

Before I Saw Your Face

by Subversa

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

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A/N: Beta reading thanks to the peerless Diabólica, whose sure hand shaped this fic. Thank you, darling.

Before I Saw Your Face

Chapter 1

She stands beneath the overhang and looks up and down the street, even though she knows no one is there...even though she knows no one can see her. Harry's Invisibility Cloak covers her completely and caresses her face like a lover's fingertips.

She slips from beneath the overhang out into the autumn night, the fog a mist of damp so close it's as if she wears it beneath her clothes. Diagon Alley is quiet, the gaslights blurred beacons from point to point along the way. She spots the tracer immediately, like a crimson glitter trail only she can see, footsteps leading on into the fog.

She hurries to follow, her breaths short and her heart fast. There's no true fear in her mind. It's not like the war years, when she walked in lockstep between Harry and Ron, fully prepared to give her life so Harry would have his chance. The war is her past, and her administrative post in the deputy heads' office is her present.

But not every Death Eater is in prison...some have been given lesser sentences. And the end of war doesn't mean the wizarding world is perfectly safe and unthreatened. There is still treachery in the world.

It is her place...her *duty*...to investigate possible dangers.

This is what she tells herself.

She hurries and makes the turn into Knockturn Alley, her quarry's pace steady as she follows, her own increasing. She must somehow catch up before the building pops into being between the ramshackle shop fronts on either side.

She must know where he goes. But she must not be caught. He must never know she even suspects him of wrongdoing.

His legs are so much longer...perhaps his purpose drives him to quicken his steps...and again, she is too late. In the blur of an instant, she sees the sleek, well-tended brick building, then it is gone...and so is he.

Snape stands within the portals of his destination, a half-smile of amusement on his lips. Why in thunder does Granger follow him every time he leaves Hogwarts? She is a suspicious girl, no question, but an intelligent one. She's grown up curvy *and* clever.

Too bad she is so young.

But it will do no harm for her to follow him here. She'll never gain entrance.

She stops on the last spot she saw him, panting and frustrated. She yanks the cloak away, stuffing it hastily into the bag hanging from her wrist. She becomes aware of the dropping temperature and the solidification of the mist into spattering rain drops. She has left so quickly to stalk her prey that she has failed to provide herself with either cloak or umbrella.

She vents her annoyance with a stomp of her foot more suited to the student she once was than to the administrator and teacher-in-training she now is.

"Got away from you, did he?"

Thank Merlin nothing has occurred to slow her reactions. With her newly-made vinewood wand in her hand, she rounds on the gnarled, mostly toothless old witch in a business-like way.

"Nay, missy, no need for that!" The witch sidles sideways, keeping an eye on the wand. "I only thought you might want a little hint of what he's up to. Don't hurt us!"

A beautiful white cat peers from around the old woman's skirts, its eyes glowing green in the ambient gaslight. An old witch with such a lovely familiar can't be all bad.

She flexes her wrist so that the wand points at the ground. "What do you know?"

The hag extends a twisted, age-spotted hand with a small, grubby card protruding. "We'll let you have it, but you should pay us. Gold is a fair exchange."

She considers for only a moment. Even if the card bears nothing of use to her, the old hag probably needs to eat. She extracts a Galleon from her coin purse and the witch snatches it and drops the card to the ground. By the time she retrieves the card from the increasingly damp cobblestones, the hag and her familiar are nowhere to be seen.

But she doesn't mind. She's staring at the grimy business card, printed on textured white cardstock with raised silver lettering.

***TPE** may be found at number eighty-three, Knockturn Alley, London*

Ronald Weasley says, "Scorpion Sours," and when the stairway appears, he takes the steps two at a time, at age twenty still half Quidditch athlete and half overgrown puppy.

The headmaster's office is very different from what it was during Dumbledore's time, and Ron takes a moment to view and appreciate the changes.

The Sorting Hat still rests on a tall shelf, but where once the headmaster's desk held pride of place, now two matched desks sit facing each other. The desk on the right holds some small framed photographs and a tin Ron recognizes from his student days...he knows it contains homemade shortbread biscuits. One spindly-legged table sits adjacent to the desk, and on its surface some of Dumbledore's favourite arcane magical devices burble and smoke.

The other desk would appear to be unused, save for the pot of red ink residing beside an elegant raven's feather quill he also recognizes from his student days. Otherwise, the desk's polished mahogany surface is utterly bare.

At a smaller desk, situated nearer the door and vaguely halfway between the two larger desks, a young woman sits. Her desk is tidy, but it is obvious that the neatness is a continuous struggle. She is surrounded by stacks of books and ledgers, parchment and gradebooks. She concentrates so completely on her work that she does not immediately look up when Ron enters. With a grin and a shake of his head, he places his hands flat on the desk surface and leans in until his nose nearly touches the top of her bushy brown head.

"Good to see you absorbed in your work."

She jerks her head up so quickly that she bumps into Ron's face.

"Ow! Bloody hell, Hermione!"

