me?" He reached his free hand out to me, tenderly. Then, he stopped, pulled back and cast a blasting curse at a vase on the nightstand. "I won't let them harm you!"

"Severus, stop. It's over."

"But, it's never over. It will never be over!"

"Severus!" He looked at me, shocked. I grabbed him and pulled him down to me, kissing him more fiercely than I ever had before. I had no idea if this would work, but it was either this or slap him, and this certainly seemed like a better choice.

He kissed me back, viciously. His tongue dueled with mine; he was crushing me against his body. We broke for air, and I whispered in his ear,

"I'm here, Severus; I'm fine; I'm not going anywhere, love."

I vanished our clothes silently and threw myself back into his arms. His heated fingers were everywhere on my skin, rough and forceful, and incredibly erotic. I moaned, sliding my hands into his hair, kissing him again, grinding my body against his erection.

"Nobody threatens you, Elizabeth; I can't lose you."

"You aren't going to lose me, Severus. But you need to let go of this anger. Let it out. I'm right here. Take me. Now. Let our bodies be our outlet tonight for all your passion, all your anger, all my fear. Let it out."

"I'll hurt you."

"No, you won't." I leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"What?"

"That's the safe word. You won't hurt me. If I want you to stop, you'll hear that word. I need this, too."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Severus, please...."

He was on me in a second. The kiss was searing. He pushed me back into the wall. His hands on my breasts were rougher than he'd ever been before. I could feel him in between my legs, incredibly hard and already dripping. I raised my legs to rub my wetness against him.

He seized that opportunity and lifted me up and maneuvered us over to the bed. His entire body weight was on mine. His mouth was on my neck as he slammed into me. I screamed. He thrust again; this time I expected it and he felt divine. He pinned my arms above my head and leaned forward and took me roughly, kissing and biting my neck and shoulder as he drove into me over and over again. My first orgasm hit so fast; I didn't know what hit me. He pounded me through it, swearing and moaning every time my body tightened around him. He thrust deeper and deeper, then pulled out and rolled me onto my stomach.

He crawled in behind me, lifted me up a little, and then he entered me again in one fast thrust. I was pushing back against him, and he was pounding me harder and harder. My hands were gripping the headboard for balance because the sheer force of his thrusts was about to push me forward into the wall. I was screaming with each thrust, begging him for more, begging him not to stop. He leaned over me, and I could feel the sweat on his chest. I reached between my legs to touch where our bodies were joined, but he placed his hand on top of mine, forcing me to rub myself as he pounded me harder and harder.

He took his free hand and slid it over my nipples. I came positively unglued, exploding around him, my body clenching and squeezing him as he moaned and swore and continued to pound.

"Oh, gods!" he shouted as he emptied into me, and my body convulsed around him.

He held me there for a few moments before rolling onto his back and pulling me against him.

"Better?" I asked him.

"Some," he said. "I think we'll need to try again in the morning."

I smiled. He definitely sounded better.

The Morning Post

Chapter 13 of 20

The Quibbler and Daily Prophet publish articles about the attack. Draco and Narcissa try to make amends with Severus and Elizabeth.

The next morning, I opened my eyes when I heard the familiar eagle owl tapping on my window. Severus still slept beside me. He had tossed and turned for a long time last night, probably long after I slept. I quietly clambered out of bed, pulled on my dressing gown and made my way over to the window. The owl carried two parchments and two newspapers. I knew he hadn't traveled far. The only question was which Malfoy sent the post.

As I opened the note, I breathed a small sigh of relief upon seeing it was from Draco. There was a letter to me and one to Severus. I set Severus' aside and began to read the one addressed to me.

Elizabeth,

I am so sorry about what happened yesterday at the Burrow. Please believe that Mother and I knew nothing of Father's scheme. It has been a long time since I've seen Mother so angry at Father. I understand if this means that you and Severus will not tutor me now. I hope that is not the case, as I hope you are both able to separate our professional relationship from Father's behavior. Please let me know what you decide on that matter.

Also, I know you do not receive the papers at the cottage, but I thought you would be interested today. Both articles are quite enlightening.

If I do not hear from you, I will meet you at the hospital at 8:30 as we had previously discussed. I do have some information for you that I feel will be very helpful. Even if our working relationship is otherwise at an end, please allow me to share this with you.

Draco

I opened the *Daily Prophet* first. On the front page were the mug shots of the seven Death Eaters from last night's attack, along with the following article.

"Aurors Capture Seven Armed Death Eaters"

Dullen D. Reary, Staff Reporter

On Sunday night at 6:35 p.m., Aurors were called to the home of Arthur and Molly Weasley as a result of a breach in their family wards. A team of four was dispatched, and shortly thereafter, they returned to the Ministry with seven of the deadliest surviving Death Eaters. Molly Weasley was the apparent target. There were no major injuries. Percy Weasley, Ministry employee, suffered a minor injury and was treated at the scene by an unknown family member.

Unconfirmed sources report that Severus Snape was spotted at the scene, dining with the family as an invited guest. Severus Snape is believed to be deceased; however, no funeral services have been held, and the Ministry of Magic has refused to comment on posthumous honors for the double agent.

The article went on to outline the crimes of the various suspects and compliment the quick work of the Auror department. I chuckled. They obviously missed the part where the family did all of the work and all the Aurors did was process the suspects, but that really didn't matter. At least there were no libelous comments about anyone.

I then turned to the other paper. *The Quibbler* was colorful; it looked more like a comic book than a newspaper. On the front page, there were various photos of members of the Weasley family from different times over the past year. The headline also told a different story.

Family Thwarts Attack on Matriarch, Captures Death Eaters, Hailed as Heroes

By Xenophilus Lovegood, Editor in Chief

As the Weasley family was finishing dinner with family and friends last night, family members realized that their wards had been breached. They were under attack. Quick thinking and bravery prevailed, and none of the family or guests were seriously injured. Less than 30 minutes after the wards were breached, seven highly dangerous Death Eaters were hauled off to the Ministry with the help of a team of Aurors.

Audrey Hopkirk, recently engaged to Percy Weasley, was present when the impending attack was discovered. She was reached by Floo later Sunday evening.

"Arthur and Bill both sensed a breach in the wards, and Molly confirmed it as well. Arthur's first concern was for the safety of the Minister of Magic and the family's guests. There was a child present, who was quickly evacuated by Floo, along with the child's guardian, Minister Shacklebolt, Headmistress McGonagall and me."

Neville Longbottom supervised the evacuation of the Minister and other guests. He also retrieved the team of Aurors who arrested the criminals. Other friends and family members were escorted into the house while Harry Potter and the other fighters developed a defensive strategy. The team responsible for bringing down the Death Eaters included Harry Potter, Arthur Weasley, Bill Weasley, Charlie Weasley, Fleur Delacour Weasley, George Weasley, Percy Weasley, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape (see related article page 2). Elizabeth Prewett was placed on guard duty at the home, protecting the Weasleys' underage daughter, Molly Weasley (the apparent target) and two other guests.

The team spanned out in all directions to locate the suspects. Within twenty minutes, seven Death Eaters had been apprehended. The Aurors arrived on the scene within five minutes of Longbottom's departure from the home. Prewett directed them to the area of the ward breach, and they returned shortly thereafter, assisting the transport of the now imprisoned Death Eaters.

Chief Auror Robards, who responded to the call, said that the situation was well in hand when his team arrived.

"All of the Death Eaters had been disarmed, and most of them had already been restrained. My men completed the job that had been very effectively handled up until our arrival."

The Aurors were applauded for the quick response time. Further questioning revealed that this was more than just general preparedness.

"We were notified that there was a threat against Molly Weasley. A tip came in on Saturday that the attack was expected on Sunday."

No comment was available as to the nature of the tip. Further, no comment was available as to why Mrs. Weasley was not notified of the general threat or the impending attack.

The seven Death Eaters apprehended consisted of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle, Gregory Goyle Sr., Gregory Goyle Jr., Sven Rowle, Marco Dohlov and James Flint. Both Lestranges were previously incarcerated in Azkaban for their attack on Alice and Frank Longbottom in 1981.

I smiled. Xenophilius was certainly eccentric, but he got to the heart of the matter. I also thought that the way he left his own name out of the story was admirable. Sighing, I turned to page two.

Severus Snape Survives Snake Savagery

By Luna Lovegood, Staff contributor

Former Death Eater and spy Severus Snape is expected to be issued a full pardon this morning. This news comes as the Ministry is releasing information on where the former headmaster has been in the weeks since the battle. Snape was discovered and treated by Healer Elizabeth Prewett after he was attacked by Tom Riddle's deadly familiar, Nagini.

Prewett served as a Healer for the Order of the Phoenix during the battle. She was searching for a family member when she came upon Riddle and Snape. According to previous reports from Harry Potter, Riddle ordered the snake to attack Snape because Riddle believed that would make him the master of an invincible wand. Riddle then immediately left the shack. Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger had been hiding in a secret passageway and attempted to help Snape; however, they believed he was already deceased and returned to the battle.

Prewett, who had been hiding under a Disillusionment Charm, checked Snape's vital signs after Potter and the others left. After discovering he was still alive, Prewett utilized her Healer training along with Legilimency to determine the best course of action. Snape managed to communicate non-verbally to Prewett that he carried an antivenin that helped reverse the effects of the venom. Prewett, along with a house-elf belonging to Muriel Thompson, worked for several hours on Snape's injuries. He was moved to Malfoy Manor the evening after the battle to be cared for by Prewett. Prewett, along with several members of the St. Mungo's staff, is currently providing care of a handful of other patients injured in the battle.

I was given the opportunity to sit down with Professor Snape to discuss his role in the wars against Voldemort.

LL: What do you think led you to the Dark Arts originally?

SS: My home life as a child was not a happy one. My father was cruel and violent at times. I wanted out; I wanted to get my mother out. Dark Magic was the means to that end in my young mind. I convinced myself that if I learned enough magic, we would be able to escape.

LL: Tell me about Lily Evans.

SS: We met at nine. She was a witch, but she didn't know it. I introduced myself and the idea that magic was real. We became close friends. She was my escape from my dismal home life. I was infatuated with her almost immediately.

LL: What happened when you arrived at Hogwarts?

SS: We were sorted into different houses, but we stayed friends for several years.

LL: Tell me about James Potter.

SS: James and I became adversaries immediately. I wanted to be in Slytherin; James came from a long line of Gryffindors. Both of us held ridiculous prejudices against the other's desired house. We were also polar opposites and smitten with the same girl. It was a recipe for animosity.

LL: What was your experience like in Slytherin House?

SS: I felt respected. I knew a great deal of magic, was fairly powerful and wasn't afraid to throw a hex to defend myself.

LL: Is that what first drew you to the Death Eaters?

SS: That was part of it along with the promise of even greater power.

LL: How did your friendship with the future Death Eaters affect your relationship with Lily?

SS: She hated it.

LL: You had a falling out at some point. What happened?

SS: My association with the future Death Eaters was a major part of the reason for our friendship ending. It came to a boil after an incident fifth year. James had humiliated me in front of several other students. She tried to intervene, which just enraged me further. The argument escalated and I lashed out, and to my shame, I called my best friend a Mudblood.

LL: What happened next?

SS: That was the final straw for Lily. She was becoming increasingly upset about my associations with the future Death Eaters. I apologized profusely for the slur, but the damage was done. The friendship was over. I was devastated. I retreated further into the Dark Arts and joined the Death Eaters after graduation.

LL: Tell me what happened in the spring of 1980.

SS: I was spying on Dumbledore for Voldemort. I overheard part of the prophecy about someone with the power to destroy Voldemort. I reported it back to him. He determined that it was Lily's unborn child. The Potters became his target.

LL: How did you react?

SS: I begged him to spare her.

LL: Her? Or them?

SS: Just her. I've no excuse for that. It's not that I specifically wished them dead, I just was laser focused in my concern for her.

LL: And then what happened?

SS: He dismissed my feelings for her. He went on some diatribe about other more worthy women. I could only see Lily. She was the only woman that existed for me back then. So, I went to Dumbledore and told him about the prophecy. Dumbledore tried to hide all of them, and I became his spy. But Voldemort found the Potters anyway and killed Lily and James. Harry survived, of course, and Voldemort lost his power.

LL: Fast forward ten years. Harry Potter comes to Hogwarts. What were your thoughts?

SS: I was filled with many negative thoughts about Harry Potter, mostly because of my dislike of James. Dumbledore tried to convince me of my bias, but I would have none of it. I protected the boy, but I resented him as well.

LL: When Voldemort returned, you returned to the Death Eaters?

SS: Yes, as a spy for Dumbledore. It was a very fine line to walk, convincing both that I was a spy for them, but I was effective at it.

LL: Until ...

SS: Until Dumbledore was infected with a fatal curse. It was killing him slowly. Around the same time, Voldemort charged another young man with the task of murdering Dumbledore. To protect the boy, and to ensure a speedy death when the time came, I agreed to kill Dumbledore to protect the boy.

LL: Draco Malfoy?

SS: Yes.

LL: You have a current relationship with the younger Mr. Malfoy?

SS: He is my Potions apprentice.

LL: And Lucius Malfoy?

SS: Is an old friend who continues to help me to this day.

LL: So back to the war. After Dumbledore's death, you rejoined the Death Eaters and became the headmaster of Hogwarts?

SS: Yes, I had sworn to Dumbledore that I would protect the students. I did as much as I dared. I regret that it wasn't more.

LL: What did you do?

SS: I thwarted the Carrows when I could. I assigned many punishments to Hagrid, who would not abuse the students. I assigned menial labor rather than the Carrows' physical punishments. I provided the Sword of Gryffindor to Potter.

LL: I'm sure those you helped appreciate it, sir. When the battle occurred, what did you expect to happen?

SS: I wanted to find Potter, to share with him the last bit of information he needed. I also had something I believed would protect him.

LL: And how did that work out?

SS: I shared the information via my memories. I did not get to give him the protection. It turns out he did not need it.

LL: Now that you've survived the war, what are your plans?

SS: I hope to return to my Potions research. I wish to live free of being under the thumb of any master. I pray to atone for the mistakes of my youth.

LL: Will you return to Hogwarts?

SS: Not to teach.

LL: And what of personal goals, Professor?

SS: Pardon?

LL: Do you still love Lily Potter?

SS: Very much. Not in the way I once did, but much of that was an illusion. I still love my childhood best friend who showed me many wonderful things.

LL: What changed that?

SS: Nearly bleeding to death on the floor of that shack. I don't know if it was an apparition, a trick of the mind, or something real, but I said goodbye to the fantasy of Lily and me while I was unconscious that day.

LL: So there's room now to move forward?

SS: I certainly hope so, but I can't predict the future.

LL: Do you have any words for Harry Potter?

SS: Yes, and I will share those with him privately.

LL: Is there anything else you would like to say?

SS: I just hope we can all learn from our mistakes and move forward now that this war is over.

I set the paper down. I hoped that would accomplish the goal of keeping the press off his back. There was very little in the article I didn't already know, but it was still endearing to me to read it like that. He'd been through a lot, and the fact that he was genuinely trying to move forward was a huge step.

The next order of business was setting Draco straight. He needed to know that I would not hold him or Narcissa responsible for Lucius' actions.

Draco,

Thank you for sending copies of the papers. As for our working relationship, your father's actions have nothing to do with your tutoring and training. Severus will have to speak for himself, but none of his ire last night was towards you or Narcissa. We know you were not involved. You know he can tell if someone is lying to him.

I will see you at 8:30 as planned. I look forward to hearing what you have learned.

Elizabeth

I glanced at the clock. It was almost 7:30. I placed the parchment and the newspapers on the nightstand on his side of the bed. I showered and dressed quickly. I took a look at myself in the bathroom mirror. I lifted my hair and examined my neck. Severus' enthusiasm last night had left evidence on my neck, shoulders and my wrists, not to mention other areas that were not publicly visible. I cast a glamour to hide the visible marks.

Severus was awake when I left the bathroom.

"Good morning," I said brightly. "Draco sent an owl and copies of *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet*. *The Quibbler* articles aren't half bad."

"Articles? How many are there?"

"Well, the attack last night made the front page, and you made the second page."

He picked up Draco's letter and read it over carefully. Then he picked up the *Daily Prophet*. "Missed the point again, didn't they?"

I laughed. "Yeah, but that's pretty benign, don't you think?"

"Actually, yes, I agree." He was now reading Xenophilius' account of the attack. After a couple of minutes, he turned to page two. His face was thoughtful, and he looked a bit worried, but there was no trace of anger.

"Xenophilius did a fine job with the story on the attack. Luna's account of what happened the night of the battle is fair and factual as well."

"And the interview, Severus, how do you feel about that part?"

"Let's just hope it works." He sighed. "I'm going to go get ready. Draco sounds pretty excited about this new information he's obtained."

"Are you ready to be seen in the hospital, Severus?"

"It's only eight patients. And most of them were my students in the past few years. If I can remember how to glare at them, they won't give me any trouble."

"Oh, you glared pretty well at Lucius last night. Just try to do it without hexing them, okay, Severus?"

"I shall try."

I stepped through the Floo and immediately spotted Draco. He looked like he was about to burst. Severus stepped out of the Floo behind me, and Draco's face dimmed a fraction.

Severus walked over to Draco and offered his hand. "Last night didn't have anything to do with you. I hope you understand that."

"Yes, sir." His face brightened as he accepted the gesture.

"So, what is this news you have, Draco? Why don't we speak in my office?" I led them into my office; Severus closed the door behind us and cast a sound dampening charm.

Draco pulled a vial from his robes. It looked like a memory thread. "Severus, Elizabeth, I think you will find those useful. I was able to persuade Father to give those to me after our dinner conversation last night. Apparently, in a skirmish years ago, Rockwood missed his target and hit Father with the same curse that was used on Rosalyn. This is Father's memory of Rockwood repairing the damage. You can see and hear how the countercurse is applied."

"How complicated is it?" I asked.

"Not particularly. I think any one of us could handle it after watching the memory."

"Good," I said. "Well, let's go about morning rounds and therapy, and then the three of us will review the memory after lunch. We can come back this afternoon and apply the countercurse if we feel ready."

"Severus, I shall take you to Aurora's room. You can speak with her about the Legilimency, and the two of you can decide how to proceed. I should probably be present when you actually cast the spell the first time, just in case there are any surprises. Draco, you and I will finish rounds and therapies."

"Yes, Elizabeth," assented Draco.

Severus nodded. "How did you persuade Lucius to share this with you?" Severus asked Draco.

"I told him it might help him get back into good graces with you two. Consider it a peace offering." Draco stared at his feet as he spoke, and then he looked up at Severus cautiously.

Severus' eyes flashed with anger. He opened his mouth to speak; then he appeared to think better of it.

Draco backtracked, "I didn't actually expect it to work, sir. It's just better to appeal to Father as a negotiation than to try to appeal to his sense of decency. I understand the gravity of Father's actions."

Severus snorted at that, seemingly appeased.

"Well, Draco, that was a good angle to use with him. Thank you." I looked at Severus and smiled gently.

Severus sighed. "Elizabeth is right, Draco. It was a clever tactic. But, don't get in the middle of this thing between me and Lucius. I know he's your father, but don't try to be his advocate to me right now. It's not a good idea."

Draco nodded his understanding. Severus had clearly not lost his ability to intimidate.

We left my office and went to Aurora's room. When we walked in, she smiled at us. "Healer Prewett, Trainee Malfoy, how are you today?" Her normal sunny tone turned icy as she greeted Severus, "Good morning, Headmaster Snape."

"Wait," I started, mildly excited, "how did you know his name?"

"I, uh," she hesitated, "I don't know."

"Have you been reading the newspapers? Did you see a photo of him there?"

She shook her head at my question.

Draco shared my excitement. "Healer Prewett, did you catch what she actually called him?"

I was puzzled, but Draco continued, "Headmaster Snape, not Professor Snape, not Severus Snape. That's got to mean something."

"So does her tone, Elizabeth," Severus offered softly. "Aurora and I were on relatively good terms when Dumbledore was Headmaster. She would have called me Severus then, but obviously, about the time I became headmaster, her attitude towards me changed."

"So, she's had a flash of memory, and you can isolate it to a period of about one year before the battle?"

"Exactly," Severus said, intrigued.

I noticed that Aurora looked agitated at Severus' presence. "Professor Sinistra, I'm going to have to ask you to trust me on this. Severus is a friend to you now. I know you don't see him as such, but I assure you, there is more to the story than you know." I reached over and patted her hands.

"Should we tell her?" Draco asked.

"Maybe a little bit, certainly not everything, not yet. Too much too soon could cause her to withdraw further, especially if there are Occlumency walls involved, whether imposed by her or by someone else. It's better to let her start figuring it out on her own, and then we can help her as she progresses. Aurora, please tell me what you thought and felt when you saw him."

"I felt anger and sense of betrayal. I don't know why. Sir, I don't know you. If Healer Prewett trusts you, I'll accept that. But that was my reaction."

"Is there anything else?" I prodded softly.

"I see the image of an old man. I don't recognize him either. Long beard, blue eyes."

Draco looked at me and mouthed "*Dumbledore*". Severus looked like he was going to vomit.

"This is excellent news, Aurora."

"How so?"

"It means your memories are present and not lost." I conjured a journal and a quill. "In the future, if you have flashes, feelings that you can't explain, write them down. This is very important. It may help us piece together the story. I know this is upsetting. I had planned more for today, but I don't think it is wise after all. Severus, please excuse us."

He nodded. "I shall be in the office." He swept from the room in fairly dramatic fashion. He was obviously upset from the encounter as well, but I knew he would understand and recover.

I sat down next to Aurora. "Do you recognize Trainee Malfoy?"

"No, should I?"

I smiled. "Not necessarily. He was a student of yours when he was younger."

"I was much younger, Healer Prewett. I had very little interaction with Professor Sinistra after fifth year."

"I see."

"Ferret?" Aurora questioned. Her hand quickly covered her mouth, unsure of what she had just said.

Draco blushed furiously.

I looked between them, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"I don't wish to go into details, but I was given that nickname after a particularly embarrassing incident in my fourth year."

"Oh. So, it's an accurate memory."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Trainee Malfoy." Aurora looked sheepish that she had brought up something embarrassing for Draco.