She throws her hands up. "Don't you have better sense than to startle me?" But she is rising and rounding the desk to pull his face down for a closer inspection. "It might hurt a bit, but it's not broken." She touches the tip of his nose.

He laughs and catches her up in a tight hug. "Sorry to startle you, but you did invite me...I couldn't have got in without the password, yeah?"

She kisses his cheek and disentangles herself. Her hair is pulled into a French braid, but tendrils have escaped to curl into a bushy, messy halo. She wears black teaching robes open over a neat, dark blue skirt and sensible white blouse.

"Damn if you don't look the part, Hermione. Do the kids call you 'professor?'"

She puts her hands on her hips. "Of course not! I'm not through my training yet...and I don't know for certain that this is what I want to do...not on a permanent basis, anyway. It's just a . . . comfortable place to be for a while."

Ron pats her comfortingly on the shoulder. "You know there's always a place for you at the Burrow...Mum asked me last weekend when you're coming to visit." He knows Hermione's parents are living in Australia, and although she has made contact with them, they are more nonplussed than pleased to meet the daughter who erased herself from their memories.

He looks away from Hermione's pensive expression and gestures towards the two unoccupied desks. "How's this working out, then? Are they getting on alright? And has the Board come any closer to making a decision?"

Hermione steps to a small table against the wall that holds a box of teabags, a jug of water, a sugar bowl and small pitcher of milk. "Neither of them wants the title, but they're perfectly amenable to looking after things until someone else can be found to take the job. I take their first- and second-year classes to free them up for

administrative duties."

She turns from the table with two steaming mugs of tea. "You can bring the shortbread from McGonagall's desk. For some reason, she dotes on you."

Ron smirks. It's no surprise to him that another elderly female has succumbed to his charms. He goes out of his way to be pleasant to the old girls. He fetches the tin and joins Hermione at a small round table apparently used for tea breaks.

"How's Harry?" Hermione asks, studying Ron with big brown eyes. Her eyes have always been her prettiest feature.

"Parvati and I don't see him much...he and the ferret are getting their restaurant ready to open."

Hermione raises her eyebrows. "Now, Ronald. He's our best friend's boyfriend now, so be nice!"

Ron laughs, knowing that Hermione agrees with him. Probably. "He'll always be the ferret to me...and he still calls me the weasel, so . . ."

"So you deserve each other," she says, but Ron can tell she isn't really annoyed.

Hermione offers McGonagall's tin of biscuits to him, but he can see her visibly jump when a silky voice speaks from the doorway.

"Shouldn't you be socializing outside of work hours?"

Hermione presses her lips tightly together, as if she wants to make a retort, but Ron is instantly on his feet, advancing to Snape with outstretched hands.

"Professor Snape! Great to see you."

The deputy headmaster sends a folder of parchment floating to his desk with the flick of a finger and accepts Ron's handshake. Relations between Snape and the Order members have stabilized over the two years since the end of war, but one still cannot describe Snape as a warm or welcoming person.

Snape maintains contact for the minimum acceptable time and withdraws his hand. "What brings you to Hogwarts, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron watches Snape slip the shaken hand into the pocket of his robes, as if to protect it from further liberties. Snape still behaves like an antisocial git sometimes, but there's no arguing with the sacrifices he made to bring victory to the Light. There's also no arguing with Harry, who insists that everyone give credit where credit is due. Harry even told the *Daily Prophet* that Snape was the bravest man he ever knew, and the silly buggers splashed it all over the headlines.

Ron grins and gives Snape a hearty clap on the shoulder. "I had to come up and see how our Hermione is getting on, didn't I?"

Snape makes no answer to this, but he disengages from Ron by taking a step towards the tea table. He studies the rigid set of his teaching assistant's shoulders for a moment, then with a sly smirk, he reaches past Hermione to filch a shortbread biscuit from the open tin. Hermione flinches, and Ron makes a mental note to ask her what's going on with her and Snape.

The two of them are behaving more like the teenagers they teach than the adults they are.

Ron crosses his arms over his chest and cocks his head to one side, surveying the late headmaster's spy. "Your voice sounds fully recovered now...not hoarse at all."

Snape inclines his head, reticent, as ever, to speak of his war injury. He has taken to wearing an old fashioned cravat with his frock coats to hide the horrific scar on his throat. On anyone else, it would have looked ridiculous, but the old fellow manages to carry it off with dignity.

The carriage clock on the mantel chimes four times, and Ron turns slightly to include Hermione in the conversation, even though she remains stiffly in her chair, staring straight ahead and not looking at Snape at all.

"I'd better go. Mum asked me to pop out for milk, and she'll be looking for it."

Hermione stands. "She'll think you fell down a rabbit hole," she says. "I'll walk you down to make sure you don't find any more distractions."

Ron puts a brotherly arm around her shoulders, but she turns away from him at the door to say, "Unless you need me for something, Professor?"

Even Ron cannot miss the irony with which Snape responds. "I need you, Miss Granger? Whatever for?"