"It isn't your fault, Professor; you weren't responsible." He had regained his composure by now.

"This is all very interesting. I shall speak with some of the specialists at St. Mungo's. I have a meeting there tomorrow."

Aurora nodded.

Draco and I excused ourselves and left her room. Glancing across the lounge, I could see Severus in my office. He had a very old book open, and he was scribbling furiously on a spare piece of parchment. He looked invigorated, like he'd just had a revelation of some kind.

"I wonder what that's about," Draco pondered.

"I don't know. He doesn't look angry, though. It looks like he may be onto something. Let's not interrupt him."

I led Draco to Lavender's room. "May we come in?"

She was standing near the door, peeking out. Before Draco entered the room, she spun around, uttered a few words quietly and turned back around. Her scars looked fainter than usual.

I smiled. "That was impressive, Miss Brown."

Draco looked at me, obviously confused. I motioned for him to drop it.

"You think so?"

"I do. How are your meetings going with Lady Malfoy?"

"Really well," she gushed. "I showed her my drawings. She thinks I have talent that I should develop. She was able to get me an interview for an apprenticeship with one of the best fashion houses in Wizarding England. If I get it, I will start in September."

"Oh, wow, that is exciting." I rejoiced inwardly. The job offer sounded good for Lavender, but even more wonderful was that she was willing to take this step. The fact that I

was seeing an excited young girl, rather than the brooding victim, was massive progress.

Draco cut in, "Mother has exquisite taste. If she thinks you have skill, you can take her at her word. She has actually launched the career of a few designers over the past ten years."

Lavender's eyes grew wide. "I've got so much to do. They want to see three of my designs. In a week! How am I going to get that done?"

Draco said, "If they are interested in your designs, do they care if you physically make the dresses?"

"No. I'm awful at the actual dressmaking. Parvati always helped with that part." She seemed to ponder that.

"Mother's tailor could probably execute the design, if that would help. Or you could have Parvati come over to assist."

Lavender clasped her hands in excitement.

"Parvati Patil is former classmate of ours, Healer Prewett," Draco explained.

"Ah, I see. Well, that sounds excellent. Lavender, keep up the good work. We will see you tomorrow."

"Send a message to Mother about the dressmaker if you can't reach Parvati, Lavender." Draco excused himself.

"Thank you both," she beamed.

As we left the room, I smiled at Draco. "That was kind of you."

He looked sheepish. "Mother is enjoying her company. I know she would have liked to have a daughter as well as a son. They tried for years for another child after me."

We visited with the other patients. We explained our progress to Rosalyn and Edward. They were both excited that we had a plan. Marjorie agreed to go with one of the St. Mungo's Healers to a Muggle hospital for some tests. One of the London hospitals had a pair of Squib doctors that worked with St. Mungo's patients on occasion.

Draco observed and assisted with the therapy sessions as well. All of the patients were working hard on their recoveries. Progress was slow as expected, but little by little, they were starting to gain strength.

By the time lunch arrived, I was ravenous. I went to the office to see what Severus planned to do. He was still working feverishly.

"Severus, are you hungry?"

He looked up at me, mildly irritated. "Not really. I've found something. I'm going to keep working. Narcissa sent you a message."

I smiled. He had a determined look on his face. Whatever he was up to, it seemed like it was pretty important. "I may spend some time in the lab later as well. Will I see you for dinner?"

"I would like that, Severus."

He looked up. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Severus, I'm fine. I've never seen you so focused." I crossed the room and leaned over to him, lowering my voice, "It's kind of sexy."

He took a deep breath. I could tell he was half aroused, half annoyed. "Lizzie, play fair."

I chuckled. "Never. I will use all of my wicked ways on you." I kissed him gently on the cheek and patted his shoulder. "I'll see you tonight. Send me a message if you need to work through. I know how it is when you get on a roll and don't want to break concentration. Draco and I can handle Rosalyn, I think."

"Oh," Severus paused. "I forgot about that. How about the two of you view the memory after lunch, and if you think you need me, let me know? But if not, take care of her. Draco and I can work later this afternoon."

"That will work."

"Thank you for understanding. But, if you need me, let me know."

I smiled, took Narcissa's message from the desk and headed out of the office.

Elizabeth,

I would like to chat with you this afternoon. Lucius is away from the house. He has gone to the Ministry with his barrister. Please let me know if you would join me for tea, perhaps around three.

Narcissa

"Boppy."

The elf appeared.

"Please let Lady Malfoy know that I am free for tea. I will see her at three."

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth."

"Thank you, Boppy."

Draco was in the lounge, so I stopped in and informed him of the plans. I then took the Floo back to the cottage. Orby had lunch waiting for me, so I ate as I updated my notes from the morning.

When Draco arrived a few minutes later, we reviewed the memory. The countercurse was just an incantation and a simple wand movement. Draco transfigured a cup into a rat and tested the curse and countercurse a few times to make sure he could do it correctly. We then traveled back to the hospital, and Draco applied the countercurse to Rosalyn's arm.

It worked easily. Rosalyn's arm wasn't instantly better; it was weak from lack of use. Her range of movement was severely limited, but it was clear that the curse was gone. We added her to the therapy schedule and excused ourselves.

Draco headed down to the lab. He had some potions brewing that needed attention. I had a little more prep work to do before my meeting the next day, so I headed back to the cottage for a little while before meeting Narcissa for tea.

It was a lovely afternoon, so Narcissa had tea served in the garden. "I must say," she began, "I'm glad you agreed to meet with me. I was afraid that Lucius' actions would keep you away."

"Narcissa, I'm not going to lie. The fact that he's away makes this much easier for me. I do not hold his actions against you, but I find myself uncomfortable around him right now. This isn't the first problem I've had with Lucius. Severus and I still need to talk through our next steps, but after the first incident, he and I discussed leaving the Manor. That option is certainly on the table after this latest situation."

Narcissa furrowed her brow. "What was the first incident?"

"Lucius had some rather unkind words for me after learning that Severus and I had been intimate. Lucius insinuated that I took Severus to my bed because I had learned that his family is wealthy."

Narcissa gasped. "Yes, I can see how that would make things uncomfortable." She sighed. "Well, even if you decide to cease contact with him, I do hope that you and I can remain friends. If you decide to leave the grounds, I can meet with you somewhere public for tea in the future."

"That sounds like a lovely option, Narcissa. Now, shall we talk about something more pleasant? Miss Brown was positively aglow this morning. She had lovely things to say about your time with her."

Narcissa gave a wide smile. "She is a delightful girl, positively exuberant. And she does have talent. It's unpolished at this time, but if my acquaintances see the same thing in her that I do, they will help her develop her skills."

"She appreciates your support immensely, Narcissa."

Narcissa chuckled. "Indeed, she made that quite well known." Narcissa suddenly grew quiet. "There is another matter that I wished to discuss with you."

"Yes, Narcissa?" I wondered what this could be about.

"I'm sure you've heard the story of my sister Andromeda. My parents disapproved of her choice in husband. To tell you the truth, so did I, but I never would have shunned her over it. My parents were insistent, however. Lucius was supportive of their choice to disown her. I never questioned it as a daughter, and later, a wife."

"I have heard the story. I have met Andromeda, but she and I are not close. Her daughter, may she rest in peace, was a friend."

"I would like to contact my sister. But, I do not know how it would be received."

"Well, Narcissa, if you want an opinion of someone who knows Andromeda, speak to Severus. However, if you want a completely outside opinion, I will say this. Contact her. What have you to lose? Andromeda may reject your attempt at reconciliation, but you would be no worse off than now. If she accepts it, you could rebuild a tie long ago severed by hate."

"I shall consider it. I think I would like to hear Severus' opinion on the issue as well."

"I believe you will find him in the training room with Draco later this afternoon."

"Thank you."

Our conversation turned lighter at that point. When she learned that I had not ventured out of the Manor, other than to go to Molly's, she was shocked. "You must let me take you out to lunch this Saturday."

I nodded my agreement.

"Would you like to take a turn about the gardens? It is so fine out, and I would love to share with someone what I've been working on over in the west garden."

I smiled. "That sounds pleasant."

Narcissa and I stood and struck out across the grounds. She shared her plans for some new floral designs. I nodded my approval, and I shared that Severus and I had toured several of the gardens, and I found them quite lovely. She attempted to hide a knowing smile, or perhaps she did not; regardless, it did not work. I could tell she wished to question me about Severus, but to her credit, she did not. We finished our walk, and I returned to the cottage a little before dinnertime.

When I got back to the cottage, I could hear Severus in the shower. My mind was instantly filled with wicked thoughts. I slipped into the bedroom and removed my robes. I set my wand on the vanity next to his and stole into the shower.

I slipped my hands into his wet hair and began to massage his temples, pressing my breasts into his back. His body felt so good against mine; I felt a jolt of arousal go through me immediately.

"I thought I told you to play fair, woman." He moaned at my touch.

I nipped at his ear. "And I made it quite clear that I did not agree to those terms." He turned around and our lips connected instantly. The passion that stirred between us was overwhelming. The water washed over us as we kissed, and I melted into his arms. He broke the kiss for air and looked into my eyes. He leaned down to kiss my neck and then stopped. "What is this?" he sounded concerned.

I looked at my shoulder, realizing that my glammers had been cancelled by the water.

"Merlin, did I do all that to you?" He turned me around, looking at the marks on my hips, my backside and my shoulders. "Elizabeth, I'm sorry."

"Shhh....don't be, I'm just fine."

He shook his head. "Well, this time, I plan to worship you like the goddess you are, my love."

He turned me around, and I could hear him lathering his hands. He reached out and rubbed the shampoo into my hair. He tenderly ran his hands through my hair, root to tip. He then leaned into me and rubbed the soap all over the front of my body. His fingers alternated between feather soft and firm, but they were never rough. My body was tingling all over from the pure eroticism of it. At the same time, he was doing heavenly things to my neck with his lips and tongue. He paid special attention to the areas that he had bruised and scratched in our rough play the night before. His lower body was molded into mine, and I could feel him firmly against my backside. He kept whispering my name and little terms of endearment. All I was capable of was uttering unintelligible little moans. It was one of the most delectable experiences I can ever remember.

When he turned me around, he captured me in a long kiss before reaching around me to wash my back. This time, his mouth found my breasts. I put my arms out to the side to brace myself, as the sensations were becoming overwhelming. He chuckled, and the vibration intensified the sensation even more. He switched sides and repeated the process, and I thought my knees were going to give way.

He lowered himself to his knees and began to work his way up my legs. When he reached the apex of my thighs, he tried to nudge my legs apart. I looked down at him and shook my head. He stood up, a bit confused. "Is something the matter? Do you not want me to continue?"

"Oh, gods, Severus, of course I do, but please take me to the bed. There's no way my knees have enough strength in them for that right here."

He smiled and turned off the water behind him. He stepped out of the shower and wandlessly cast a drying charm on both of us. He then lifted me off the ground and carried me to the bed. He placed me gently on the bed, pushed my legs apart and leaned down.

He inhaled sharply, "Amazing," he whispered, his breath sending yet another shockwave through my body, and I felt my body respond even further to his touch. His hands first rubbed my thighs gently, and then he moved one up to my breasts. The other replaced his lips, and he slid a finger inside. I was moaning wantonly, my hips rocking, my hands clutching the sheet beneath me. My orgasm had been building for what seemed like an eternity, yearning to rip from me. He then angled his fingers slightly, and my orgasm took hold of me from head to toe. I screamed and thrashed wildly, calling his name and sounding my praises for the amazing things he was doing to me. As I came down from the incredible high, I reached down and pulled him up my body. He kissed me soundly and threaded his hands with mine. I pulled away from the kiss and locked eyes with him.

"Please, Severus; I need you inside me right now."

He smiled and complied, groaning as he entered. Once in, he stilled and kissed me again. I rocked my hips into him, begging him to move. He pulled back, my stimulated body feeling every inch of him as he slid back and then down again. He continued this slow pace for what seemed like an eternity, and I was panting and begging with renewed need. I raised my legs, wrapping them around him.

"What does my goddess desire?" He said silkily.

"You, closer." I tightened my legs around him.

"I am happy to oblige," he said, entering me deeply once more. He began to gradually pick up speed, and he kissed me again as he continued to thrust in and out of me. My hair was fanned out on the pillow, and he ran his fingers through it gently. I moved with him, meeting him thrust for thrust, tightening my legs around him.

I could see his eyes darken, and I knew that he was close to his climax. I leaned forward and nipped at his jaw. I wrapped my arms around him as my own climax was quickly building again. He cupped my face and our eyes locked as our pace became uncontrolled. The intensity overcame me and I came, screaming his name loudly in ecstasy. My body convulsed and my vision grew fuzzy. He shouted his pleasure and I felt him empty inside of me. He collapsed into a heap on me, and we lay there, panting, for a few minutes, a sated tangle of limbs, our hearts pounding in our chests.

"That was incredible." I ran my hands through his hair.

He smiled and kissed me again. "I assure you, my dear; it was amazing for me, too." He rolled onto his back, and I draped my body across him.

I was completely sated sexually; still, I couldn't get close enough to him. The bliss of being wrapped in his arms at that moment was all-encompassing. Once again, I found myself biting my lip, fighting with myself.

It was crazy, but I knew this man was my future. Emotion won over reason, and I took a deep breath. "I love you," I whispered into his chest.

He kissed the top of my hair and hugged me tighter. He then pulled me up and turned me to face him. "I love you, too, Elizabeth. I know, it's insane, it's too fast to be rational, but I do. I am as sure of it as I have been of anything in my life." He kissed my lips, my cheek and my nose, and then he snuggled me down against his chest once more. I closed my eyes and dozed off to sleep.

Correspondence

Chapter 14 of 20

Elizabeth and Severus receive letters from family members in response to the recent newspaper articles. Elizabeth learns more about Wizarding social customs.

The following morning, I woke earlier than usual. Severus was in the other room. He was seated at the small dining table, sorting through a huge pile of parchment. The window was open, and there were a steady stream of owls flying in and dropping more letters in the pile.

"What in the world?"

Severus' eyes cut up towards me. The frustration was apparent in his eyes. "These," he sighed, "are reactions to yesterday's articles."

"Oh, dear, do I dare ask what the reaction is?"

"So far, I've seen seven Howlers, thirty expressions of thanks, four marriage proposals, five job offers and a few pleasant notes from acquaintances. However, I'm most worried about that one." He pointed nervously to an unopened letter to his right.

"And what is that one?"

"It's from Grandmother Prince."

"Oh. Are you going to open it?"

"I was waiting for you."

"Oh. Well, I'm here."

"I can see that." He motioned to the chair next to him. I walked over and gave him a quick kiss before sitting next to him.

He opened the parchment. He read quietly to himself. When he finished, he sighed. The smallest of smiles graced his lips as he handed it to me.

Grandson,

You can imagine how shocked I was to receive your owl on Sunday evening. I had received word earlier in the month that you had been killed, which saddened me greatly. My initial reaction was that your letter was some sort of sick joke. When I received the newspaper yesterday, I realized that the letter was real. One of my neighbors receives The Quibbler, and she brought me the copy with your interview.

It has been many long years since I have seen you, Grandson. Losing Eileen, first to stubbornness, then to illness, was a tremendous blow. Then, when you became an adult, you disappeared as well. I thought my family was lost to me permanently. There are many things I would like to understand, not the least of which is why you never contacted me until now.

But I also want you to understand that you are still my family, and I want to rebuild this family. You have been separated from your birthright, and it is time to make amends. However, that privilege comes with certain responsibilities that we will need to discuss.

Please accept this invitation to come to the estate outside of Dublin this weekend. We have much to talk about, Grandson.

Looking forward,

Lady Evelyn Prince

P.S. I hope you meant it in the interview when you said there was room for you to move forward now. You said that Miss Evans was the only woman you saw back then. I hope that means you are ready for a new love now. You've been alone too long, my boy. Not to mention, you are the last in the line, and you aren't getting any younger.

I chuckled. "She's a spirited one, isn't she?"

"She always was. While she is very much a lady of society, she reserves the right to speak her mind with force at times."

"Are you going to go see her?"

"Yes. Will you come with me?"

"If you both think it is a good idea, I would like that. But if you wish to go alone, I completely understand."

"I shall write to her, accept her invitation and give her an update on the facts I omitted from the interview." He blushed a bit. "It sounds as if she picked up on what I did not mean to say so publicly."

I smiled. He had said several things in the past few days that I doubted most others caught, but it warmed my heart to hear those things.

Severus starting opening the remaining piles of letters; it had, not surprisingly, grown in the last few minutes.

"What do you think of all this?" I motioned to the letters.

"That I hope it ends soon." He pointed his wand at the fireplace, igniting the flame. With another wave of his wand, the unwanted letters flew into the fire. He grumbled and continued opening.

Orby appeared with breakfast. We thanked him and began eating as Severus continued reading. "Ah, that one is for you."

I reached for it gingerly. To my relief, it was from Bill. In the chaos the other night, Severus had not had the opportunity to discuss Edward's case with him. He asked if we were free for dinner that evening at Shell Cottage.

"Bill and Fleur have invited us to dinner tonight at their home. I had mentioned to Bill that you wanted to talk to him about one of the cases, but when everything happened, it fell by the wayside."

"That sounds fine." He considered the letter he was currently looking at carefully. "Hmm, this one is someone requesting advice on a potion modification. It's a reasonably interesting idea."

"Oh, that reminds me, what were you so engrossed in yesterday?"

"I saw Miss Brown as we entered the hospital wing yesterday. One of my projects that I was working on a few years ago was a scar reducing potion. I had tested it on myself during the war."

"But you have very few scars."

Severus looked at me incredulously.

"Trust me; I've looked at your body quite carefully." I blushed.

"Well, then the old potion seems to have worked fairly well. Trust me; there were plenty of wounds that should have scarred."

I winced. I didn't like to think of him in pain. I looked at his neck. "Even your neck is healing better than I would have expected."

"That's what got me thinking. I originally thought it was solely the phoenix tears, but given the success of the old potion, I'm not sure that's it. Arthur's scars are also minimal."

"Hmm, I never thought of that."

"There were several common ingredients from the anti-scarring potion and the original antivenin. So, it got me thinking, if the antidote for Nagini's potion minimized scarring from her bite, is it possible that the treatment for lycanthropy could be incorporated into an anti-scarring potion for werewolf bites?"

"That's an intriguing theory. No wonder you were in such a frenzied state yesterday."

"Well, the fresher the wounds are when the treatment is started, the more effective it is, so I doubt it could erase her scars completely, but it might help. I intend to dig into these theories more this morning."

"Do you think the same logic could be applied to other cursed wounds?"

"Possibly. One thing at a time though."

"Of course." I stood and kissed him before going to shower.

After I finished getting ready, I wrote Bill to accept his invitation. Severus had also prepared a response to his grandmother. It was still very early, so I decided to walk the messages to the owlery rather than have Orby take them. The walk would be refreshing.

"You may read it if you like."

I looked at him quizzically. "I do not wish to intrude."

"Please, read it."

"Okay."

Grandmother,

I would be happy to visit you this weekend. Thank you for the invitation. I will secure a Portkey to travel to the Dublin estate on Friday afternoon, if that is agreeable to you.

I agree that we have much to discuss, regarding both the past and the future. However, I must warn you, my past is not a pretty one, so it may behoove us both to focus on the future. On that subject, there is someone I would like you to meet at your convenience. Her name is Healer Elizabeth Prewett, and she and I have formed an attachment over the past several weeks.

I am equally hopeful that the Prince family can be rebuilt. I do understand the responsibilities of the family. That is something else we can talk about this weekend.

Severus

"It's lovely, Severus. I think she will be pleased."

"I just want you to understand, Elizabeth. If you accompany me this weekend, she will likely try and interview you for the role of the next Lady Prince. She will ask you many questions that involve conversations that you and I have not addressed."

"Are you suggesting that we should have those conversations, Severus?"

He stammered for a moment, and then he collected himself and continued, "Given the new development, yes, we probably should. Things can change in the future, so please don't panic about giving answers that I will hold you to in the future."

"Likewise, Severus, don't feel any pressure to have it all figured out."

"Thank you."

"Well, fire away."

Severus looked shocked at my candor.

"What?"

"There's no time like the present. What will she want to know?"

He took a deep breath. "She will want to know about your family. Not in a judgmental way, but she will use the information to assess your behavior. My Grandmother is not bigoted the way some purebloods are, but she was raised with Malfoys and married a Prince, so she does carry some prejudices. My father and his flaws did not elevate her view of Muggles. But your character and breeding will likely help level that out. You will remind her that both worlds contain people of all kinds.

"She will probably make some of the same mistakes Narcissa made in assessing your knowledge level of societal customs. She will expect you to be inexperienced in the way of Wizarding customs and society protocol. I'm not really worried about any of this, and I'm sure you will charm her the same way you have charmed Narcissa.

"The more difficult questions will come when she wants to know about us. The fact that our relationship is affectionate will please her; the speed will be concerning, I think. She will want to know your views on marriage, children and a woman's role in the household."

I laughed, "I see; now we get to the heart of the matter."

He scowled. "Elizabeth, this is difficult for me, please don't mock."

"Severus, I have always seen marriage and children in my future. It's always been a hazy, 'someday' sort of thing, but there hasn't ever been any doubt that it would happen at some point."

He sighed. "I can't say I've always had the luxury of seeing even a hazy future, Elizabeth. I spent years in a depression over Lily, and then for the past several years, I honestly expected to be a casualty of the war."

I closed my eyes in sadness at his admission. "What about now?"

"I should very much like to have a family someday. And honestly, someday doesn't mean fifteen years from now. I would like to still be a young man when my children are born."

I laughed. "You are talking to a Muggle-raised woman, Severus. Long term for a thirty-plus woman is five years in terms of childbearing."

"Your magical blood will probably allow you more time than a typical Muggle woman; you do realize that, don't you?"

"I do, logically, but I have my prejudices too. We are all prisoners of our conditioning, to some degree."

He nodded. "Just how hazy are your visions of family these days, Elizabeth?"

"Less so now than two months ago." I blushed and stared at my hands.

"I couldn't agree more. Now, do you mean that in terms of marriage, or children, or both?"

"Both, actually." My voice shook with nervousness.

"How many children do you want?"

"I would rather not have an only child, Severus. I also do not want a brood. I think my ideal would be three or four, but I could be happy with just two or possibly as many as five."

He smiled. "I think two or three would be wonderful, Elizabeth. Five sounds overwhelming, and I agree with you about having an only child. If that were our fate, it would be fine, of course, but that wouldn't be my preference."

I nodded and smiled.

"This is where you may get out of your comfort zone."

I laughed as I thought, *Did he really think the last few questions weren't pulling me out of my comfort zone?*

He continued. "She will not approve of our relationship beginning so informally. She will wish to rectify that."

"What does that mean?"

"Probably a Courtship Agreement," he began gingerly.

I must have looked affronted, because he continued in a somewhat placating tone. "They are not that onerous, and the terms are non-binding. It's simply a statement of good faith that we are pursuing a romantic relationship with the eventual intent of marriage. If we proceed to an engagement and a marriage contract, those will probably be more familiar to you. Wizarding engagements are no more formal than Muggle ones. A marriage contract is more about establishing inheritances for future heirs than anything, though some families are much more demanding in the contents. But the core of them is to ensure minimal fighting among heirs by laying that all out in advance."

"Interesting. That sounds a bit like a Muggle prenuptial agreement."

"I haven't heard of that, but I'll take your word for it."

"Will our private life be something she considers up for discussion?"

He laughed. "Nothing as crass as that, my dear, though our living arrangements will be specified in the Courtship Agreement. We would be allowed to stay under the same roof, but we would be expected to have separate rooms until marriage. If we were younger, it might be more onerous, but as it is, the need to guard anyone's virtue is obviously not a consideration."

I laughed. "So you living at the Manor and me here is acceptable, but both of us in the cottage would not be," I said and frowned.

"Why does that bother you, my dear?"

"I don't like you living under Lucius' roof, even technically. I was going to speak to you and get your thoughts on that tonight."

"I understand your concern. I do have a home that would suffice. It has room for us each to have our own space, though it is not large or grand. It is not far from where the Weasleys live. If you prefer, I could set up residence there again, and you could stay here to be near the hospital, though I would prefer you to be off Malfoy property as well."

"That is something to think about." I glanced at the clock. "Severus, the morning is getting away from me. I'm expected in the hospital in a half hour."

I excused myself and headed to the hospital. The morning was uneventful. Rounds and therapy were followed by lunch in my office as I made last minute preparations for my afternoon meeting at St. Mungo's. When the time came, I stepped through the Floo to the hospital lobby.

The receptionist pointed me to my meeting room. I was to meet with a member of the hospital board, the Chief Healer and a Squib who worked as a Muggle hospital administrator and served as a liaison for St. Mungo's. The head of Healer education was also attending to hear about Draco's progress.

They were all warm and welcoming. The receptionist brought in water, coffee and tea, and the Chief Healer called the meeting to order.

"We are here to discuss the progress at the St. Mungo's, Malfoy Manor Annex. There are nine patients under observation there, one full time Healer, and a round-the-clock mediwitch/wizard on staff. There is also an informal training program in place, and there is also an informal consultant assisting."

"That is all correct, sir."

"Very well. The first order of business is your consultant. For legal reasons, we must have a formal agreement with this individual. Please deliver the following agreement to Master Snape and have him review it. He may not work on patients directly until this is signed. It outlines his pay and rules for conduct. I doubt he will find anything objectionable in it, but we need his signature."

"There is a potential for a second consultant, sir. Master Snape feels he requires backup for one of the upcoming cases. He would like to utilize Curse-Breaker Bill Weasley if that is agreeable."

"Ah, well, as luck would have it, Mr. Weasley has assisted us in the past. I will have legal send him an extension of his prior contract if it has expired."

He continued. "What of your trainee? I would enroll him in our formal training program, except for the fact that he has not completed his required N.E.W.T.s. He will remain a volunteer until such time as he can enter the training program. He may observe procedures, but he may not perform any medical procedures."

"Now, tell us about the patient progress."

I outlined the progress of each patient. They listened attentively, took copious notes, and provided me with excellent feedback.

We discussed Aurora's memory triggers in detail. They agreed that Legilimency was the best course, but we decided to ease her into it, especially given her memories of Severus. Next, we talked about Lavender. It was agreed by all that she could be released at any time, that it was merely a matter of her own comfort. I touched briefly on Lady Malfoy's assistance, but did not go into detail. A similar decision was reached for Rosalyn. She would need to come to the hospital three times a week for therapy, but if she wished to spend the rest of her time at home, that was acceptable. Edward's case was also discussed thoroughly, including the source of the information for the treatment. Bill's involvement was addressed, along with our meeting with him scheduled for that evening. Dean, Terry and Jessica were progressing, but there was not much to be said there. The Muggle contact took down the information for Marjorie and informed me that he would owl me with the times and dates for her testing.

All in all, it was a productive meeting. I headed back to the cottage mentally tired but pleased with the results. I added my notes to the case files from the meeting while waiting for Severus to return from working with Draco.

The pile of owl deliveries had grown again. I sifted through them; I removed the ones that were for me, as well as separating the ones that I thought were from people Severus actually knew. Minerva had sent him a note, as had Minister Shackbolt, Andromeda and Xenophilius.

I had received one from Molly and one from Aunt Muriel. I groaned inwardly. I opened Molly's first. It was short and friendly, checking in on Severus and me after Sunday. The family had discerned why we left in such a hurry, and she expressed renewed concerns about me living at the Manor. To my surprise, she suggested that I 'keep Severus close while staying at that awful place, for both of your protection'. I smiled. Perhaps she was warming to the idea of Severus and me.

Muriel, on the other hand, made my blood boil as always.

Elizabeth,

I read of your recent adventures in The Quibbler. I have a bit of advice for you my dear, though I would imagine you are too stubborn or too dim to take it. It seems that Severus Snape has been hiding a secret that makes him well worth catching, my dear. I have it on good authority that his claim of relation to the Prince family is actually true, much to my surprise. Further, my dear, it seems he is the sole heir to the Prince estate. No doubt his lackluster appearance and personality will deter many young women, so you might stand a chance to win him and improve your stature. Despite your very Muggle behavior and unladylike attitude, you do possess certain charms that he might find appealing. Use them at once, my dear, before someone else beats you to this opportunity.

Muriel

"Ugh!" I screamed in disgust, shredding the parchment with my wand and levitating it to the fireplace. I cast an Incendio. Watching the smoke, I felt mildly better.

"Everything, okay, dear?" I jumped. Severus chuckled.

"My horrible Aunt Muriel sent me an owl."

"I take it the letter was not pleasant."

"Well, the good news is she highly approves of you and me as a couple. The bad news is witches like her give merit to Lucius' original accusations towards me."

"Ah, so she advised you to 'snag the Prince heir'."

"More or less. It was peppered with insults, of course, and advised me to use my 'charms' on you before someone else stole this opportunity."

Severus rolled his eyes and laughed again.

"Funny, I've never been called an 'opportunity' before. You'd think I'd like it more than I do."

I suddenly took in Severus' appearance. He looked like he'd been exercising. His face was flushed, and his hair was messy and drenched in sweat. "Severus, what have you been up to this afternoon? You look like you've run a marathon."

"Defense evaluation of Draco. Let's just say he's ready for the Defense N.E.W.T. He tossed me up against a couple walls."

"Severus, you are still recovering. Please be careful."

"Yes, dear," he said, crinkling his nose at me in mock submission. "I'm going to go shower and get ready for dinner."

"By the way, you have a few owls that you might actually want to read. I tried to separate out the personal ones from the responses to the articles. There's also a consultancy contract from St. Mungo's."

"Thank you. I'll look at them when we get back," he said as he left the room. I went into the bedroom and dressed while he showered, then I returned to the living room and some of the books we were reviewing. He emerged a few minutes later looking refreshed and ready to go.

Dinner at Bill and Fleur's was quite pleasant. Bill and Severus talked privately about Edward's case. Bill agreed to come over to help on Thursday. He told me he had received the update of his contract via owl just before we arrived. We all laughed at the bureaucracy of it all.

Fleur and I chatted a bit about Sunday. "I am sorry we all laughed at you and Severus," she said sincerely. "He seems genuinely different now. He's still sarcastic and a little impatient with people, but it's lighter now. The malice is gone. I don't know if you are the cause of the improvement, or if the improvement is the cause of your interest in him, but you two seem to be good for one another."

"Thank you."

It was late when Severus and I returned to the cottage. I noticed that he was limping a bit.

"Severus, are you alright?"

"My back is a bit sore. Draco is stronger than he realizes."

"It may be a result of the binding charm being lifted."

"Probably." He winced with the pain.

"Alright, that's it. Take your shirt off. Lie down on your stomach on the bed. Let me see what I can do for that back."

"Yes, ma'am." He did as he was told.

I crawled up on the bed and started working his sore muscles. I used warming charms to help soothe him. After a few minutes, he started to relax. I kept working, and after a few more minutes, I heard a soft snore emerging from beneath me. Chuckling, I climbed off the bed. I levitated him slightly and pulled the sheet over him. I then put my gown on and got ready for bed, crawling in next to him.

Wednesday passed as expected. Severus continued working on his research in the morning, and he tested Draco in Charms in the afternoon. I had tea with Narcissa. We were having a nice conversation, but she could tell I was distracted.

"What is troubling you, Elizabeth?"

"Severus is going to visit his grandmother this weekend."

"Lady Prince?" Narcissa looked genuinely excited by the prospect.

"Yes."

"Why do you find this troubling?"

"He wants me to go with him."

"I don't understand the problem. I thought things were going well with you and Severus."

"Narcissa, this is not a world I understand. He's talking of rules, agreements, protocols, titles and responsibilities. It's completely foreign to me. I'm going to make a mess of things."

She gasped. "He's talking about getting approval from his Head of Household to court you officially?"

"He thinks she will insist upon it."

"And he's willing?" I nodded. She beamed.

"Narcissa, I don't understand. He said that was just a good faith statement of our intentions."

"Intentions to eventually marry, Elizabeth. That is a huge step, especially for someone like Severus. You may already know his intentions, but for him to make them publicly known is significant."

"What if she doesn't approve of me? They shunned his mother for a bad match."

"First of all, you can't possibly be comparing yourself to Tobias Snape. Do you know anything of the man?"

"I know he lacked character and he was cruel to both Severus and his mother. But was that really why they were shunned? I know that background means a lot to many of these old families."

"It probably means less to Lady Prince than it would have to the former Lord Prince. He was the one who shunned Eileen. Lady Prince wanted to protect her daughter and grandson; she was just limited on what she could do. She often sent her pin money to Eileen."

"I didn't know that."

"Besides, Elizabeth, the Prewetts have always been considered a very respectable family. I don't think you have anything to fear."

"I hope you are right."

"May I ask you another question?"

"Yes."

"Draco shared something with me in your early days here, and I'll admit, I followed up on it."

"Why do I think I'm about to get ambushed?"

"Tell me about your mother's family."

I sighed. "You checked up on me, didn't you?"

"Please don't be angry. I wanted to know who was educating Draco. I want to make sure my information is correct."

"Mother's family is from Ireland originally. They immigrated to the eastern United States in the mid-nineteenth century. My great-grandfather was involved in U.S. politics, as were several of my cousins. One still is. My grandparents were society people, Grandfather was a successful businessman and Grandmother was a socialite. Mother became a college professor after returning to the U.S."

"That's actually quite a pedigree. The Prince line is already half-blood. Your background is actually stronger than Severus'; it is just reversed. Your Muggle line is the 'ancient and noble' line, and your pureblood line is solid and respectable. Severus is from an ancient pureblood line and a highly questionable Muggle line."

"I don't think like that, Narcissa. Actually, that makes me really uncomfortable."

"Please don't think I'm insulting Severus. He saved my son's life. I'm merely pointing out that if anyone tries to throw stones, you are not at a disadvantage." She paused as I considered her words. "Knowing Lady Prince, she will only care about your character and the fact that you two love each other."

I looked up, shocked.

"Don't deny it, Elizabeth. He would not be talking about this with you if he didn't love you; nor would you be worried about it if you didn't love him."

"I trust I can rely on your discretion, Narcissa."

She smiled and nodded. "Just be yourself, dear. Be honest about what you don't know regarding etiquette, and be open and willing to learn. Severus will be a solid guide through this process."

That evening, the return owl arrived from Lady Prince.

"Friday is confirmed, Elizabeth. Grandmother says would like very much if you are able to accompany me this weekend. She did inquire who your Head of Household should be for her to seek permission from before you attend."

"What?"

"It's a custom, Elizabeth. Before any formal courtship can begin, the heads of our family must correspond, even if only by owl."

"My mother isn't going to understand any of this."

"Well, it's generally a male blood relative. And a Muggle would be highly irregular."

"My only male blood relatives are the Weasley men. And Arthur isn't a blood relative."

"What about Bill?"

"Is Bill going to understand all of this?"

"I would guess that he will understand it fairly well. French magical courtship etiquette is even more strict than English. He probably had to go through all of this with Fleur." He paused.

"And the fact that he's younger than me?"

"It is unorthodox, but not unprecedented. He's basically playing the role of a brother."

I considered his words. "I suppose I should talk to him."

Severus suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"What is it?"

"I spoke to him last night. He is willing. Don't worry, he doesn't seek to make any decisions for you, it's just a formality in your case. It's a holdover from when brides were very young."

"I feel like I've been transplanted back two hundred years."

"Honestly, it's probably more like five hundred years. Please don't worry; we all respect that you are an independent woman. It's just a tradition."

I sighed. "Severus, I trust you. But this is bizarre to me. You are going to have to help me through all of this, or else I'm going to make an idiot of myself."

"You'll be fine, dear. And I'll be with you every step of the way. If you are okay with this, I will let Grandmother know that Bill is your representative."

I nodded, and he kissed me. "It's going to be okay, Lizzie."

Bill came out on Thursday. He and Severus performed the countercurse on Edward while Draco and I completed the morning therapy sessions. When I examined Edward

right before lunch, the wound had closed, and this time, it looked completely healed.

The morning's magic had depleted Severus' magical energy levels dramatically. We decided that it was time for him to take the final round of the antivenin. I notified Draco that Severus was taking the afternoon off, and I would work with him on the charms that Severus had identified Draco needed the most practice. As it turned out, Draco had not completed an O.W.L. in Charms, so he had not completed the N.E.W.T.-level training in Charms. This meant it would be his weakest area, and he had to take his O.W.L. in a month in order to even be eligible to take the N.E.W.T. in November. Luckily, he was quite strong in Defense, Transfiguration and Potions, so he would need very limited tutoring in those areas. Severus offered to take Herbology in order to allow me more time to work with him on Charms.

Draco, Severus, Bill and I all had lunch together. Immediately after lunch, Draco was supposed to meet with Ministry officials. Apparently this was the day that Lucius' magic was to be bound, and Draco needed to be present to have the Manor's magical properties transferred to him.

Severus laid down to rest after taking the antivenin. Bill and I decided to go out onto the grounds to talk so that we wouldn't disturb Severus' rest.

"Lizzie, how are you holding up?"

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"Are you nervous about the visit to Severus' grandmother this weekend?"

"Oh, that. Yes, I'm very nervous."

"It's going to be okay. He's not going to let any harm come to you in any form."

I smiled. "I don't think it's all that dramatic, Bill. I'm just out of my element."

"I understand. Severus gets it as well. He may have learned all of this academically, but he's never been through it before either."

"That's true. I hadn't thought about it that way."

"And you seem to have the best resources in Britain at your disposal."

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"Lady Malfoy likes you. Draco likes you. Lucius is a bastard, but I would suspect after Severus' outburst the other night, he will behave."

"You heard about that?"

"Yes. Severus told me last night that you kept him from attacking Lucius. Though I think you should have turned his hair purple or something." We both laughed. "You complement each other, Lizzie. I know we all teased you initially, but really, it's a good match."

"Thank you."

"Oh, and Draco told me to give you the following advice ..."

"Oh, no. I'm afraid to ask."

"He said that you should," Bill put on his best Draco imitation, "try to find the value in the perspectives of others, even when you disagree."

"That little punk!" I laughed heartily.

Bill looked confused.

"I told him that a while back. He's turning it around on me."

Bill laughed along with me. We talked for a few more minutes, and then he headed home to Shell Cottage.

Thursday evening, Severus and I stayed in and enjoyed a quiet night. We had dinner, talked, read, shared a bath, made love and went to bed early. Friday morning, I attended to the patients with Draco. I returned to the cottage for lunch and to prepare for our trip. Severus had visited the Ministry in the morning and picked up the Portkey.

We finished lunch and packed for the weekend. At two o'clock, we stood holding an old book, waiting for the Portkey to glow. I took a deep breath and looked into his eyes.

Meeting Grandmother Prince

Chapter 15 of 20

Elizabeth accompanies Severus to Ireland. He reconciles with his grandmother. They answer her questions about the past, present and future. Severus helps Narcissa mend an old wound, and Elizabeth and Lucius attempt to be civil.

We stood about a hundred yards from the Dublin home. The front walk was flanked by a very pretty yard with gorgeous flowers. The house was impressive, but it didn't feel imposing. I let out a sigh of relief. Severus laughed.

When we reached the door, Severus knocked, and a very old house-elf opened the door.

"Good afternoon, sir." The elf bowed politely. "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Severus Snape and Elizabeth Prewett," Severus said politely. "Lady Prince is expecting us for the weekend."

"Master Severus!" the elf squeaked, clearly excited. "You are all grown up now, sir."

Severus looked at the elf quizzically for a moment. "Jiffy?"

The little elf let out a small squeal. "Yes, sir! You remembered. Please, come in, Master Severus and Miss Prewett. Lady Evelyn is expecting you."

He led us to a small sunroom at the back of the house. An elderly woman sat by the window; she was working on needlepoint of some variety.

Jiffy cleared his throat.

The woman stood and made her way over to her grandson. She was tall and thin with gray hair pulled back in a bun. She put me in the mind of Minerva McGonagall, but she was not as severe looking.

"Severus, I am so glad you could visit. It has been too long. Let me look at you. You are a grown man now." She leaned forward and gave him a warm hug. She turned to me and spoke politely. "You must be Healer Prewett."

I smiled. "It is lovely to meet you, Lady Prince. Thank you for inviting us."

"Oh, young lady, Lady Prince was my mother-in-law. Please, call me Lady Evelyn or just Evelyn." Her smile was welcoming, but I could feel her appraising me.

"Thank you." I smiled. "Please, call me Elizabeth."

"Wonderful," she said, and she leaned forward and gave me a gracious hug as well. "Now, I would show you to your rooms, but they are upstairs. I'm 90 years old, and those stairs are less than friendly on my old joints. I moved my rooms to the main floor years ago. Jiffy will show you to your rooms. Elizabeth, yours is the first door to the left of the stairs; Severus, yours is the first one on the right." We both nodded.

"Please go settle in. I will give you a tour when you are finished, and then I would like it if you would have tea with me."

We turned to follow Jiffy upstairs. "Which bags are the lady's?" the elf asked. Severus pointed to my bag. The elf snapped his fingers, and both bags disappeared. He then led us back through the house and up the staircase.

I turned left at the top of the stairs and entered my room. Like the rest of the house, the room was comfortable and inviting, elegant without being ostentatious. I was beginning to think this whole "Prince Line" business was more bark than bite. I removed my clothes from the bag and cast a Wrinkle Removing Charm on them before hanging them in the closet.

After a few minutes, there was a knock on my door. Severus stood on the other side. "I'm going to go downstairs and visit. Join us when you are ready."

"I'm basically ready now," I said, "but if you would like a few minutes to catch up before I join you, I can make this take a bit longer."

He laughed. "I think that would be a good idea. I would like her to speak freely for a bit. It will be easier to gauge her true feeling that way." He leaned in and kissed my cheek and then turned and went downstairs. I finished putting my clothes away and then unloaded my toiletries in the bathroom. I waited about fifteen minutes before I started downstairs. I was trying to balance between giving them ample time to chat and not appearing too high maintenance.

As I reached the parlor, I stopped to gather myself. I heard Severus say to his grandmother, "At first it was shame at the fact that I had become a Death Eater, even after I turned to Dumbledore's side. Between the wars, well, I have no excuse, other than it had been so long and felt awkward. Recently, the danger to you would have been too great."

"I understand, Severus. Truly, I do. I'm just glad you are here now."

I took a breath and rounded the corner. Severus stood. I smiled and nodded.

"Is everything comfortable in your room, dear?" Evelyn asked kindly.

"Yes, thank you. Your home is lovely and inviting."

"Well, thank you for the compliment. It's one of the smaller homes of the estate, but it is my favorite. The others are just too large for one person. Even this one is a lot to take care of for Jiffy. But, anyway, I promised you both a tour." She stood and led us from the room.

The house was charming, roomy without being wasteful. Evelyn had moved her rooms to the main floor, transfiguring the drawing room into the master suite. There were two sitting rooms with fireplaces, a comfortable eat-in kitchen, a good-sized dining room, a small office, a cheerful room off the kitchen that served as Jiffy's quarters and a sunroom that looked out into the gardens. We were told that there were four bedroom suites plus an office upstairs. She told us that the upstairs master (Severus' room) had an alcove that was perfect to set up either a small sitting area or a crib for infants.

Severus' jaw dropped; I felt my throat go dry instantly. I smiled and moved on quickly to compliment the lovely artwork in the sitting room. Evelyn grinned. She led us back into the parlor. Severus and I sat together on a small couch, careful to leave an appropriate amount of space in between us.

Jiffy popped in to serve the tea. Evelyn turned to Severus.

Tea consisted mostly of small talk at first, and then Evelyn turned to the events of the last few weeks.

"When I first heard of the Battle of Hogwarts, I heard that you had not survived. Then a few weeks later, I received an owl requesting contact, and then the article was published detailing your miraculous rescue. I must say, I still don't fully understand why your survival was hidden at first."

"Honestly, that decision was made for me by the Minister of Magic. They needed time to sort out my true loyalties. They were afraid that people would want to condemn me as a Death Eater before I had the ability to tell my own story. So my survival was concealed from all but a few, and I was placed at Malfoy Manor to convalesce."

"How did you and Elizabeth come to know one another?"

"Grandmother, Elizabeth is the Healer that saved my life."

"Yes, Severus, but how did you know her before that?"

"I did not, Grandmother. Her sister is among my acquaintances, but Elizabeth and I had never met prior to that night."

"So, you sat all night on the dirt floor of a shack, saving the life of a man you believed was a Death Eater who had just been attacked by a madman?"

"Yes, ma'am. I had assistance from a house-elf. But as a Healer, my job is to treat the injury before me."

She smiled appraisingly. "And you've been treating him, along with others, at Malfoy Manor for the past several weeks?"

"Yes, ma'am. He has also been assisting me with some of the cases. In addition, Draco Malfoy wishes to be a Healer and to specialize in experimental potions. He is apprenticing with Severus, and we are working together to help him prepare for his exams."

"So the attachment has formed recently?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Severus, tell me about your plans after your recovery is complete."

"I have recently been able to restart my research, which I enjoy. I have also signed on to consult with the hospital on difficult cases. I own a home that I plan to finish restoring soon. As Elizabeth stated, I'm also apprenticing Draco Malfoy."

"And you, Elizabeth?"

"I will probably go to work for St. Mungo's after Draco takes his exams in November, though I have a few other offers that look promising as well."

Lady Evelyn turned to lighter topics at that point. She shared with Severus information about several of the properties. Severus talked about his research extensively; Evelyn was very well versed in potions and talked easily with him on the topic. I talked a little about how my work often involved blending Muggle medicine and Wizarding techniques. I mentioned how there were several illnesses that were virtually always fatal in the Muggle world that were regularly managed in the Wizarding world, along with a few that worked the opposite way.

She was quite proud of her gardens, so she took us through those between tea and dinner time. They were beautiful, and once again, she impressed me with her knowledge of Herbology. It was no wonder she got along with Narcissa so well.

The weekend continued as such. I spent a fair bit of time reading in the sunroom while Severus reconnected with his grandmother. We all had meals together; Severus trounced me soundly at wizard chess a few times; I taught them both a few Muggle card games.

On Saturday night, when Lady Evelyn had retired for the night, Severus asked me to take a walk with him on the grounds. We hadn't had much time alone together, so it was nice to just be together in the cool night air. He held me close as we looked at the stars. Something seemed to be on his mind.

"Is everything okay, Severus?"

"Absolutely, I just wanted to let you know that I will not be at breakfast in the morning."

"Why not?"

"Grandmother wishes to speak to you alone. I have made my intentions known to her; she would like to speak with you before giving her blessing."

"Oh."

"She adores you, Elizabeth; this isn't going to be an inquisition. She has an obligation to speak with you privately."

"It's okay, Severus. You have all prepared me for this."

"All?"

"Yes, you, Narcissa, Bill and Draco."

"Ah, I see." He turned me around and kissed me.

"I love you, Elizabeth. This is going to work."

"I know. I love you, too."

He took my hand and led me back to the house. We walked up the stairs and stopped at my door. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I'll be glad when I can hold you through the night once again."

I smiled and leaned up to him. The goodnight kiss was slow and intoxicating, much like a first kiss. I embraced him quickly and slipped into my room.

The next morning, I dressed in a light floral dress and pulled my hair up delicately. I made my way down to breakfast.

"Good morning, Elizabeth."

"Good morning, Lady Evelyn."

"Did Severus tell you that he wouldn't be joining us for breakfast?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did he explain why?" I nodded. "Severus has made it very clear to me that while it is early in your relationship; he feels you are the best match for him."

"That makes me very happy to hear that. I also feel we are well matched."

"Do you love my grandson?"

"Yes, ma'am. I am not a woman who gives my heart easily, and I find that he has completely made a mockery of that trait."

Lady Evelyn chuckled a bit. "He sees you as his wife in the not so distant future. What is your reaction to that?"

"I hope that is where we are headed as well."

"And children?"

"I would like a family. Anywhere from two to four children would make me quite happy."

"Severus has informed me that your Head of Household is William Arthur Weasley. Is that correct?"

"Bill is my oldest male relative on my father's side. My mother's family is non-magical. Bill is my nephew, but he is a grown man and is married to a wonderful French woman. He is well versed in courting customs."

"What happened to your father?"

"My father was murdered when I was nine. My older brothers met a similar fate a few years later."

"Oh, my dear, I am sorry."

"Thank you. It was a long time ago. Mother and I fled to the U.S. for our safety."

"So you received a magical education even though your father was deceased and your mother is non-magical?"

"Mother wanted me to be prepared for anything."

"It sounds as if your mother is a wise woman."

"She is a remarkable person. She, along with others, tutored me in Muggle subjects to make sure I could choose either a Muggle life or a magical one."

"And why do you feel you are you prepared to be Lady Prince?"

"I love your grandson. He and I are a good match, and we are both good at solving problems. As far as breeding, if you would like to know more about my mother's family, I can share more. But truthfully, I don't feel that's the most important thing about this pairing. I know he and I will use all of our talents and strengths to build our family. We are both powerful in mind and in magic, and we have both suffered the loss of family. We both cherish the family that we do have. If we start a family together, it will be strong and protected. You have my word."

"Do you enjoy being a Healer?"

"Yes, I do. I enjoy helping others, and I find that solving problems gives me a feeling of accomplishment."

"Do you plan to give it up when you marry?"

"Not unless it's truly necessary."

"And what about when you have children?"

"I do not know the answer to that now. I'm sure that pregnancy and motherhood will change many of my goals. When the time comes, Severus and I will re-evaluate and determine the best course of action."

"Managing a large estate takes a great deal of time, my dear. Is that something you are willing to support your husband in handling?"

"Yes, ma'am. My Grandmother Fitzgerald manages the household and holdings for the family. Mother was able to balance raising me alone, assisting Grandmother with their charitable endeavors and supplementing my education. I have watched her from a very young age and have seen both the work and value involved in taking care of household and family. I would hope that Severus and I can learn to partner to handle our joint responsibilities based on both ability and interest rather than simply on expectations."

"Very well, let's bring Severus back in for a few moments. Jiffy!" Jiffy appeared; she requested that he go get Severus. He joined us a few minutes later.

Evelyn looked at Severus. "You think you can handle her? She sounds like a fireball." Her tone was teasing, but I know there was some truth in her words.

"Grandmother, I don't believe in handling a woman. I've seen too much of that in my life. She balances me, and I support her. I believe it is a good combination."

She smiled. "You are not children, and I am not going to pretend I know your minds better than you do. Severus, she is intelligent, well spoken, and she's clearly in love with you. She is quite strong willed, but it will take that to help you in your duties. She also appears kind-hearted, modest and willing to work to make a relationship successful."

"She is all that and more."

"I shall send the petition to Mr Weasley. How long of a courtship would you like to request?"

Severus looked at me. This was not a topic we had addressed. "Six months to a year?" His eyes were questioning.

"I'm at a disadvantage here; please explain what that means again."

"That basically means we won't get married until at least six months have passed, and if we aren't ready to get engaged after a year, our Heads of Household have to agree to extend."

"That seems reasonable."

"Any other terms we need to discuss?"

"Living arrangements?" Severus questioned.

"You will have separate rooms at a minimum. Prince Hall is currently rented, as are the other cottages in England."

"I plan to move into the home I purchased a few years ago. It requires work, but it is livable in the meantime. There is sufficient space for separate rooms. Elizabeth is welcome to join me, or she can make other arrangements, or she can stay where she is. Though truthfully, that makes me uncomfortable."

"I would also be more comfortable away from Malfoy Manor, given recent developments. It will take time to be truly comfortable with Lord Malfoy again."

"Well, you will also need Mr. Weasley's agreement on your living arrangements. Beyond that, what I don't know won't hurt me." She paused. "No children until you marry." We both nodded. "I mean that. You're both adults; be adult about it."

"We understand, Grandmother. Although we both want children, I don't think either of us is quite ready for that step yet."

"Very well, I will have a draft sent to Mr. Weasley for his approval, and then he will forward it to both of you. You have my blessing."

"Thank you, Grandmother."

"Thank you, Lady Evelyn."

"Well, let us enjoy the rest of our visit." She rose from the table and headed to the parlor. I started to follow her, but Severus detained me for a moment for a quick kiss.

"I told you it would be fine."

"Who are you trying to fool? You were nervous, too." He looked skeptical. I laughed. "Okay, perhaps not as nervous as I was, but there is a lot at stake here."

He took my hand and led me into the other room. We had a nice morning. Before lunch, we both went upstairs to gather our things for the trip home. Lunch was casual and pleasant, and we headed home shortly thereafter.

After dropping off our things, he asked. "Do you want to see the house?"

"That would be nice."

He Apparated me to a cottage at the edge of a small grove of trees. It had obviously been vacant for a while; however, it would be quite handsome when restored. The downstairs consisted of a kitchen with a dining area, a nice-sized living area and a small office next to the kitchen. The upstairs consisted of a large bedroom, two medium-

sized bedrooms and a small bedroom that looked like it might have been originally intended to be a nursery.

Severus looked at me expectantly, mild nervousness behind his eyes. "What do you think?"

"I think it will work perfectly."

"For the time being at least, I agree, it will work. Down the road, I will be expected to live in one of the Prince properties. And honestly, if we have more than two children, we will probably want more space." I nodded.

"So, what do you think? Will you stay here with me?" I smiled. "If you prefer, we can modify the second bedroom to give you more space, or you can take the larger room."

"That's not necessary, Severus. That room is perfectly fine. I would be happy to stay with you here. I should inform Minister Shacklebolt of the change. I assume the Floo can be connected."

"Yes. I will inform Lucius and Narcissa and move my things out of the Manor tomorrow morning after I visit with Aurora."

We headed back to the cottage. We each had a small stack of messages waiting for us. I looked over them. I looked up at Severus after finishing.

We both started speaking at the same time.

"Narcissa invited Andromeda to tea in Diagon alley..." I started.

"Andromeda and Narcissa met yesterday afternoon." He stated simply.

We both burst out laughing. "How did she say it went?" I asked him.

"She was pleased with it."

"Lucius was apparently less than pleased. Narcissa told him that he's been making all decisions for both of them for twenty-five years, and she's ready to handle her own decisions on some fronts."

"I wonder how he took that."

"She says he pouted a bit, but he has mostly returned to normal."

"Well, I'm glad. As much as Lucius infuriates me, I wouldn't want to see his marriage damaged. As for Narcissa, it's good to see her reconnecting with Andromeda. I think it will be good for both of them."

After dinner, we took a walk on the grounds. Much to our surprise, we came across Narcissa and Lucius, who were also out taking a stroll.

"Good evening, Narcissa, Lucius." I nodded politely.

Severus squeezed my hand and crossed over, offering his hand to Lucius. "Lucius, Narcissa, I want to thank you for your hospitality these last few weeks. Now that I am recovered, I am going to be leaving in the next few days for my own home."

"Not that hovel in Spinner's End," Lucius said disdainfully. I flinched. Lucius' demeanor showed no evidence that he intended any malice; he really was just that arrogant.

"No, Lucius, this home is not one you have visited. You may still view it a hovel, but it is quite sufficient for my current needs."

Severus was doing a very good job of containing himself, but I could see that his ire was raised.

Narcissa sensed it also. "Severus, you know you are welcome to stay here as long as you wish."

"Thank you, Narcissa, but I feel this is best. But do not worry, I will still be tutoring Draco, and I do not intend to be a stranger."

She smiled sweetly. "Severus, may I have a moment of your time?" She asked him politely.

"Certainly." He followed her a few steps down the garden. I noticed with a smile that when they stopped, he made a very deliberate show of being able to still see Lucius and me.

"How are you, Lucius?"

"Utterly emasculated, thank you for asking," he sulked.

"Ah, the magical binding spell was performed then?"

"Yes. And my wife has developed opinions of her own." He sounded absolutely flummoxed by the development.

"It's a mad world."

"Do not mock me, Healer Prewett."

"I'm sorry. That was unkind of me. I know this must be difficult for you, but these are your circumstances for the next two years. I suggest you do what you do best."

"Bribe and intimidate people?" He asked incredulously, his eyebrow sharply raised.

I couldn't help it; I laughed unabashedly at his comment. "No, that's not what I meant at all. One of your talents, as I see it, is your ability to use nearly any situation to your advantage. Perhaps there is something to be learned during this time."

"Penance?" He sneered.

"Oh, nothing so high-minded as that. It has been observed that when someone loses one of their senses, the others grow sharper over time."

Lucius still looked confused. I groaned. *Is the man really this obtuse?*

"One of your main sources of strength has been taken from you. Use this time to strengthen the others. Your mind, your physical strength, your knowledge base, your political influence, your wealth or whatever you choose. You will get your magic back. You can either sit around feeling sorry for yourself for two years, or you can improve your other skills."

"Interesting thought, Elizabeth. I never thanked you for intervening the other night. I know you were angry as well, and I know you were acting on behalf of Severus more than me, but nevertheless, thank you."

"I don't support violence, Lucius. Although a good haircutting charm might have taught you a lesson."

Lucius looked horrified. His hand darted up to his hair. I laughed. "You are welcome. However, do not expect everything to be forgotten so easily. He felt betrayed by your actions."

"And you?"

"You haven't been friendly to me from the start. The fact that you behaved on your own accord didn't surprise me in the least."

"I hope you know the comments you found so offensive were meant only to protect my friend."

I sighed. "And I have since learned how opportunistic some witches can be with regard to wizards with property. The concept is foreign to me, but I suppose you've seen it firsthand."

"Yes. Narcissa and I married young, but even as Draco's father, it's something I have to be on the lookout for on his behalf."

"Lucius, may I say something?"

"Yes, and I may ignore you." He smirked.

"Don't push him too hard on this marriage thing. He's so young, and I don't think he's ready."

"I do not wish to see him ignore our traditions."

"I really don't think he'll do that. I think he'll honor your traditions in his own time. If you push him, he is more likely to do something foolish that you both regret."

"And what about you? I understand you have recently become acquainted with some of the traditions as well. What is your response?"

Thankfully, Severus and Narcissa had finished their conversation and were headed back towards us. I pardoned myself from my conversation with Lucius and crossed back over to Severus. Once we were alone again, he asked me what Lucius had to say.

"He was polite enough. He thanked me for helping keep things from getting out of hand last week. I gave him some advice on dealing with the temporary loss of his magic."

Severus laughed. "You never cease to amaze me, Lizzie."

"What did Narcissa want?"

"She shared with me a little about her visit with Andromeda. She wants to restore her part of the Black family legacy to little Teddy. Draco will inherit so much from Lucius' family; she thought this was a good way to help restore relations with Andromeda."

"Will Andromeda care?"

"Not about the money or property explicitly, but she will understand the gesture that Narcissa is making, so I think she will be pleased."

"You've done a good thing here, Severus."

"Me? You were the one that started this."

"I did no such thing."

He laughed. "I suppose we'll have to declare it a joint effort."

I looked at him. "We make a good team."

"That we do," he said before capturing my lips in a kiss. I Apparated us back to the cottage, and we proceeded to show each other just how well we worked together. A while later, we drifted off to a contented sleep.

Out on the Town

Chapter 16 of 20

After securing the blessing of Grandmother Prince, Severus and Elizabeth begin their formal courtship.

Monday morning, I sent an owl to the Minister to inform him of my wish to move from Malfoy Manor. Severus sent a note of thanks to his grandmother, and then we walked to the hospital. Draco joined us, and we started rounds by visiting Aurora. She greeted us all pleasantly.

"Good morning, Aurora. Do you feel up to allowing Severus to look into your mind?" She nodded hesitantly.

He asked her to sit down at the table in her room and sat down across from her. Draco and I backed away in order to give them room.

"Relax as much as you can. If you feel any discomfort, I should be able to sense it and exit, but don't hesitate to say something if I don't notice."

She nodded and took a breath. Draco and I watched from our vantage point across the room. She was still; he was seemingly looking through her eyes. Every once in a while, he would move slightly, or he would whisper something. After a few minutes, he moved back in his chair. She leaned forward and rested her head in her hand. They both looked fatigued.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked cautiously.

Severus looked at me. "Yes. I was able to see the walls. They do not look self-imposed. I'm not sure if that makes it more or less difficult to solve. I may have been able to bring down one of the easier ones."

Aurora began murmuring quietly. "Hydra, Virgo, Ursa Major, Cetus, Hercules, Eridanus, Pegasus, Draco, Centaurus..."

"Yes?"

"Not you, Draco, she's naming constellations. By size, if I'm not mistaken." I was intrigued by this development.

Draco looked embarrassed at his mistake. "Another subject I didn't get an O.W.L. in," he said with sheepish grin.

I waved my hand at him. "Severus, it worked. You unlocked part of her professional knowledge. Aurora, do you feel alright?"

She nodded. "I think so. It feels strange."

Severus offered an explanation. "It probably will. I always felt a little off when I took down my Occlumency walls after being around Voldemort."

Aurora clasped her hands together and looked frightened.

I patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Note to all, let's avoid that word around her."

Draco and Severus nodded.

"All is well, Aurora. He's dead. He's not going to hurt anyone again."

She visibly relaxed.

"This is going to be an uncomfortable process for you, Aurora. I think that's enough for today. Good work, Severus. Rest, Aurora."

She nodded.

Severus and I stepped into the hallway for a moment of privacy before he excused himself to go move his things. Today was a Charms day with Draco, so Severus was going to work on the house. I told him he should take Orby with him if he needed some help; he agreed to call the elf for help.

I returned to Draco, and we headed to check on Edward. He was packing up to head home. He had not had any recurrences over the weekend. Rosalyn was also going home. She had to return for therapy a few days per week, but she was ready to be among family. We visited briefly with Marjorie, and I shared the information from St. Mungo's. I would take her to St. Mungo's on Wednesday, and the liaison would take her to the Muggle hospital.

Lavender was our last stop of the day before therapies. She was bustling about her room. Three dress mannequins were lined up against the back wall. She had a pair of shoes in her hand and a pincushion on her wrist; her portfolio was flopped open on her table.

"Lavender, dear, are you okay?"

"I'm meeting with Lady Malfoy after lunch, and she is taking me to my interview. I'm not ready."

"What's not ready? Your designs?"

"No, those are fine. They are fine, aren't they?"

Draco and I both nodded; we were both unsure of how to react to her agitated state. He backed towards the door.

"Then what's not ready?" I was puzzled.

"Me! My clothes, my hair...I look a fright..."

"Lavender, it's 9 a.m. You have over 3 hours." Draco attempted to calm her.

"I know! It's not enough time!"

"Draco, do you think your mother would mind if we asked Boppy to assist Miss Brown this morning?"

"I think that would be fine with Mother. Should I go ask her?" Draco seemed rather desperate to escape.

"Yes, please. Lavender, please show me your dress designs." Lavender calmed a bit and started going over what she had prepared. A few minutes later, Draco reappeared with Boppy. Draco and I excused ourselves and went to the therapy room where Dean was waiting for us. Three hours later, we broke for lunch. I returned to the training room after lunch, and we worked for several hours getting Draco ready for his Charms O.W.L. He had most of the basics down, but some of his work lacked finesse. He would apply too much power and break the item he had just repaired. His frustration was evident.

"Draco, you are doing fine. You are still adjusting to the lifting of the binding spell. We'll keep at it tomorrow."

He nodded. I could tell he was worried. "Get some air, Draco. Call your friends; go have some fun. You've been working very hard. You're trying to accomplish a great deal in a short amount of time."

He rolled his eyes.

"There's something else, isn't there?"

"Father wants to talk to me after dinner. He said it's about the Courtship Agreement with Pansy."

"I thought that was settled. Severus won't consent to it."

"I don't know. He said he'd given it some more thought, and he wanted my thoughts on something. I am NOT ready for this conversation. She at least needs to finish Hogwarts first." Draco froze, mortified at his slip.

"What? Has Miss Parkinson not graduated yet?"

He kicked at one shoe with the other. "I'm not talking about Pansy."

"Oh. May I ask who you are talking about?"

"Astoria Greengrass. She'll be a seventh-year this year, but she wants to go to university next year."

"Is she the type of young lady your parents will accept?"

"I think so."

"Pureblood?"

"Yes. Beautiful, proper, intelligent, sweet. Everything Mother and Father could possibly want in a daughter-in-law."

"And she is interested in you?"

"Yes."

"And you are concerned because of your father?"

"Yes. There's probably some bargain in place that I don't know about."

"Draco, have you talked to your mother about Miss Greengrass?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't think I needed to yet. I thought we had already dodged this hex."

"Don't panic. Talk to your father tonight. Find out what he's thinking. If you think telling him about Miss Greengrass is a good idea, do so."

"You are so damn trusting, Elizabeth. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but this is my father we are talking about. Hoping he'll do the right thing is like going with Lovegood on a nature hike. Foolish and dangerous."

"Then talk to Narcissa. Who else handles your father better?"

"I need to go get ready for dinner. I'll think about talking to Mother."

I took a quick shower when I got back to the cottage. It had been a long afternoon of training with Draco. Though not as physically strenuous as dueling, the charms we were working on were still demanding. I came out feeling refreshed, and I heard Severus in the living room. I was intrigued to find one of my dresses had been placed gently on the bed with a note on top of it.

Put this on.

Smiling, I dressed quickly and stepped into the living room. He was sitting at the table.

"What's going on?" I asked, curious.

"This arrived from Bill today." He motioned to a stack of parchment. "It's the Courtship Agreement. He signed it. When we sign it, it will be official. The Ministry will get a copy automatically."

"This is Ministry business?" Once again I was shocked at the customs.

He smiled. "Yes, dear. So tonight, we are going out."

"I don't get the connection."

"We're going out to celebrate. What's not to understand?"

"Severus, what aren't you telling me?"

He laughed. "I can't get anything past you, can I? One of Grandmother's provisions is that I take you out at least twice per week. Actually, her provision was once per week. Bill updated it to two times. It seems they both think that I will just lock you away."

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Oh, I doubt that it's just you they are worried about. I told you I buried myself in work and study for years."

"I've already read through the document. Take a look at it; if you don't have any objections, we'll sign it. I'll go get ready to give you a chance to look it over."

I picked up the agreement and read it over. It was fairly straightforward. Severus was right. It was basically just a statement of intentions. There were some provisions about dating etiquette, but it all seemed like common sense.

Minister Shackbolt had also sent me an owl. He was concerned about my request to leave the Manor before the hospital was empty. He inquired as to my reasons, and he reminded me that we had originally talked about three months. I groaned. I really did not want to get into my reasons for wanting to leave the Manor. He had asked for a meeting with me on Wednesday, which I accepted.

Severus emerged from the bath looking positively scrumptious. Once again, he was in a simple button-down shirt with Muggle trousers, with his hair tied back neatly at the base of his neck with a black ribbon. As he was tying his shoes, he looked up at me and chuckled, breaking me from my admiration.

"What is it, Severus?"

"I was just wondering if I am in danger here. You look like you are about to pounce."

"I was seriously considering it," I said, boldly at first, then blushing a bit.

He walked over and helped me to my feet, giving me a quick kiss. "My dear, I would be happy to be your quarry later tonight. But for right now, did you get a chance to look over the paperwork?"

"Yes, and everything looks in order."

He conjured a quill and handed it to me. I signed, and I then handed the quill back to him. He signed as well. The parchment glowed blue and disappeared. It must have been a Portkey that activated when all signatures were in place.

"Now, let's go. Our reservations are at seven. Oh, and don't be alarmed when we get there. I used your name for the reservations; I thought it would draw less attention than mine. The restaurant is in Diagon Alley, but it's a bit of an out-of-the-way place." I nodded at his explanation.

We Apparated into a small alcove off a cobblestone street. He led me around the corner and through the door. Much to Severus' chagrin, the restaurant was much different than he expected.

It was located in the back of a pub that was bustling with activity. It seemed the only way to access the restaurant was through the pub. He growled as he looked around at the crowd of people. In the distance, we heard the shattering of a glass. My eyes followed the direction of the sound. The young bartender stood with his mouth agape, staring at us. He looked vaguely familiar to me, but I clearly was not the source of his shock.

Severus nodded sharply in his direction. "Mr. Finnegan, good evening."

The young man sputtered, unable to formulate a greeting. Severus quickly steered me over to the hostess stand. The hostess, thankfully, did not seem to recognize him.

As she led us back to our table, Severus hissed, "Bill told me this was a quiet restaurant."

"Oh," the hostess stated nonchalantly, "we just expanded; we've added twenty-five tables and the bar area up front. Business has been booming since the battle. We actually just reopened last week."

"Thank you." I smiled to her. "I would guess Bill hasn't been here in a while, then, Severus."

He grimaced. The hostess presented our table. We were a distance from the bar, but I could still see the movement up front. Severus had his back to the bar, so he could not see the activity there. We ordered and chatted. I told Severus about the owl from Minister Shacklebolt.

"He's probably going to want to know why you want to move out."

"I know. I'm not sure what to tell him. If I let him know that it's because of Lucius, it may cause problems for the Malfoys, and I really don't want to do that to Narcissa and Draco. If I let him know it has something to do with us, well, then we're on someone else's radar."

"Kingsley may know about Lucius' knowledge of the attack, Elizabeth. I don't think I'd worry too much about that."

I nodded, seeing the logic in his statement. "How did the renovations go today?"

"I made some good progress. The house is in fairly good shape. Albus knew about the house; he used to send the house-elves out every few months, so it's really only been neglected for about a year."

Severus went on to talk in a bit of detail about the changes he was making. As he was speaking, my mind wandered, and I noticed the attention we were getting. The bartender was still staring, along with an attractive dark-skinned girl who was talking to him casually. She looked pleasant, but rather sad. She was joined by a tall, athletic, sandy-haired man and a pleasant looking brunette. They both also seemed interested in Severus. I shook my head and returned to my conversation with Severus, but I couldn't help but notice a few others that seemed to be whispering. None of it seemed malicious; it was more benign curiosity.

A middle-aged blonde witch entered the pub. She was trying to look younger than her age, judging by her garish appearance, which screamed for attention. She had bleached blonde, short curly hair, pale skin, bright red lipstick and jeweled glasses. Her nails were long and painted a blinding red. She was what my Muggle friends would have called a cougar. She flitted about the people at the bar, paying particular attention to the sandy-haired young man.

As Severus and I were finishing dinner, George and Charlie entered the pub with Ron and Hermione. The young people pulled them over, and I could see the brunette motion over to us. George caught my eye and gave me a sly smile before he turned to the group. Whatever he said to them, they stopped gawking and returned to their merriment.

The older blonde spotted Charlie and tried to start a conversation with her words AND hands, which he was simply not having; he extricated himself from her clutches with the subtlety of a locomotive. I couldn't help but giggle at the scene. Severus scowled.

"I'm sorry, Severus; my nephews are here, and Charlie is having a bit of trouble." Severus didn't even turn around. "Do you mind if we go say hello?" I asked.

"Honestly, I'd rather not, Elizabeth. Those are former students; we do not share fond memories. But I need to visit the loo, so if you want to go be sociable, now would be a good time."

I nodded. Severus paid for our meal; he stood and helped me to my feet, kissing my cheek quickly. He turned and greeted George and Charlie silently but politely; then he turned and headed towards the back of the bar.

The blonde froze in her tracks and eyed Severus gleefully, a predatory glint in her eyes. My nostrils flared protectively, but I contained myself and headed up to visit with George, Charlie, Ron and the rest of their friends. The blonde deliberately went around me to the other side of the bar.

Charlie greeted me with a giant bear hug, and George quickly introduced me to their friends. It seems these were mostly a group of students who had played Quidditch together over the years. The sandy-haired young man was now a professional player, which explained the blonde's special interest in him. I chatted with them amicably for a few minutes, and then I saw Severus emerge from the restroom. The blonde had spotted him also and managed to corner him near the back wall of the restaurant. I could tell he was very uncomfortable, but the sight was truly funny to an outsider. I couldn't suppress my laughter.

George, who was talking to the girl named Angelina in a reserved manner, looked up with curiosity, as did Charlie, who was also facing the back wall. George bristled.

"It seems Severus is trying to escape the clutches of a cougar in the back of the bar." I joked to Hermione.

Hermione laughed at first, but then she got a good look at the blonde. She looked at me, her eyes serious and angry. "Go get him," she growled, incensed. "Now." She was practically shaking with rage. "We will explain in a moment." I looked down to see that her wand was drawn. Ron was clutching her wrist tightly; clearly, he was concerned she would do something impulsive. He nodded his agreement with Hermione.

I headed to the back of the bar quickly. "Severus, Charlie insists that you come say hello," I said, taking his hand and pulling him past the blonde, who looked at first annoyed and then strangely satisfied.

We paused as we reached the group. Severus said a quick hello, but he was in a hurry to get out of there. Ron still had a death grip on Hermione's hand. She motioned for us to leave the pub. Severus nodded imperceptibly. She and Ron followed close behind.

When we got out of the pub, Hermione was seething. "That vile woman just won't go away. Professor, I would not go back in there. Who knows what story she'll concoct even now?"

"Miss Granger, do calm yourself." Severus sounded bored. "Rita Skeeter is a mere insect." Ron laughed; Hermione looked perplexed for a moment.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I have my sources as well. Draco very much regrets some of his youthful antics. But nevertheless, Elizabeth and I have finished our meal, and we have other places to be this evening. Enjoy yourselves, and please give our apologies to the rest of the group."

I was still confused. "Can someone explain what just happened?" Obviously, this woman was more than some random barfly.

"Rita Skeeter is a reporter, Elizabeth, and she is not a particularly ethical one. She has a very tenuous relationship with the truth; she prefers to deal in rumor and innuendo. Miss Granger was, at least formerly, one of her favorite targets, though I think she was rather intrigued by my appearance here this evening as well."

Ron pointed down to where Severus' and my hands were joined. "Don't hex me, sir, but I think she picked up on Aunt Lizzie's relationship with you," he mumbled. He tried, with modest success, not to shudder.

"I am aware of that, Mr. Weasley."

"Make sure she doesn't follow you, sir," Hermione stated earnestly.

"We'll be Apparating to the Manor," I snarled. "I'd like to see her try."

Severus leaned in and whispered, "I had not intended to go to the Manor, Elizabeth."

"Oh."

"However," he sighed, "we can make a quick stop off there, and if anyone does try to follow us, they will obviously be thwarted. We can then move on to our next stop. I will not have Skeeter *there*."

Ron and Hermione looked confused, but they nodded their agreement.

Severus watched them go back into the pub, and then he escorted me around the corner to the Apparition point. He put his arm around me, and we appeared in the cottage.

"Now," he said, "I have something to show you. Close your eyes."

"What?" I asked curiously, but did as I was told. I felt the pull of Apparition for a second time, and I found myself standing in front of the house Severus had shown me the night before.

"Our future home," he whispered in my ear. I was dumbstruck. I was amazed at the change in the house in just 24 hours. The overgrown lawn had been trimmed neatly; a small flower garden resided under each window. Surfaces were freshly painted; the windows were gleaming.

"You did all this today?"

"Orby cleaned up the outside. Come on inside."

The inside was even more impressive. The whole house had been freshly painted, the floors refinished. A warm, cozy rug was on the floor of the living room. There were comfortable-looking chairs and couch. Severus had set up an office in the den. It already looked neat and organized. The bookshelves were full as well. The kitchen looked like the place a family would naturally gather. I took it all in, admiring Severus' work.

"It looks wonderful."

He led me up the stairs. He had set up the smallest bedroom as an office for me. The third bedroom was set up as a charming guest room. "I don't know if we'll ever need to house guests, but that's what this room is for usually."

He led me into the room designated as mine. "You can of course redecorate it however you wish. That goes for the other rooms in the house, too. I want you to feel at home here."

At that point, he started peppering kisses down my neck, and I turned to face him. "I think there's another room you need to show me." His mouth captured mine, and I could see the passion burning in his eyes when the kiss broke.

"Too far away," he gasped, quickly maneuvering us over to the bed. In an instant, my dress was pulled over my head. Severus stood looking at me, shocked at the fact that I wasn't wearing a bra or underwear. "You little minx."

"Well..." I kissed his neck as I unbuttoned his shirt "...the note said 'put this on'." I motioned to the dress at my feet. "There were no knickers or a bra out for me." I pushed his shirt off his shoulders and unfastened his belt.

"Do you always follow directions this well, Elizabeth?" One hand found my backside and pulled me flush against him. The other tangled in my hair, and he kissed me again.

"Try me," I gasped out as the kiss broke. He quickly shed the rest of his clothing and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Take me in your mouth," he breathed, scooting to the center of the bed. I climbed over him and placed my hands on him. I ran my tongue in circles over him before lowering my mouth onto him. He moaned as I worked on him. His hips began to move, sparking a moan from me, which excited him further. One hand wound into my hair, and he called out for more. He pulled me down onto him and swore profusely as I continued. Before long, he shouted his release, and I crawled up next to him.

He rolled on top of me and kissed me tenderly. He ran his hands down my body, rubbing my breasts with both hands as he kissed across my jaw and down my neck. He slid down my body again, using his mouth and hands to drive me absolutely mad. He quickly pushed me over the edge. I closed my eyes briefly, only to feel his lips on mine again.

"Oh, I'm not through with you yet, witch." After another searing kiss, he rolled over onto his back and pulled me on top of him. I straddled him and slid down over him, relishing the feel of him filling me. I placed my hands on his chest as he gripped my hips, and we started to move slowly together. We found our rhythm, and our eyes locked. His movements became more urgent, his hands encouraging me to move more quickly and enthusiastically against his body.

I arched my back as my orgasm overtook me. He rode it out, and then rolled me over, twining my fingers with his over my head as he drove in feverishly. I wrapped my legs around him and whispered his name. He kissed me hard one more time, then threw his head back and released into me with abandon, which pushed me into oblivion yet again.

He curled up next to me, draping one arm across my stomach and placing his head near my heart. He chuckled. "I guess we'll christen the other bedroom tomorrow." I laughed.

"No, you don't understand; I had candles set up in there, a bottle of wine, a whole seductive routine."

"You're lucky we even made it up the stairs, Severus."

The Beetle Bites

Chapter 17 of 20

Rita's article is published, much to Elizabeth's chagrin. However, the reporter's triumph is short-lived. The next few months pass in relative tranquility.

The following Monday was one of those days. I hadn't slept well, and I just generally did not want to get up and face the day. As I was trying to convince myself to move, I heard a loud thud on the window. I looked up to see a small owl buzzing outside the window, looking a little dazed. I opened the window, and it darted inside. I detached the little owl's load, and the owl flew around the room a time or two before zooming back out and on its way.

The package contained a letter and a magazine. I recognized Molly's handwriting on the letter.

Lizzie,

I thought you should see this before you go out today. It's not pleasant, but try not to get too upset. This woman is known for writing these kinds of pieces. Just ask Hermione.

Molly

The other item Molly had sent was a magazine called *Witch Weekly*. I immediately saw a picture of Severus and me from the previous Monday night. I groaned inwardly. It had been too much to hope that we would escape from that incident without fanfare.

Taciturn Teacher Tangled in Triangle

Ministry sources reveal that a Courtship Agreement was filed last Monday afternoon on behalf of war hero Severus Snape and American Elizabeth Prewett. Snape was recently restored to his birthright by Lady Evelyn Prince, currently of Ireland, and it seems Prewett wasted no time ensuring her chance to be the next Lady Prince.

The couple was spotted Monday night canoodling at a popular Diagon Alley restaurant and pub. Snape seemed completely enamored with the young witch, no doubt due to the brazen redhead's resemblance to the potion master's long lost unrequited love, Lily Evans Potter.

When Snape excused himself for a few moments, Prewett seized the opportunity to boldly flirt with Oliver Wood, Keeper for Puddlemere United. She also received a very enthusiastic embrace from another unidentified wizard. Prewett was quick to abandon the young people when Snape returned. This reporter had attempted to speak Professor Snape, but no comment could be obtained. Prewett dragged a protesting Snape from the pub with the assistance of Hermione Granger and her current boyfriend, who is reported to be a relative of Prewett.

In an even more shocking turn of events, it was revealed that last week Snape moved out of Malfoy Manor after an argument with Lord Lucius Malfoy over Prewett. Days later, Prewett also left Manor grounds, despite having signed a contract with the Ministry to live there for three months. It seems that Lord Malfoy was quite concerned over the relationship between Prewett and Draco Malfoy, sole heir to the largest magical fortune in all of Britain. In a conversation with Blaise Zabini, young Malfoy's closest friend, he expressed shock and anger over the revelations regarding Prewett's pattern of targeting wealthy wizards.

"They are quite close... romantic relationship is ridiculous. She started as his mentor... but now he sees her differently... Draco's a gentleman... sure nothing inappropriate has happened... respect for Professor Snape. Lord Malfoy was angry about the relationship...."

This reporter has also learned that Draco recently rejected the courtship agreement of longtime girlfriend Pansy Parkinson, who was devastated by the news. Rumor has it that both Prewett and Snape were behind Draco's decision to jilt the now heartbroken Miss Parkinson. One possible explanation is that there may be sort of sordid plural relationship occurring between the three. Visitors to the Manor report that the three often spend hours alone together, often in Prewett's cottage.

I threw the magazine down. *How dare she?* To attack me for a story was one thing, but the allegations regarding Severus and Draco were appalling. And to try to make a familial hug with Charlie into something sordid was preposterous and inexcusable. I blasted a vase on the nightstand, noting with dark amusement that it was the one Severus had blasted when he was so angry with Lucius.

I proceeded to levitate and toss items around the room in anger for a few moments. A distressed Severus ran into the room, wand drawn, clad only in his sleep pants.

"Elizabeth, are you alright?"

"Damn Skeeter and her lies and innuendo! Horrible, despicable excuse for a human being...."

Severus caught me around the waist and started whispering in my ear. He managed to pull my wand from my fingertips.

"Calm down, Elizabeth; what's happened?"

I pointed to the magazine that I had thrown across the room. He crossed over to it, still holding both of our wands in his hand. He absentmindedly cast a quick Reparo on the broken vase while flipping through the magazine. A few moments later, he burst out laughing. I was less than entertained.

"It's not funny. She's managed to disparage you, me, Draco, Charlie, some kid named Oliver Wood, even Lucius and Narcissa with her lies. And who the hell is Zabini?"

Severus wasn't even trying to hide his amusement. "Blaise Zabini is a good friend of Draco's. That much is true. His words were likely twisted beyond recognition like the rest of the so called facts in this piece of rubbish. Rita has certainly upped her game. She didn't even accuse Miss Granger of orchestrating a triadic relationship when she went after her a few years ago."

"Why is this funny to you?"

"First, because it's typical Skeeter, and I expected it. Second, because it's so absurd and yet so shrewd. You have to admit, the embroidery of the facts is artfully done. And third, you are beyond adorable when you are all fired up."

I pouted, mildly placated at Severus' words, but still livid about the article. "So much for peace and quiet." I sulked further. "Is anything to be done?"

"Probably not, and if there is anything to be done, I suggest we leave it to the Malfoys. The smears on Draco's character are the most potentially damaging. The people close to you all know the truth and won't care about Skeeter's lies. Draco is still single, and the type of woman he will eventually pursue will be more likely to care about scandal. Narcissa will understand that fact and appeal to Lucius for action. I guarantee you that retribution from Lord Malfoy will be sufficiently painful," he mused.

I nodded. The idea of incurring Lucius' wrath over his only son was frightening indeed.

A half hour later, Severus and I had showered, dressed, had a quick breakfast and headed to the Manor. We decided to go in a little early to deal with the article if needed. We were greeted by a seething Draco.

"That woman is going to pay for this. She's going to ruin everything. And what the hell is with Blaise's comments?" Sparks flew onto the floor from his wand.

"Draco, calm down. I've already had to disarm one person today; I'd rather not have to repeat the process." Severus spoke quietly but firmly.

"Gentlemen, let's take this into my office. We are being watched, and I'd rather not let this get any more out of control." Terry, Lavender, and Dean were all peeking out of their rooms.

The men followed me into the office. Draco continued to rant for a few more minutes while Severus and I watched in awe.

Suddenly, Boppy popped in. "Mr. Zabini is here to see you, Master Draco. He says you summoned him, and he needs to speak with you."

"Oh, this ought to be good." Draco fumed.

"Draco, this is Rita Skeeter we are talking about," Severus reasoned. "Let's find out what really happened."

Boppy reappeared with a handsome young wizard who looked thoroughly embarrassed.

"Draco, I didn't say those things. Well, I did, but they didn't mean what she made them mean. She twisted my words Draco. On my honor," he appealed.

Severus scoffed.

"Very well then, Professor. On my fortune."

"Prove it." I spoke up, my voice stonier than usual.

"What? Oh, you must be Miss Prewett."

"Healer Prewett," I asserted coldly. "And you heard me, Mr. Zabini. If you did nothing wrong, prove it." I flicked my wand at the cabinet, and the Pensieve floated out and settled on the table. We had moved it up from the cottage when I moved out over the weekend.

"With pleasure." Zabini answered my challenge with a devilish smile, putting his wand to his temple and extracting a memory thread. He deposited it into the Pensieve. Severus, Draco and I dove into the Pensieve together.

Blaise was seated at the bar in a pub I don't recognize when Skeeter approached. She offered to buy him a drink and coaxed him to a table off to the side of the bar.

"So," Rita began with saccharine sweetness, "I have heard some disturbing rumors about young Mr. Malfoy lately. As his closest friend, I would hope you could assist me in setting the record straight."

She reached across the table and brushed the top of her quill across Blaise's cheek. He visibly recoiled. Rita gave an unattractive giggle. "Don't you want to help your friend?"

"Of course." Blaise's voice was full of skepticism.

"Well then, let's begin. I understand that Draco has recently ended his relationship with Pansy Parkinson."

"Yes, Ms. Skeeter, that is true. Draco never had those kinds of feelings for Pansy. He felt obligated to give things a try when they were younger, but he declined the Courtship Agreement recently. She had her heart set on becoming the next Lady Malfoy. No doubt she is devastated that she will not hold that title now." Blaise's tone revealed that he held a fairly low opinion of Miss Parkinson.

"Why did he choose to end things now?"

"He should have ended things long ago, but he was afraid of his parents' reaction. His hand was forced. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, so he concocted a plan with Professor Snape to use the terms of his Apprenticeship Agreement to avoid the contract. Pansy was displeased and threw a tantrum. Draco then ended things permanently."

"And was Severus' paramour involved in the discussions?"

"What?"

"Elizabeth Prewett, the woman Severus just filed a Courtship Agreement with?"

"Oh, well, she is also Draco's supervisor and tutor, so she probably was involved in the discussions about Draco's training and the timing of the contract."

"Tell me about Draco's relationship with Prewett."

"Well, she started as his mentor, but now they are quite close. I think he sees her like an older sister. Draco always wished he had siblings."

"And as to the rumors about Miss Prewett and Draco having a clandestine affair, what do you say to that?"

"The idea that they have a romantic relationship is ridiculous. Even if he had feelings toward her like that, which he does not, Draco is a gentleman. I can be absolutely sure that nothing inappropriate has happened between them. She is completely enthralled with the professor, which Draco is thrilled about. He even defended them with Lord Malfoy when he was angry about the relationship. Draco has tremendous respect for Professor Snape. Now, if you are through with this preposterous drivel, I bid you good day." Blaise stood and turned his back on Rita Skeeter.

The memory ended there. We emerged from the Pensieve. Draco shook Blaise's hand and apologized for doubting him. I also shook Blaise's hand, telling him I hoped the next time we chatted, it was under better circumstances. Severus just nodded to Blaise, who still looked slightly afraid of his former professor.

Draco called Boppy to escort Blaise out. Boppy reported that Lord and Lady Malfoy wished for all three of us to join them for lunch. Draco sent our acceptance with the elf, and the three of us commenced our morning duties.

When I returned to the office just before lunch, there was a pile of letters on my desk. As I was sorting through them, Severus entered the office.

"The red ones are Howlers," he said. He quickly helped me separate them from the others. They started screeching and bursting into flames just as we finished. I looked at Severus, both annoyed and amused.

"Really? Our love life is this important to people? That's absolutely pathetic."

"I know."

I started to look at the rest of the letters. Again, I sorted them by people I knew versus names I did not recognize. I paused in shock when I came across a letter from Grandmother Prince.

"Oh, no." I showed it to Severus.

"Open it, dear. It may not be bad." I opened it gingerly.

Elizabeth,

I was informed this morning that you have been the victim of the poisonous words of Rita Skeeter. Do not pay it any mind, my dear. Those that know you will know the truth of the matter. This too shall pass. Severus loves you, and no amount of character defamation will change that.

Evelyn

I smiled. "She's a smart lady, Severus. I shall try to take her advice."

The next one I recognized was from Hermione Granger. It was addressed to both of us.

Elizabeth/Professor,

I just wanted to let you know that I still have the glass jar. I'm sure Professor Snape knows the spell. Ginny told me to tell you that she can teach you a wicked Bat Bogey Hex. Harry said he needed an Obliviate from the imagery, but he knows that Skeeter is a fraud and so does most of the Wizarding World. Ron said that sound-dampening charms work pretty well on Howlers, but don't try an Incendio before they are finished. He lost an eyebrow that way once.

Hermione

P.S. And tell Draco that while I'm sorry he was dragged into this, what goes around does, in fact, come around.

Severus barked out a laugh. "That insufferable little know-it-all! I'm glad she's on our side. She's more than a little scary."

We headed to lunch with the Malfoys. Lucius was absolutely furious. Narcissa was mildly upset, but she seemed to know that Skeeter lacked credibility with most people with any sense in Britain. Lucius tried to enlist Severus and me in a plot of revenge, but we declined. I didn't want to grace it with a response. I did wish Lucius luck in his endeavors, and I reminded him not to do anything illegal.

"What is the real damage?" I inquired. "I think there should be attention given to solving any legitimate problems caused by this before you address revenge."

Draco spoke softly. "Father, Mother, I have a concern."

"Yes?" Narcissa addressed her son gently. "What is troubling you, son?"

"I have been meaning to speak with both of you, but I didn't know how you would react. I have developed an interest in someone, and I am worried about how her family will see me in light of this."

"Draco, who is the young lady?" Lucius was cautious with his son.

"Astoria Greengrass." He looked to his mother for approval. She considered his words.

"Is that the younger daughter?" Lucius asked pointedly.

"Yes, Father."

"Is that the petite, blonde, deferential girl? Clever, but quiet?" Severus offered, clearly trying to help. Draco nodded.

"Well, the Greengrass family certainly represents a suitable match for the Malfoys, Draco. Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Lucius looked confused.

"You seemed set on Pansy. Also, Astoria is young, and she wants to continue her education after Hogwarts. If we proceed, it will be several years before she wants to marry."

"How do you feel about that, Draco?" Narcissa prodded mildly.

"It's probably best. I've got two or three more years of my apprenticeship, and I'd like to be established as a Healer before marriage."

Lucius considered Draco's words. "There's no reason you can't marry while she's completing her education. You will probably want to be married a few years before having a child anyway."

"Lucius, darling, perhaps we should slow down a bit. Draco, do you have any thoughts on timing as to when to start the process?"

"I was thinking I would introduce her to you and Father over winter holiday from Hogwarts. I'm sure there will be a ball or something for which I will need a date. We could start the negotiations after that, hopefully, to have the Courtship Agreement in place by the time she finishes Hogwarts."

"That seems like a reasonable plan, Draco."

"Draco, I will address the accusations with Mrs. Greengrass. She is on the board of a charitable foundation that I serve on as well," Narcissa stated calmly. "She will understand."

"And I," Lucius growled, "will deal with Skeeter."

Over the next few months, Rita Skeeter quickly learned that nobody wants Lucius Malfoy to "deal with them." Draco shared with Lucius the fact that Rita was an Animagus. That, along with information that Harry shared with Lucius about what he had heard about her actions against Bathilda Bagshot, earned her some unwanted attention from the Auror Department. Rumor has it that she confessed readily when Auror Robards entered the room with an empty jam jar.

She was stripped of her journalistic credentials and bound to her human form permanently. She faced a heavy fine from the industry, and several of her past subjects sued her for defamation. They were all strangely represented by the same barrister on a pro bono basis. She was required to appear at each and every civil trial, which took a tremendous amount of her time. None of the defendants collected any money from her, as she was already bankrupt, but they all received the satisfaction of having the real story published in the *Daily Prophet* by Dullen D. Reary.

The weeks passed, and life slowly returned to normal. Lavender headed home that week, eager to start preparing for her apprenticeship. She continued to correspond with Narcissa, who also contacted Fleur about her work. The two younger women formed a friendship based on their mutual interest in fashion. They talked of going into business together down the road. Narcissa agreed to serve as an adviser and their financial backer.

Jessica and Terry left shortly thereafter as well. Terry had more therapy to undergo, but he was making enough progress that he wanted to go home.

Dean stayed at the Manor until the first of September when he headed to Hogwarts, having decided that he wanted to complete his final year of schooling after all. He was walking with a cane by this point, and he continued to visit St. Mungo's for therapy with me twice per week.

Aurora's memory was fully unlocked by the middle of August, and she returned to Hogwarts to resume her prior career.

Draco passed his Charms O.W.L. with an "O" and sustained his level of hard work preparing for the N.E.W.T.s coming up in November. Severus worked with him diligently, and Severus continued to use the Malfoy lab for his research.

Severus and Lucius worked on repairing their friendship slowly. Lucius was adjusting to his life without magic, and he was starting to explore Muggle technology as a means of further growing the Malfoy business empire. He employed Dean as a consultant, and Dean visited during school breaks to brainstorm with Lucius and Draco.

Narcissa and I generally preferred to go out to Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley for our social time together. We were occasionally joined by Andromeda, who had grown quite close to her sister once again.

Aunt Muriel passed away. She left her home to Percy; he had always been her favorite nephew. Percy and Audrey prepared for their wedding in early December, and they decided that it would be held at their future home. Aunt Muriel left two of the house-elves to Percy, but she bequeathed Orby to me. I contemplated offering Orby his freedom, but Severus reminded me that he would not view that favorably. So, Severus prepared a lovely suite behind the kitchen of our home, and Orby was invited to join us permanently.

I joined the staff of St. Mungo's permanently, though still part-time while I worked with Draco. Lucius was currently in talks with the board of St. Mungo's and the Ministry. He had developed an idea for a premier therapy facility in London that would serve all of Europe in treating magical injuries like those of Dean, Terry and Jessica. He saw it as a way to really put the stamp on the fact that the Malfoys were working on recovery.

Severus continued his research, working quietly at our home and at the Manor on larger projects with Draco. We visited Grandmother Prince about once per month, which was always an enjoyable experience.

Before we knew it, Draco's N.E.W.T.s arrived. He received the necessary marks on the exams, and he was almost immediately rewarded with a formal apprenticeship offer from St. Mungo's. It seemed he was going to be my trainee again, at least part of the time.

Severus and I continued to grow closer. There were many spats, but they were generally short lived and often ended with either laughter or passion. Our talk of marriage and family changed from an "if" to a "when," and we soon found ourselves anxiously waiting for the allotted six months to pass before we could consider the next step in our relationship.

Percy's Wedding

Chapter 18 of 20

December arrives; Percy and Audrey's wedding is the event of the season. And this time, a Weasley manages to marry without a Death Eater attack interrupting.

It was strange to walk up to Muriel's house without feeling an ounce of dread. It had been two months since her death, and Audrey had done a fine job updating the large house for her new family with Percy. Molly greeted us as we walked into the entrance hall. Audrey's love of historical artifacts showed in the decorating.

They were blended with a warm, welcoming décor in a way that was both attractive and comfortable at the same time. Severus was at my side; he was muttering about his dress robes under his breath.

Molly led us to the former hospital wing; the room had been transfigured into a ballroom for the wedding. Molly cheerily babbled about how Audrey had told her they would use part of it for the nursery when the time came. I could hear the flurry of the house-elves in the kitchen. Orby, Kreacher and a few of the Hogwarts elves were on hand to assist. Knowing Percy, the wedding would be as grand of an event as he could manage; all the help would be appreciated.

We made our way to our seats and waited for the ceremony to begin. Audrey was an only child, so much of the wedding party was going to consist of Weasley siblings and significant others. Percy wanted his influential friends seen, so he had asked Harry and Neville to serve as ushers and the Minister to perform the ceremony. Harry led Arthur and Molly down front, and Neville escorted Mr. and Mrs. Hopkirk to their seats.

Percy stood at the front with the Minister. Kingsley looked as regal as always. Ron and Hermione entered first, both looking charming but a bit nervous. They were followed by Bill and Fleur, whose abdomen was protruding slightly with early pregnancy. Charlie escorted his little sister in next. They both wore bright, mischievous smiles that made us all a wee bit nervous. Finally, George escorted Audrey's close friend Susan Bones down the aisle.

Audrey was a beautiful bride, and Percy's face when he saw her was priceless. For a moment, he forgot himself, and his smug expression turned to one of childlike awe. The ceremony was lovely, and soon the guests moved to the back of the room while it was magically transformed for the dinner and dancing.

We milled about until we located our seats. I took my seat next to Narcissa, politely greeting Lucius. Kingsley helped Andromeda into the seat next to Severus, and then he sat next to Minerva. She had been escorted by Xenophilus Lovegood. Minerva looked perfectly comfortable with the eccentric wizard, but Lucius, who was seated on the other side of Mr. Lovegood, looked quite alarmed.

Andromeda and Narcissa were chatting pleasantly about Teddy. Narcissa seemed a bit wistful for Draco's childhood. Kingsley and Minerva were talking about the new term at Hogwarts and her plans for some new classes at the school, one of which was going to be on magical culture. Lucius was trying to participate in their conversation, but he kept getting derailed by Xenophilus and his talk of adventures to find exotic creatures. Lucius breathed a huge sigh of relief when Mr. Lovegood went off to find his daughter at the conclusion of dinner and the toasts.

I excused myself to go talk to the family, leaving Severus at the table as I knew mingling was his own persona*Crucio*.

The first person I found was Molly. "Molly, everything was beautiful. You should all be proud. They seem very happy." Molly nodded and started to tear up again.

George, Charlie and Ginny were huddled around the head table, obviously plotting. Ginny cast a Sonorus Charm to get the attention of the room.

"Ladies and gentleman, before we begin the dancing, my brothers and I have a bit of a surprise for the bride and groom." Ginny smiled brightly as she addressed the room.

The room was then entertained by a presentation of photos of the bride and groom. Audrey's were all exceptionally tasteful and flattering, showing her as a toddler on a toy broom, then as a young witch playing around with wandless magic, on Platform 9 ¾ her first year at Hogwarts, plus a few more as the years past, culminating with a photo from her leaving feast at Hogwarts. There were a few pictures of her with her parents. Percy's photos were a bit more embarrassing, but his siblings were generally very kind. The presentation wrapped up with photos of the couple during their time dating, their engagement photo and finally a photo of them in front of the new house the night of the wedding rehearsal.

Molly was crying again, as was Audrey's mother. Percy, who had been initially very nervous about the display, embraced his brothers and sister. Audrey was then given a warm welcome by the Weasley siblings as well, which prompted even further tears from Molly.

At that point, the party began. Most of the young people took to the dance floor. I spotted Dean Thomas, who had brought Lavender as his date. Seeing Dean up and about really made me smile. Luna Lovegood and her date, a young man I did not recognize, were dancing decidedly out of time with the music, but they looked happy. I had been informed by Hermione that Luna and Neville had decided to part ways amicably. Apparently, their romance was brought about by the pressure of the war, and they ultimately decided they were better as friends. Neville was dancing, with more skill than I would have expected, with a pleasant blonde named Hannah.

Harry and Ginny were pulled close, to mixed reactions from her brothers, though Molly looked pleased. Hermione was trying to protect her toes from Ron's awkward steps. George wasn't dancing, but he was chatting with Angelina, the young woman I had met the night we encountered Rita at the pub. Charlie had gotten up the courage to bring Gawain as his guest, and they were also talking near the bar.

I looked around for Bill and Fleur. Curiously, I spotted Fleur engrossed in conversation with Narcissa, but Bill was nowhere to be seen. Even more curious was that I didn't see Severus.

Lucius was speaking to the Minister; Percy was trying to break into the conversation. Audrey and Minerva seemed to be having a pleasant dialogue. Arthur and Molly were standing near the table visiting with Andromeda.

Lucius' mobile telephone rang. Everyone looked and then quickly went about their business. Arthur's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. It was truly comical to see Arthur try to question Lucius about Muggle technology. Lucius was overwhelmingly gracious, particularly given their history, but you could see behind his gray eyes that he was truly becoming bored with Arthur's constant questions.

I walked over to Narcissa and Fleur and took a seat. We chatted for a few minutes. Narcissa asked me where Severus had disappeared to; I couldn't help but notice that Fleur shot her a look. Narcissa quickly changed the topic back to the baby, and Fleur positively glowed. It seemed that Fleur and Narcissa's latest project was a line of maternity clothes for witches. I soon found myself out of my element, so I politely excused myself and made my way over to the bar, where some of the younger guests were now taking a break from dancing.

Draco spotted me and steered Astoria over to meet me. She was polite and sweet, and she seemed a little nervous meeting me.

"Healer Prewett, I would like present Miss Astoria Greengrass."

"It is nice to meet you, Miss Greengrass; please call me Elizabeth."

"Thank you, and please, call me Astoria. I'm very pleased to meet you, Elizabeth. Draco has had nothing but compliments about you."

I laughed. "He is too kind. But I assure you, Draco has been wonderful to work with these past few months. St. Mungo's will be lucky to have him on staff." They both smiled.

"You are in your final year at Hogwarts, is that correct?"

"Yes, Elizabeth."

"Have you made any plans for after Hogwarts?" She looked down and blushed. I realized that she had misunderstood me. "Are you planning to seek an Apprenticeship or attend university?"

She brightened. "I have been accepted into a Herbology program at Oxford's wizarding university. It is a subject that I enjoy very much."

"That's wonderful, Astoria. I'm sure you know this, but Lady Malfoy is very proud of her gardens. She performs a fair bit of work herself on several of the more delicate species. I'm sure she would love to discuss it with you sometime."

"Thank you, Elizabeth; I was not aware that she enjoyed the subject."

"Draco, you need to keep Astoria better informed in the future," I teased him lightly.

"I shall, Elizabeth; thank you for your sage advice." He was clearly teasing back. "Elizabeth, someone seems to be looking for you." Draco motioned over my shoulder to where Severus had entered the room.

As I started to cross the room to Severus, George stepped to the front of the room and cast *Sonorus*.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Percy and Audrey will be leaving shortly, so I'd like to ask everyone to move to the front lawn to see them off." I was caught up in the crush of people, and I could not reach Severus. Instead, I found myself next to Fleur and Bill.

We watched Percy and Audrey exit the house, accepting well wishes from their guests along the way. Bill stepped away for a moment to say goodbye to his brother and new sister-in-law. Fleur kept grinning at me.

The crowd was thinning quickly. The younger guests were heading back in for more fun; many of the older witches and wizards were departing.

Fleur remained firmly on the step, looking over my shoulder with a strangely determined look on her face.

"Fleur, you are positively glowing," I commented. "Pregnancy suits you." She grinned. *Why did I get the feeling she knew something I did not?*

"Well, you are glowing a bit yourself tonight, Elizabeth," she said, straightening my robes and fussing with my hair. "Tonight is a special evening for many of us."

Bill, as he was returning, chuckled at his wife, "Fleur, stop fussing with Lizzie's hair and robes."

The crowd had completely disappeared by now; it was just the three of us on the front steps when I spotted Severus at a distance.

Bill suddenly became twitchy. "Come Fleur, I think Mum was looking for us inside."

I crossed over to Severus and kissed him. He led me over to the fountain in front of the house and sat on the stone wall, motioning for me to sit on his lap. It was a chilly night, but surprisingly not cold. I leaned against him, placing my head on his shoulder and looked up at the stars, which he was doing as well.

"Do you realize..." he began, then his voice faltered, "do you realize that it has been seven months tonight since the battle?"

I thought for a second. "I hadn't actually realized it until just now, Severus."

"If anyone had told me before that night that I'd be sitting her like this, I would have checked if they had been Confunded." I chuckled.

"My life has changed so much since that night."

"Everyone's has, Severus."

"I know, but I'm honestly a different person than before you saved me." I winced at the word 'saved'.

"Elizabeth, you saved me that night. I know you say you were just doing your job, but it was more than that. If someone else had physically helped me, my life wouldn't

have turned around the way it has. You have given me a life I never thought I'd be privileged enough to enjoy. I love you, Elizabeth."

"I love you, too, Severus." I tried to turn in his arms.

"Wait. Let me finish. If you turn now, I'll kiss you, and then we'll both be distracted. I need to say this."

"Go on." My voice was starting to tremble as comprehension dawned on me.

"This life, this future, it's something I haven't dared dream of since I was very small. Now, I can see it clear as anything, and you are the key to it. Please say you'll share that life with me. Be my wife, Elizabeth." His hands moved beside me, and then he raised his hands to where I could see them. In his hand there was a box containing a very old, very beautiful, engagement ring.

I gasped and then quickly squeaked out, "Yes, of course I'll marry you. Oh, Severus, it's beautiful."

"It was Grandmother's. Actually, it's over three hundred years old, but Grandmother was the last one to wear it. She wanted you to have it. I was going to select one of the other Prince rings, but she insisted." He took my shaking hands and slid the ring on my finger, whispering the spell to size it to my hand.

"It's gorgeous. I love you, Severus. Can I turn around now? I would like to kiss you at some point tonight."

He laughed and stood, turning me and leaning down to kiss me. The kiss was slow, tender and passionate. It must have lasted a while, because I suddenly heard a whistle from the direction of the house.

Bill, Fleur, George, Harry, Ginny, Charlie, Hermione, Ron and Draco were all on the porch, staring at us.

"Bill!" Severus growled at my nephew. He looked embarrassed and led Fleur back into the house, motioning for the rest to follow him. Severus kissed me again, before looking at me and saying quietly, "Are you ready to face them?"

I hesitated. "Is that appropriate? At Percy's wedding?"

"I asked him, and he encouraged me to make the announcement. Apparently," Severus said with a roll of his eyes, "this will further solidify this wedding as the event of the season."

I laughed. "That's so Percy. So wait, Bill obviously knew, and so did Fleur. They clearly told the other kids. Does your Grandmother know?"

"Yes. And..." he looked slightly timid, "so does your mother. Molly also knows I was going to ask soon, but she doesn't know about tonight."

"You told Mother?" I wasn't upset, but I was shocked. Severus had met Mother, as she had visited us in September, but I couldn't imagine he'd been planning this that long.

"Do you remember that research meeting I went on last week?"

"Yes."

"On my way back from Toronto, I stopped in Boston, had lunch with your mother and informed her."

"No!"

"You aren't angry, are you?"

"Of course not. I'm a little shocked that you managed to cover all the bases without me finding out."

"One of these days, my dear, you are going to understand what it means to be a Slytherin. Or at least you better figure it out, because odds are good we'll have at least a couple."

I laughed and kissed him again. "Let's go back inside."

When we got back in the house, I was practically bowled over by Molly. She immediately began talking about the wedding, when it would be, where we would have it, and who would all be invited. I was overwhelmed. Severus, having just been vigorously hugged by Arthur and welcomed to the family, looked equally shell-shocked.

Bill beckoned us over to him. "This is my job, you two. Do you want me to announce this now or later?"

"Now," said Severus. "Everyone is going to know soon based on how you Weasleys all chatter. I'd rather have them all maul me at once rather than in shifts."

Bill looked at me; I nodded my approval. Bill crossed to the front of the room. "Ladies and Gentleman, I have another announcement to share with you." Narcissa's eyes cut my way; they immediately went to my left hand. She gave me a knowing smile.

"As most of you know," Bill continued, "Elizabeth Prewett and Severus Snape have been courting for the past six months. It is my pleasure to announce that they are now engaged. Let me be the first to say congratulations to the future Lord and Lady Prince-Snape."

The room burst into applause. Severus had his arm wrapped around me, and while he was clearly happy, he still looked decidedly uncomfortable with the attention. As the applause started to die down, we heard Ginny and George bellow "Kiss her!" I blushed and buried my face in Severus' shoulder, but the crowd was not deterred that easily. Charlie joined in, followed by Angelina, Dean, and a few others. To my shock, I heard Draco's voice in the mix. I looked over at Narcissa, who looked both mortified and amused by the display.

"ENOUGH!" Severus yelled. The crowd went immediately silent, sure that they'd just evoked the old Severus. Then, with a smirk, he stated, "If you ruffians would halt for a moment, I would be able to concentrate on kissing my fiancée." Then Hermione and Ginny giggled, and a few others joined in.

"Now, let's see," he whispered, leaning in to give me a soft, yet intense kiss. The room erupted once again.

"Prince-Snape? Is that what we are going to go by?" I asked.

"Well, Fitzgerald-Prewett-Prince-Snape is a little wordy, don't you think?"

"I'm actually shocked you aren't suggesting just Prince."

No, Elizabeth, if I drop Snape entirely, they'll expect me to be proper and polite all the time. We can't have that"

I chuckled. "I'm not tied to any name, Severus; I hope you know that."

"I do; though you clearly do like the Prince diamonds."

"I am female, Severus. We like sparkly things."

"I love you, Elizabeth."

"And I love you, Severus."

The Wedding Day

Chapter 19 of 20

Severus and Elizabeth are wed in a quiet ceremony.

I didn't move for a few minutes after I woke up. It was my wedding day. I was marrying Severus Snape in about three and a half hours. I just stared at the ceiling of Severus' room.

Our room, I reminded myself. Orby had officially moved my things in yesterday after Severus returned to the Manor for the evening.

I rolled over and glanced at my simple dress, which was hanging on the door. I was so glad the service was going to be small. A large wedding was fine as a guest, but it just didn't suit Severus or me.

Grandmother Prince had suggested we use the ancient Prince wedding ceremony. It would be performed outside without attendants. It seemed deceptively casual compared to Muggle weddings, but the magic was very strong. There were only a handful of guests attending. We were expecting all the Weasleys and their guests, my mother, Grandmother Prince, the Malfoys, Minerva, Andromeda and Minister Shacklebolt.

There was a gentle tap on my window. The Malfoy owl waited for me to open the window. It flew in carrying a note and a small box.

Elizabeth,

I hope this morning finds you well. I cannot wait to make you my wife today. Please wear this today with your dress.

Severus

I opened the box, expecting it to be a hair comb, or jewelry or something else pretty from the Prince vault. I laughed heartily when I discovered that it was, in fact, the tiniest pair of ivory knickers that I'd ever seen.

I wrote back a quick message to him.

My dear Severus,

Just what would you have done if I had responded in kind?

Anxiously waiting,

Elizabeth

There was a knock on my door, and Mom entered with Molly and Ginny in tow.

"Good morning, Lizzie. The girls will be here for brunch in about a half hour."

"That's great, Mom. I'll be down in about twenty minutes. I'd like to shower first."

I showered quickly and combed my hair out. I knew Ginny had big plans for my hair, so I cast a simple drying charm on it and pulled it back simply to keep it out of the way.

Brunch was a lovely affair. Orby had really outdone himself. Grandmother Prince had arrived along with Narcissa, Audrey, Fleur and baby Victoire.

We ate and visited; after about an hour, Narcissa, Ginny and Fleur whisked me upstairs. Audrey played with the baby and chatted with Mom and Grandmother Prince. Ginny went to work on my hair while Narcissa and Fleur fussed over the dress. Ginny worked rather quickly, and soon she and Fleur started working together to put the sides of my hair up. They wound in beautiful flowers that Narcissa had brought. The twists were woven together in the center, fanning out along with the rest of the curls trailing down to about the middle of my back. The effect was a soft, ethereal look. Upon seeing my dress and the hairstyle, Narcissa decided that my make-up should be subtle and earthy. It seemed appropriate for an outdoor service.

Soon it was time to dress. Narcissa raised her eyebrows at the knickers Severus had sent.

Fleur giggled as she saw the note. "You thought it was going to be earrings, didn't you?"

I blushed. "Hair combs was my guess, actually. And you knew!" I said to Fleur good-naturedly.

Narcissa tried to hide her own laughter.

My gown was a simple ivory sheath with flowing fabric that didn't quite reach the ground. The silhouette was modest; the only daring element was the slightly low back, but even that was mostly covered by my curls.

Jewelry was not worn in the old ceremonies except for the wedding bands exchanged. My engagement ring was a public symbol, but it was not worn during the ceremony. The bands exchanged during the ceremony would be tied to our inner magic and would increase the bond between us.

I went to the bureau and pulled out Severus' ring. It was platinum, as I knew he found gold garish. It was engraved with the runes for respect, love, harmony, companionship and family. These were the things I was offering to Severus as part of our ceremony. I gave it to Fleur; she turned it over in her hand, reading the runes.

She smiled. "It's perfect. He will love it. I will have Bill hold it for you."

"How are you feeling, dear?" Narcissa asked sweetly.

"Nervous. Not about Severus, just about the ceremony."

"It will be fine, Elizabeth."

Molly came in the room. "The guests are starting to arrive. Severus is downstairs, so you need to stay up here."

"How is he doing?"

"He's not happy about all the attention. He's ready to have you all to himself. Where are you going on your honeymoon?"

"I don't actually know."

"How long are you going to be gone?" Ginny piped up.

"Two weeks."

"And you don't know where?" Molly repeated.

"No. He wouldn't tell me."

"How did you pack?" Ginny pushed.

I motioned to Fleur. She nodded to Ginny. "I helped. Severus insisted she have all new things, so that she wouldn't know what was missing from her current wardrobe."

Mother entered the room. "May I have a few minutes alone with my daughter?" The other women nodded and exited. I looked at Mom nervously.

"You look beautiful." Her eyes were a bit misty.

"I know this isn't the type of wedding you probably had envisioned for me."

"Oh, don't be silly. Your father and I eloped. This is a grand affair compared to that."

I laughed. "Well, maybe it's Grandmother that would have preferred a more elaborate wedding in Boston."

"Actually, she's come around. She was sorry that she couldn't make it. She and Father just weren't up for the trip. But they are excited for you. There's something to be said for history, culture and tradition. You are, after all, marrying a titled Englishman. How could Mother object to a suggestion from Lady Evelyn Prince?"

I laughed. "It's strange how life works sometimes, isn't it?"

"Exactly. But let's not worry about that. I'm happy for you, Lizzie. He's a good man. You seem more at ease and comfortable with yourself this past year. I think he's been good for you."

"He is good for me, Mom."

"And from what Molly tells me, the difference in him is even more dramatic. It's hard for me to even picture your Severus as who she described."

I laughed again. "I've only seen a glimpse or two of that man. He made a decision to move forward. I've been here to support him, but he's made the transformation himself."

"Always with the modesty, Lizzie; you never could just accept a compliment." I blushed as she leaned in and hugged me. "Be happy, Lizzie. Love him, and treat him well. He'll do the same for you. You have the tools for a very strong family together."

"Mother, Fleur will not be happy with you if you make me cry before the service." I blinked fiercely. Mom was not having as much luck with her tears. I know she was thinking of Dad. "I wish he could be here too, Mom."

She took a deep breath and composed herself. "Grandmother Prince wishes to see you as well. Molly is going to Apparate her up here so she doesn't have to climb the stairs." I nodded.

Mom hugged me again, kissed my cheek and fidgeted with my hair for just a moment. "I'll see you downstairs."

"Thank you, Mom." She left the room, leaving me to compose myself yet again.

Molly popped in with Grandmother Prince a few moments later. Molly nodded to me and then stepped into the hallway without a word.

"You look beautiful, Elizabeth."

"Thank you, Grandmother." She smiled. I had finally gotten comfortable calling her that as the wedding approached.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so. Thank you for helping us with the details."

"You are welcome, my dear. I think the old ways and the elemental magic suit you both."

I nodded. "I hope I can make him happy."

"Nobody can make another person happy, Elizabeth. You can support him, and you can make him more comfortable. You can give him a great deal that can help him be happy, but you cannot make him happy. That has to come from him."

I smiled. "I plan to do what I can to support his happiness."

She took my hand and squeezed it. "That's all I ask, my dear. Now, I would imagine it is very close to time. I am going to go take my seat. I will send Fleur up to help you. Molly, dear, I'm ready to go to my seat," she called out.

"Thank you, Grandmother."

Molly came in and linked arms with her. They popped out. I checked the mirror again as Fleur popped in.

"Bill has the ring. He will give it back to you when he gets you to the altar. Now, let me see." She surveyed my makeup. "I told them not to make you cry." She waved her wand, touching up the make-up charms. "Good as new. Are you ready? Severus is outside now; you can come downstairs."

"Let's go." I closed my eyes and appeared in the living room. Tucking my wand into the hidden sleeve at my side, I looked at Mom and Fleur.

"I'm ready."

"We will go take our seats, and I will send Bill in to escort you." Fleur leaned in and hugged me. Mom did the same, and then they went out to take their seats. Bill was standing at the door with Victoire in his arms; Fleur took the baby and kissed Bill quickly before heading outside. My mother followed her out the door.

Bill crossed over to me. "Time to go, Lizzie." I took a deep breath and took his arm.

There was no elaborate procession. All the guests, including family, seated themselves. Bill, as my family's representative, would sit in the front row with Mom after he escorted me down the aisle.

We reached the grove of trees that separated us from the guests. Bill paused for just a moment to allow me to compose myself. He handed me Severus' ring, which I tucked away. He cast a quick charm to activate the soft music that would accompany us down the aisle.

My first view of the altar was at a fair distance, so I couldn't see Severus' face. His posture showed anticipation and nervousness rolled into one. As was the custom, he wore neither jacket nor outer robes, just a long sleeved shirt and black trousers. His hair was pulled back neatly at the nape of his neck. He was looking downward, partially facing the Minister.

Upon hearing the music, his head tilted up, and he pivoted to face us. His stance straightened, which caused me to smile in amusement. Bill patted my hand where I held his arm; I think he mistook my reaction for anxiety. As we grew closer, my eyes made contact with Severus', and the rest of the scene dissolved. I think I was smiling; I can't be sure, but Severus was not. I was not fazed, knowing that Severus smiles mostly at humor or even nervousness; when he is happy, his expression is best described as serene. But he shows his emotions through intensity, and the look on his face was more intense than I had ever seen.

We reached the altar; Bill passed my hand to Severus, who took my hand with both of his. I added my other hand as well. Kingsley cleared his throat and addressed the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today we are here to witness the joining of two people, both their lives and their magic. Severus and Elizabeth come here today with the blessing of their families, who are represented by William Arthur Weasley and Lady Evelyn Prince."

He waved his wand, and an ancient looking parchment floated into his hand. "The families will now record their blessing in front of these witnesses."

He stepped forward to Bill, who tapped the parchment with his wand. "The Prewett family gives consent and blessing to this union." Bill stepped back and took his seat next to Fleur and my mother.

Kingsley then crossed over to where Grandmother Prince was seated and held the parchment down to her. "The Prince family gives consent and blessing to this union," she said as she touched the parchment with her wand. Kingsley returned to his place in front of Severus and me.

Severus and I looked back at one another. At this point, I know I was smiling. Standing there with him, my anxiety had faded. The tension in his face softened; he seemed more relaxed now as well.

"Now the bride and groom will state their intentions." Kingsley's eyes cut to me.

"I, Elizabeth Rose Prewett, have come here to bind myself to Severus Tobias Prince-Snape for our lifetimes. I have come here freely and without reservation." I squeezed his hands gently.

"I, Severus Tobias Prince-Snape, have come here to bind myself to Elizabeth Rose Prewett for our lifetimes. I have come here freely and without reservation." He rubbed his thumb across the back of my hand and smiled shyly.

"Please join hands." A slight ripple of laughter went through the crowd, as our hands had been joined since the moment I reached Severus' side.

Kingsley smirked. "Now the bride and groom will present each other with rings representing their commitment to one another."

I pulled Severus' ring out carefully. "Severus, this ring represents the promises I make to you.

"Respect: This is the first emotion I felt for you, for your power, your courage, your actions and your character. This is the foundation for all of my promises to you.

"Love: This is the gift we give one another. I promise to nurture that love and to act in a loving way towards you.

"Peace: I promise to be a calming force in your life. I will work to balance your strength and your courage with my patience and understanding.

"Companionship: I promise to remain by your side, and I will work to become ever stronger as your confidante and partner: body, mind and soul.

"Family: I promise to use all my gifts to build a strong family with you. I promise to persevere through the inevitable challenges and to honor and protect all the members of our joint family."

I slid the ring onto his hand, and my eyes locked with his. Tears lurked behind my eyes, but I willed them not to fall with a smile. A swell of magic surged around our joined hands.

Severus held my ring in his hand. "Elizabeth, this ring represents the promises I make to you.

"Partnership: I promise to always value you as an equal and to work with you to solve the problems life may throw our way. This is the foundation of all of my promises to you.

"Love: I thank you for the gift of your love to me, and I promise to share my love with you and to treat you in a loving way.

"Strength: I promise to use my strength to further your happiness, and I vow not to underestimate your strength as well.

"Protection: I promise to protect you: body, mind and soul. I promise to accept your protection when offered, even when you are protecting me from myself.

"Family: I promise to work with you always to build and maintain a strong family. I promise to weather any storm and to welcome and honor all the members of our joint family."

He slid the ring on my hand as silent tears streamed down my cheeks. The swell of magic surged higher, and a gold jet of magic joined our left hands.

Kingsley stepped forward again. "I ask you all to witness this union." He raised his wand, and silver sparks flew from it. The guests followed his lead.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife, life-bonded witch and wizard. You may seal your union with a kiss."

Severus leaned in and kissed me softly and gently. As the kiss broke, the jet of magic binding our hands floated over to the parchment; a seal appeared, making the union official.

His hands free, Severus pulled me closer and kissed me a second time, this time a bit more ardently. As we pulled apart, we whispered our love to one another. I was completely consumed by magic of the ceremony and my feelings for my husband.

Severus took my hand, and we led the guests to the side of the house where Orby and the elves had set up a light lunch for our guests. It was fitting for the simple

celebration. We greeted each guest together as they came through.

Mother hugged us both tightly and said her congratulations quickly, still dabbing her eyes.

"You know, I've never actually seen a magical wedding, even though I married a wizard. It was beautiful."

I nodded and smiled. Mother's experience as a Muggle in the magical world had been at such a turbulent time; she really hadn't seen the positives.

"Take care of my baby." She addressed Severus seriously.

"Yes, ma'am."

Grandmother Prince smiled at her grandson. "Thank you for finding me again, Severus." Then, to both of us, she smiled and said, "It is so wonderful to see that the family is in such good hands."

Bill approached next. He shook Severus' hand. "Congratulations, Severus."

"I'm a lucky man, Bill. Thank you for your help with this."

Bill nodded and turned to me. "You did good, kid!"

I laughed and hugged him.

Fleur quietly offered her congratulations, holding Victoire. Severus peeked at the baby timidly. I tried very hard not to laugh.

I kissed Fleur on the cheek and patted the baby's arm softly. "Thank you for your help as well, Fleur."

Molly hugged Severus, who visibly bristled. Her words were unintelligible through her tears. She hugged me and mumbled something like "such a beautiful service."

Arthur's congratulations were enthusiastic and hearty, with a strong handshake for Severus and a kiss on both my cheeks.

Charlie shook Severus' hand and nearly crushed me with his hug. Gawain said a quick word of congratulations and rejoined Charlie immediately.

Percy and Audrey graciously wished us joy and shook hands with each of us.

George gave me his best smile and hugged me tightly. "You look beautiful, Lizzie." He turned to Severus, his hand outstretched. "It's good to see you happy, sir."

Angelina smiled sweetly. "The ceremony was lovely."

Ron practically ran past Severus, mumbling out congratulations before giving me a perfunctory hug and heading quickly towards the food.

Hermione was more articulate. "May you finally find the happiness you deserve, sir." And then she turned to me. "Take care of him, Elizabeth, even when he acts like a git."

Severus scowled. "Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Miss Granger."

Ginny offered Severus her hand. "Best of luck, sir. We Prewett women can all throw a mean hex."

"Ginny!" I feigned offense as I gave my niece a hug.

Harry approached sheepishly. "Sir, congratulations." And then he leaned in, and I wasn't intended to hear his next statement. "Mum would have been pleased to see you so happy." Severus started; then he shook Harry's hand. Harry wasn't having it. He caught Severus in an awkward hug

Harry then approached me. "He's going to be a challenge, Elizabeth. But I think you're up for it."

Lucius approached next. He shook his friend's hand firmly. "May your family be as much of a blessing to you as mine has been to me." Severus merely nodded.

Lucius took my hand in his and kissed it gallantly. "Never have I been so pleased to learn I misjudged someone's character. Please forgive me for distrusting you, Lady Prince-Snape."

"Thank you, Lucius. Thank you for joining us to witness the bonding."

"Severus, congratulations. Your happiness is long overdue." Narcissa hugged him primly. "And Elizabeth, you have enriched our lives immensely these past months. Thank you for that."

I smiled and hugged her. "You have been a wonderful friend to me, Narcissa."

Astoria very shyly said congratulations to Severus. She thanked me quietly for the invitation.

Draco approached Severus. "Thank you for all of your help over the years, sir. I hope this is the start of many happy years for you."

He then turned to me. "You're glowing, Elizabeth. Are you sure there's not something else you need to announce?"

"Draco!" Narcissa was mortified. Lucius tried to hide his smirk. Severus growled.

I slapped Draco's shoulder playfully. "All in good time, everyone. All in good time."

Andromeda handed Teddy to Harry, who had come back over for a moment. She hugged Severus. "It's so good to see you happy, Severus."

She looked to me. "Thank you, Elizabeth, for saving him and for making him whole again."

Minerva patted Severus on the shoulder. "It is a day for new beginnings, my boy. Make the most of it." She gave me a warm hug. "Congratulations, my dear; I wish you great joy."

Kingsley shook our hands in turn. "Thank you for the honor of presiding over a bonding filled with such love and promise."

We followed Kingsley over to the tables. Severus greeted our guests. "Thank you all for coming today to share this moment in our lives. You have all been instrumental in some way in shaping the path that led Elizabeth and me here today. Please know that it has not gone unnoticed."

I smiled. "Thank you all. The showering of love and well wishes upon us gives me even greater hope for this union. Knowing we have the support of such wonderful friends and family makes me feel even stronger in our ability to help one another grow and improve as the years pass." I leaned over and kissed Severus soundly, resolutely ignoring the catcalls of some of our younger guests. Severus grinned and pulled my chair out for me. He then sat next to me, holding my hands gently in his lap.

Bill stood. "Today marks the joining of two great families through the union of two amazing people. May the happiness and love they feel for each other today never fade."

He raised his glass. The guests followed.

Grandmother Prince stood slowly. "And may they provide me with great-grandbabies before I get too old to enjoy them." The group laughed uproariously, clinking their glasses and drinking. I buried my face in Severus' shoulder, and he covered his face with his hand.

We enjoyed the meal, talking and laughing with our family and friends. Minister Shacklebolt excused himself first, congratulating us once again. Andromeda and Teddy left next. Little by little, the group dwindled until it was time for Mother's Portkey home. She hugged me and Severus one last time before picking up her bag and the candlestick and vanishing.

Severus gave me a predatory look, and I laughed. "When are we leaving?" I asked him.

He checked the clock behind me. "Too soon to properly consummate this marriage before we go, but I have plenty of time to snog you senseless." His arms wound around my waist, clutching the bare skin of my back and pulling me against him. His lips were aflame, hungry and needy on mine. His tongue played at my lip, seeking entry, which was happily granted. I clung to his shoulders as our mouths danced together, tongues twirling over one another, bodies pressed tightly together. "I hope you are rested, my love; it's going to be a very long night." I smiled, and he leaned in and kissed me again, less urgently this time.

He released me and headed up the stairs, returning shortly thereafter with our bags and my engagement ring, which he slid back on my hand against my wedding band. I looked down at my hand for a moment.

"Severus, I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier, because I didn't want to get emotional again with everyone around, but your vows were beautiful. They were perfect."

"I meant every one of them, Elizabeth. And I loved yours as well, and I know you will keep them as well." He cupped my face with his hand and kissed my forehead, before pulling me into a gentle embrace. "We're leaving very soon, dear." He held out a teacup, and I put my hand against it.

"Are you going to tell me now where we are going?"

"Italy, my darling wife. I'm taking you to Italy." Just as he finished speaking, the teacup began to glow.

The House of Prince Restored

Chapter 20 of 20

Elizabeth and Severus enjoy a beautiful honeymoon in Italy; their lives and their love wind and twist over the course of many years and many changes.

After we landed, I took a moment to regain my bearings, and then I surveyed my surroundings.

We were outside a beautiful village. Behind us was beautiful greenery. The air smelled of the sea, and there was also a distinct citrusy smell that I couldn't quite place.

"Where are we?"

"Muggles call this area the Sorrento Coast. We're not actually in Sorrento; this area is called Sant Agnello. We have a bit of a walk to the villa, which has been divided into several suites. It was recommended by Mr. Zabini when he learned that I was interested in this area of Italy for the honeymoon."

"Is this a Muggle area or magical?"

"It's mostly Muggle, though the owners of the villa are wizards. Most of the apartments are designed with Muggle amenities, but they also have one that has been built to accommodate magic."

I surveyed the surrounding a bit more, astounded at the stunning scenery.

Severus tugged gently at my arm. "I promise you, my dear, we will have ample time to explore the area in the coming days. Right now, however, I wish to get you to the villa for an entirely different type of exploration."

We started walking, talking along the way about what he had learned about the area from Blaise.

"What time is it here?"

"It is about six p.m. The locals tend to dine late; I thought we would go get settled in, and then have dinner in a few hours. Tomorrow, we shall get out of the villa and explore the area."

"That sounds heavenly, Severus."

"Also, before I forget..." he said, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a small box. "This is a universal translator. It will help with the language barrier. You can transfigure it to something else if you prefer, but it should be something discreet and natural looking. That way it doesn't raise questions. You will hear the locals speak to you in English; the locals will hear you in Italian. They will hear your voice and accent. I have set the translators to make us sound reasonably competent in Italian but not fluent. It would raise eyebrows for a British man and an American woman to be perfectly comfortable with the language but not with the local culture." The translators looked like Muggle wristwatches. "This was our wedding gift from Minister Shacklebolt. The Ministry has been working on these for several years, but they are not available to the general public."

"What a thoughtful gift," I said, slipping the smaller watch onto my wrist. "It's an incredible bit of magic as well."

Severus nodded, and then he motioned to the building in front of me. My jaw dropped again. The villa in front of us was spectacular.

Severus was doing a much better job of concealing his reaction. He chuckled at my unveiled enthusiasm. "You never cease to amaze me, Lizzie. One minute you are an elegant, professional lady of the world, and the next I have a wide-eyed ingénue in my arms. The contrast is fascinating."

He led me inside, and the interior was just as impressive as the exterior. He checked us in quickly, and the host seemed quite excited by our presence. He started speaking in Italian, then stopped before Severus waved on for him to continue. The translator worked beautifully.

"Ah, Lord and Lady Prince-Snape, it is an honor for you to join us here for your honeymoon. You are in our finest accommodations, which should be appropriate for all of your needs. I understand you will be dining with us later this evening. My name is Fernando, and I will be happy to see to any of your requests. I have taken the liberty of having one of our finest bottles of wine sent up to the room along with some refreshments to sustain you until dinner."

He summoned for assistance; a boy approached and took our bags up the stairs behind us. "Would you like a tour of the common areas, sir?"

"Tomorrow." Severus' words were quick, but not impolite.

Fernando tried to hide a knowing smile. "Of course, sir. Please let me know when will be convenient for you and your wife."

Severus nodded and took the key from Fernando. Severus took my hand and led me up the stairs. I could barely keep up with his long strides as he headed down the hall to our room. He stopped at the room and quickly unlocked the door.

Surprisingly, he scooped me up in his arms and carried me across the threshold. I couldn't help but laugh at the gesture that was just so not typical Severus. He carried me through the living area and into the beautiful bedroom; he sat me on my feet in front of him.

When he turned back to me, I was shocked by the level of desire in his eyes. We'd been intimate for over a year now; I was surprised that he would view the wedding night with the amount of intensity I was seeing. It was, of course, significant, but I thought I was just being sentimental and didn't anticipate that he would mirror my feelings. His gaze was so intense that I actually took a step back. He placed his hands on my hips.

"Surely you aren't afraid of me, wife?" His silky baritone was like a caress.

"No, of course not, but I am a bit surprised. I didn't expect this level of enthusiasm given that we've been together many times before. It's not a bad thing."

"You didn't think I would be excited at the prospect of bedding my bride for the first time?" He pulled me closer. "Elizabeth, you underestimate both of us." He caught my lips in a scorching kiss. By the time I came up for air, I'm sure my eyes were as lust-filled as his.

"First of all, my dear, with all the preparations, we haven't been alone in days." He put his mouth to my neck, finding the spots that made my vision blurry every time. "Also, when else am I going to have the chance to take a wedding dress off of you?" He ran his hands up and down the side of my dress. He then slid them around to my bare back. He located the zipper and edged it down tantalizingly slowly. "My darling, you should not be surprised by my passion for you." His fingers slid up the dress until he reached my shoulders, and he pushed it down gently. He put just enough space between us for the dress to pool at my feet. He then lifted me out of both the dress and my shoes and sat me down gently next to the bed.

His eyes slid up and down my body, his hands brushing my hip, feeling the ivory knickers he had sent me that morning. I leaned in to kiss him again; I unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it from his shoulders. I cancelled the charms holding my hair, and it fell loosely around my shoulders. He ran his hands through it, unwinding the rest of the twists as he went; my hands unfastened his belt and then his trousers.

I was a bit shocked to find him wearing nothing underneath. My eyes must have betrayed my surprise, but my hands roamed over him eagerly.

"Your return owl didn't specify what I was to wear, so I thought you preferred nothing underneath."

I laughed and kissed him again. He stepped out of his pants, and then he hooked his fingers into my knickers and slid them off my body. I moaned at the feeling of him running his fingers down my heated skin as he went.

I lowered myself onto the bed, and he climbed in and hovered over me. His fingers played with my hair as he kissed my lips reverently. Our legs were intertwined; I could feel his arousal, and I am quite sure he could sense mine as well. But we were both determined that this would be a slow build of passion. He kissed me again; this time he was seeking a deeper kiss. We explored each other in a slow, sensual way with no sense of hurry; we knew we now belonged to one another, body, mind and soul. I slid my hands into his hair. I loved the feel of his hair in my fingers. I'd never had a lover with long hair before; I found it very sexy. He chuckled.

"What?" I questioned.

"You like my hair. It's never been a feature that earned compliments."

I kissed him. "I like many things about you, Severus." My hand found one of his, and I played with his long fingers.

"Oh, really? Well, I suppose we can put those to good use." He slid his other hand across my collarbone and down to my breast. His fingers slid gently across the sensitive skin.

I whimpered softly.

"You make the most delicious sounds."

He kissed me again, and then his lips moved down to my jaw line. I slid my hands over his shoulders, relishing the feeling of his skin on my fingers. His hands were now touching both breasts, and my need to feel him closer was starting to build.

"Severus," I whispered, "please."

He leaned back up and kissed me again, then pulled back and looked into my eyes. I felt like I couldn't breathe; his eyes on mine were so powerful.

"Elizabeth, I love you."

It took me a moment to realize he wasn't speaking. He had cast a wandless *Legilimens*.

"I love you too, Severus."

He positioned himself above me and entered slowly.

"Oh, gods, Severus, you feel amazing. Please go slowly, love. I want to enjoy this as long as we can."

"Oh, I intend to make this last, my dear."

As we moved together slowly, the emotion poured forth between our minds. Things that we had protected to that point were said easily because they didn't actually need to be said. He intertwined his hands with mine, holding me tightly as our bodies danced together slowly. After a while, he slowly increased his speed. Neither of us could get enough of the other. He whispered my name over and over again, and the air hummed with magic around us. As my orgasm began to build, I moaned and pulled him in tighter. He kissed me again, our mouths tangling together aggressively as the pace of our bodies became frantic. I felt my body explode around him, and I clung to him. He cried out as his orgasm took hold, and he emptied into me, my body still shuddering beneath him.

Our magic merged, and a silver mist swirled about the room. I hugged him to me. "My heavens, Severus, our lovemaking is always wonderful, but that was..."

"Earth-shattering," he said as he rolled off me.

"What was that mist? Did we just...?" I stopped. I didn't know if this was a question I wanted to ask.

"That was bonding magic." He looked down at me. "I'm sorry; I should have had one of the ladies explain to you what might happen, especially since we used the ancient ceremony. It's rare, but not unheard of. When the marriage is consummated, there is a release of energy; the stronger the union, the more powerful the energy release will be. It intensifies the connection between spouses. In the rarest cases, the partners begin to feel imprints of the emotions of their partner. Right now, I can hear your brain processing this, almost like I'm using Legilimency.

"So, we'll hear each other's thoughts?"

"It's not a direct connection; it won't feel like earlier. It's a distant echo. Sometimes, you can hear a voice in the background, and you can tell if they are angry or happy. It's like that. If you don't know it's happening, you may mistake it for your own thoughts. I'm probably more tuned into it from my years of using Legilimency and Occlumency."

I stilled and tried to sense him. "You're anxious about something."

He nodded. "There's one other thing you need to know." He paused, his nervousness obvious. "The magic, if strong enough, has been known to nullify contraceptive spells. It doesn't always happen, but given that I can feel your thoughts now..."

"Oh. And that's making you anxious?" My face fell. Severus and I had discussed how long we wanted to wait before trying for a child. We had decided to wait a few months. *If that had been taken out of our hands, would he be upset?*

"No, Lizzie, you misunderstand." He looked at me earnestly. "Telling you was making me anxious. It wasn't fair for you not to understand what could occur. I knew there was a chance that this could happen tonight."

I laughed. "Severus, you do realize that it's always a possibility. If it happens because of some rare magical event, that's pretty incredible."

He sighed, and I could feel his relief. "I'm still sorry; it didn't occur to me that you wouldn't know. American Wizarding culture relies less on the ancient practices. Actually, even here, part of the reason the old ceremony isn't used as much today is because of the impact on contraceptive spells. I should have had Grandmother or Molly speak to you."

I made a face. He laughed. "Okay, then, maybe Fleur or Narcissa. Thank you for taking this in stride."

I looked at him seriously. "Severus, having your child is something I want. Given where we are in our lives, it doesn't matter to me that much whether it is in nine months, twelve months or three years." I felt quietly hopeful.

"Elizabeth, I just want to make sure you understand; the magic doesn't change your fertility or mine. If the timing wasn't right, this won't change that."

I nodded and smiled. I could tell I wasn't the only one feeling quietly hopeful. "I guess that begs the question then, Severus. If we are both okay with the timing, what are we going to do next time we're together?"

He looked at me seriously. "You are the one who has to carry the child, Elizabeth. I don't want to put any pressure on you."

"I'm not prepared to make this decision alone. I would rather we let nature take its course, Severus, but I'm not the only one whose life will change with a child."

He kissed me, and I could feel happiness flow over him. This emotional imprint thing was going to take some getting used to.

We relaxed together for a few minutes before showering and dressing for dinner. We wandered onto the terrace and enjoyed view of the bay briefly before heading down to the restaurant. Dinner was amazing as well. We enjoyed a relaxing meal in the beautiful ambiance, sipping on fine wine and talking about what Severus had learned about the area as he was planning the trip. We wandered out onto the grounds for a few minutes together; neither of us was really ready for the evening to end. After a while, however, the excitement of the day and the fantastic wine began to conspire against me. I was feeling quite tired. Severus led me upstairs; we enjoyed one another a bit more before curling up together for our first night as husband and wife.

The next two weeks passed as if in a dream. We visited open air-markets, traveled to some of the other towns nearby and dined in all manner of restaurants. We spent an inordinate amount of time in our very comfortable bed, the gigantic bathtub and one very late at night on the terrace. There was a beautiful beach that we visited, a few museums in some of the neighboring towns that were quite interesting and a few historic sites, both magical and Muggle. I couldn't possibly have asked for more out of our honeymoon.

The night before we returned to England, I revealed to Severus that the timing had, in fact, been right. He was as happy as I was that we would be starting our family sooner than expected.

2000

I reached into the bassinet and touched the baby's arm as he slept. He had been born a few hours earlier, and he had just gone back to sleep after a feeding and a change. He was perfect.

There was no other way to describe him. Sure, Severus grumbled that the baby would have been better off favoring me, but when I looked at my son, the resemblance to Severus made me absolutely giddy. This little boy would know nothing of the childhood suffering his father had experienced. We would see to that. All the pain Severus had endured would be made right as the father of a healthy, loved and well-cared-for child.

"Fabian," Severus stated simply.

I looked up with a question in my eyes. "I thought we were naming him after you."

"No. We should honor your brothers. They saved your life. None of this would be possible without their courage. What was Gideon's middle name?"

"Michael."

"Fabian Michael Snape." Severus spoke softly, looking at his son. I felt my throat tighten. Severus looked at me cautiously. "Is that acceptable?"

"Of course. It's wonderful. I just thought you would want your firstborn named after you."

"Elizabeth, the poor child is saddled with this hair and probably this nose. Let's not burden him with my name as well."

I laughed, wiping my eyes. "Thank you, Severus. That really does mean a lot to me. And when we have a daughter, we shall name her Evelyn."

"Slow down, my dear. Slow down."

2004

"Open it," I said insistently. It was our fifth wedding anniversary, and I was very anxious for Severus to open his gift.

"Elizabeth, you are worse than Fabian sometimes." He opened the box slowly. The photo of Fabian inside was truly darling, but the reaction when he noticed the sign in Fabian's arms caused him to look up at me in shock.

"Really? When?"

"In a little over six months. I didn't want to tell you and get your hopes up, just in case." After two years of disappointment, we had begun to accept that Fabian might be our only child. We were starting to believe that only the magic of our wedding night had allowed us to conceive. It bothered me, but I knew it bothered Severus more. I found comfort in the fact that all my nephews and nieces had started families and at least Fabian had children his own age in the family. Severus struggled with it more because he wasn't as close to the Weasley children as I was.

"And you've been feeling well? Sweetheart, why didn't you tell me? If something had happened, I wouldn't want you to bear that alone."

"I'm good. The baby's healthy. Everything is right on target. She'll be here this winter."

"She?" I nodded. He sat the photo down and hugged me tightly. "So, our son knew before I did?"

"Don't be silly, Severus. He can't read yet. He's just turned four."

2007

"Oh my! Look at all that red hair! You finally got one that looks like you, Lizzie!" George joked as he held baby Gideon.

Evelyn peeked around George's legs. "Be careful," she warned George, her eyes wide. "Daddy says this one is trouble."

And almost on cue, the baby spit up on George's shirt. George made an overly dramatic face, but then he expertly shifted the baby to his other arm and cast a wandless cleansing charm on his shoulder.

"Looks like he's ready, Angelina." Bill chuckled at his younger brother's antics.

"Well, he better be," a heavily pregnant Angelina said, laughing. "He's only got a few more weeks before little Fred arrives."

2011

"Ravenclaw," I said to Severus, beaming.

He looked up from his book. "You're kidding. I was sure he'd be in Slytherin."

"Just because he looks just like you, Severus, that doesn't make him a Slytherin."

"Obviously. And Merlin knows that neither Evelyn nor Gideon will be sorted in Salazar's house. Evelyn is far too sweet, and Gideon is undoubtedly destined to follow the Prewetts into Gryffindor."

He stood and put his arms around me. "Which means, my dear, that this child," he said as he gently caressed my growing belly, "is going to be my Slytherin princess."

I laughed. "We shall see, Severus. We shall see."

2016

"Hufflepuff," I said as I read the letter.

"Yes, yes, but how is she?" There hadn't ever been a question on Evelyn's sorting. She had been quite nervous about going to Hogwarts. Severus was particularly protective of his daughter.

"She sounds good. Introducing her to Neville's daughter this summer was an excellent idea, Severus. It will be nice for her to have an older student in her house that she already knows. She apparently thinks Alice hung the moon."

2018

"Gryffindor," I told Severus.

He sighed. "Indeed. I'm sure Minerva will have sent me her own owl by the time the day is over. Even though she's retired, I know she will be relentless about this."

"He sounds pleased. He'll have lots of fun with his cousins."

2024

"Rachel, what have I told you about hexing your brother?"

"He started it!"

"Rachel Eileen Snape, a Bat Bogey Hex is not an appropriate response to your brother pulling your braids." I tried to keep my voice level as I reversed the hex on Gideon, but I knew my voice was tempered with both humor and annoyance. Odds were good he had deserved it, but Rachel needed to learn to control her temper.

"That's right. You always start with Jelly Legs as a warning shot."

"Ginny Potter!" Molly called out to her daughter.

Severus shot my niece one of his patented glares. She stuck her tongue out at him. Ginny had long ago stopped being intimidated by Severus. And apparently, she still hadn't quite grown up.

"What?"

2025

"Severus, are you ready to go?" I called into Severus' study from the library of Prince Hall. I heard the scraping of the chair, and Severus crossed over to me. After all this time, those eyes still made me lose my breath. His hair was now shorter and streaked with gray, but his eyes hadn't changed at all in their intensity for me.

He chuckled. "Not now, Elizabeth, we are due at Hogwarts shortly." Then he grumbled, "A Longbottom. I can't believe he's marrying a Longbottom."

"Oh, you shush, Severus. Alice is a lovely girl, and she makes our son happy. Now, pull yourself together; it won't do if you are grousing around at your son's engagement party."

"That's it. You have officially been spending too much time with Narcissa and Astoria." His tone was teasing, and his arm slipped around my waist as he leaned in to kiss me.

"Oh, sweet Merlin!" Gideon's voice called from the doorway. "In the library! Can't you two restrict those displays to rooms in the house that your children aren't going to wander into?"

"Gideon, son," Severus said calmly, looking at our younger son warningly. "Perhaps if you and Miss Thomas were more discreet about your displays in the garden, your mother and I would reciprocate."

The redhead blushed furiously.

"Is your brother ready to go, Gideon?" I interrupted.

"Yes, Mum, Fabian is pacing in front of the Floo. That's what I came to tell you."

Severus and I both laughed. "And the girls?"

"Evelyn is being more high maintenance than usual. I've no idea why. She's still in her rooms. Rachel is ready, though. She's with Fabian waiting by the Floo."

"I'll go get Evelyn, Severus. Could you try and calm Fabian? If he's worried about being late, you can send the boys on ahead."

Severus nodded.

When I reached Evelyn's room, she was fretting with her hair. She had grown into a striking woman. She would be twenty-one soon, and she was studying Arithmancy at the university. She had her father's black hair, but she had my eyes, nose and mouth. She was taller than me and had a willowy figure. Her dark blue dress was elegant and striking.

"Evelyn, what is it?" I was as confused as my son had been. Evelyn didn't normally fret over her appearance.

"My hair!" She seemed disproportionately distressed, given that her hair was nearly perfect.

"Here, turn around." I cast a couple of charms, and the twist she had cast tightened up. A couple of strands of hair had escaped, but I pulled down a matching piece on the other side and cast a curling charm; the effect was quite pleasing. "Evelyn, what has you so agitated? You looked lovely before."

"This is better; thanks, Mum. I just want to look special tonight. No reason, really." Her eyes cut away from me.

I wasn't buying that, but it didn't seem a good idea to press. For whatever reason, she was still anxious.

"Hmmm, it still needs something. *Accio!*" A pair of sapphire earrings flew into my hand, along with a matching necklace.

"You may wear these tonight, Evelyn."

Her eyes grew wide, and she quickly put in the earrings. I cast a spell to fasten the necklace for her.

"Thank you, Mum."

I hugged my older daughter. "Now, we need to go. We don't want your brother to be late to his engagement party."

When we reached the family room, Fabian was still pacing. Rachel, now nearly fourteen, was laughing with Gideon on the other side of the room. Rachel's dark red curls bounced as she teased her brother about Sybil Thomas. Our only Slytherin, Rachel had just started her third year at Hogwarts. She was an excellent student, but like her closest brother, she had a bit of a tendency for mischief.

Gideon was eighteen and had graduated from Hogwarts earlier that year. He was working with his cousin George helping manage the Hogsmeade shop. George spent most of his time these days on the distribution side of the business. He had been happy for the help from Gideon. George owned six shops around Europe, but the products were popular worldwide and were sold at joke shops in nearly every wizarding community.

I turned to my oldest son. "Are you ready?"

He nodded; his expression was still stormy.

"Settle down, Fabian; tonight is a night for celebration. Alice will understand that we had preparations on our end as well."

He nodded, taking a calming breath.

Fabian was the image incarnate of his father, down to the hawk-like nose and intense expressions. The only difference was he was a little stockier than Severus. He had my tendency to overanalyze and his father's fiercely protective nature. Alice Longbottom was a sweet, gentle girl, but she had a tough streak and knew exactly how to calm Fabian when necessary. It was a good match.

Severus motioned to the Floo. Fabian stepped through, followed by Severus, then Rachel, Gideon, Evelyn and me.

I took Severus' arm. Rachel ran off to find her friends. Fabian spotted Alice and went to greet her. Gideon excused himself when he saw Hugo Weasley. Evelyn stayed with her father and me. Severus gave me a look, which I acknowledged without a sound. Something was troubling her, but neither of us knew the source.

Severus navigated us over to greet Hannah and Neville. After all these years, they were both still a bit uneasy with Severus. Severus politely thanked the deputy headmaster for arranging the party and told Mrs. Longbottom that she had done a lovely job with the planning. He excused himself to go visit with Minister Weasley, who was visiting with Ron, Harry and Ginny. Ron, upon seeing Severus approach, quickly excused himself and left his wife to go speak with Dean Thomas. Hermione rolled her eyes at her husband and welcomed Severus into the conversation. I laughed inwardly. Ron had never warmed up to "Uncle Severus."

I felt a gentle hand on my arm, and when I turned, I was greeted by Astoria and Draco Malfoy. Their son was talking amicably with Evelyn. She seemed to have finally relaxed a little. Draco inquired as to where Severus was, and I motioned across the room. He nodded and headed over to Severus.

Astoria sighed. "So, what do you think of all this?" she asked sweetly.

"Fabian and Alice? I think it's wonderful." Astoria's eyes grew wide.

"Astoria, what is it?"

She looked away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Draco speaking seriously to Severus. I also noticed that Evelyn had grown tense again.

"Astoria, what do you know that I don't?"

Severus and Draco excused themselves. I cursed inwardly that Severus wasn't physically close enough for me to feel what was going on over there.

"I think you should talk to Severus, Elizabeth." Astoria clearly felt backed into a corner.

"Astoria, please tell me what this is about."

Suddenly, Scorpius stood next to his mother. Evelyn was standing at his side, wide-eyed. Scorpius had his hand protectively on Evelyn's elbow. Realization dawned on me.

"Really?"

I looked at my daughter, pleased but confused. I knew the two were close, but Scorpius was more reserved than his father, and Evelyn had never betrayed feeling for any young man that went beyond friendship. I quickly hugged Evelyn.

"Do you think Father will consent?"

"He will if I have anything to say about it, which I do."

Evelyn beamed. "I was afraid he would say I am too young."

"He may, my dear. The timing will require some discussion. You two will need to be flexible; both of your fathers can be quite stubborn. But in terms of overall acceptance, I will reason with Severus if necessary. Excuse me."

I started to make my way across the room. I was derailed a time or two along the way. By the time I reached the corridor where the two men had disappeared to, they were headed back towards me. Draco paused and allowed Severus to speak to me a moment.

"Is everything all right?"

"Indeed." Severus kissed my forehead. I could feel his reaction. He was happy, but there was a touch of nostalgia mixed in. "It seems that we will have another wedding to plan next year."

I smiled. "Has he proposed yet?"

Severus shook his head. "Not officially. Neither Astoria nor Draco thought it appropriate until they spoke to us."

"What do you think, Elizabeth?" Severus looked at me seriously. "Scorpius has grown into a fine young man; he will be good for Evelyn, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do. Besides, it's what Evelyn wants. She's a smart girl; she knows her own mind. I didn't realize that she and Scorpius had formed an attachment. That explains her nerves earlier tonight."

Severus motioned Draco over to us. "Please let Scorpius know that he may proceed, Draco. He is a fine young man." Severus held out his hand, which Draco accepted, before pulling Severus into a hug. Somewhere across the room, I heard a small squeal.

Draco nodded, and then he leaned in and hugged me. "Mother and Father will be pleased to see the families merged."

"How is your father?"

"He is improving each day. He wasn't up to coming out tonight, and Mother decided to stay with him. The therapy routine you prescribed for him is fairly draining."

I sighed. "I know, Draco. But Lucius will recover much faster if he pushes himself a bit. You know this. Flying accidents are especially challenging, but he'll make a full recovery."

"I do. Honestly, he does too, but he still likes to throw his weight around a bit. He's been terrifying the young Healers that the clinic has sent out the past week."

"Perhaps I should attend to Lucius myself. I can't have him terrorizing my staff," I said lightly.

Draco chuckled and nodded. He returned to Astoria.

We had reached the Great Hall once more. We stood there for a moment, watching our family and friends talking and laughing. Rachel was laughing uproariously in the corner with George and Angelina's youngest daughter. Gideon was talking to Albus and Hugo. Evelyn and Scorpius were hand in hand; they looked blissful as Draco had just delivered the good news to them. Fabian and Alice were talking with her parents in the center of the room.

It had been a long and glorious journey from that dirty old shack to where we were tonight. I looked at my prince and smiled. More than one life had been saved that night. I said quiet thanks that I had been led to this man and this life.