Hermione's lips compress again, and she flounces out the door. Ron and Snape exchange a look. Ron shrugs, philosophical as ever about the mysterious behaviour of witches. Snape's austere face is expressionless, until he humorously arches one coal black eyebrow.

"All right, spill. What's going on with you and Snape?"

Hermione grabs Ron's arm and pulls him into an empty classroom, muttering, *Muffliato*."

She purses her lips, considering whether she should take Ron into her confidence. He's one of her best friends, but his thoughts are bound up now with Parvati Patil, with whom he shares a flat in London, and with his professional Quidditch career as the reserve Keeper for the Chudley Cannons. He's not thinking about clandestine matters of state any longer.

Would he be able to understand her concerns? Such as the shelf of Charmed books in Snape's rooms that appear to be perfectly blank? Or the way the deputy headmaster slips away several nights a month claiming to have work to do in his rooms, but then leaves the castle and Disapparates? Would Ron care about Snape's obviously Secret Kept destination in Knockturn Alley?

"What?" Ron says. "You're up to something, aren't you? I know that look."

She looks up into his freckled face, the concern in his guileless blue eyes, and knows she cannot burden him with her suspicions. There's no way Ron can keep a secret from Harry, and the last thing Hermione needs is a visit from Harry, who has now appointed himself Snape's ambassador in the world. If Harry knew Hermione suspected Snape of something, he would put himself right in the middle of it, and Hermione would be helpless to stop him.

"I don't know what you're on about," she says, infusing her voice with indignation. "And watch what you say where the students can hear you. Don't forget, I'm a teacher now."

She knows from his expression that he's not buying her story, but he just shrugs. "Have it your way, then."

And as happy as she was to see him in her office, she is happier still as she sees him out the castle doors.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 2

Two nights later, her work week complete, Hermione dawdles over her supper in the Great Hall. She has plans, but executing them depends on where Severus Snape decides to spend the evening. She casts occasional glances along the table to where he sits beside McGonagall at the centre of the table. After pudding, McGonagall rises and speaks to the teachers.

“Brandy and conversation in the staff room this evening.”

“And poker,” Snape adds sardonically. “Don’t bring your pocketbooks.”

Amid the good-natured laughs, Hermione trails the teachers until she sees Snape stand politely aside to permit the others to enter the room ahead of him. Flitwick and Slughorn are the last ones in. She reverses direction. She has preparations to make.

“Miss Granger?”

She freezes in her tracks. Why didn’t Snape go in? What does he want?

She turns to him. “Yes, Professor?”

“Will you join us?”

His tone is perfectly modulated. He exhibits no expression other than one of courteous attention. Hermione can’t help but notice how much better he looks than he did when she was his student. His eyes are no longer sunken in a face bordering on the skeletal, which always threw his nose into unflattering relief. He appears properly nourished, properly rested, and though he has a large, hooked nose, it no longer dominates his face as it did before. No, his eyes are his dominant facial feature now. They are endlessly dark and arresting.

These days, she finds herself looking at him far more frequently than she wants to, and she doesn’t like it.

She says, “Thank you, but no. I have plans with friends.”

Other than a faint arch of his eyebrows, Snape makes no response. He then nods and enters the staff room, closing the door behind him.

Hermione feels a curious mixture of relief and regret. Does he really want her company? She finds she cannot believe this to be true.

She turns and goes to her room to prepare for her night’s adventure.

Ninety minutes later, she is sitting disconsolately in the office shared by the co-owners of Harry’s Place. She wears a little black dress and crazily high-heeled black shoes. She’s even used Sleekeazy to put her hair up, but all to no avail. Knowing the location of the building still did not gain her entrance.

As she stood in the dark, empty foyer of the Secret Kept house, a disembodied voice said, “Password, please.”

Hermione looked all around, but saw no one. “I don’t have a password.”

“Come back Tuesday.”

And by some magic she is not familiar with, she was back on the street.

So she walked round to Harry’s Place.

She kicks off her shoes and massages a foot, while Harry and Draco stand over her.

Harry shakes his head. “Girls go out in the cold wearing next to nothing and then wonder why they’re freezing.”

Draco elbows Harry gently in the side. “Why don’t you find us something warm to drink, and I’ll fetch a blanket for her.”

When Harry leaves the room, Draco rests his shapely bum on the edge of a desk and looks her over with cool grey eyes.

“What happened to you? Some bloke stand you up?”

Hermione glances over her shoulder to ascertain Harry’s absence, then holds out the grubby card to Draco. “Do you know this place?”

Draco wrinkles his nose and takes the business card fastidiously by the corners. When he speaks, his voice is sharp with disbelief. “TPE? What the hell, Granger?”

Hermione snatches the card from him and puts it away again. “Just tell me what you know.”

He leans closer to her and speaks quietly. “It’s a club for adults. My father goes there now and again.”

“Your parents go to TPE?”

“My *father*,” he repeats, as if she’s not quite bright. “It wouldn’t be to my mother’s . . . taste.”

“But why is it so secretive? What do they do there?”

Draco's eyes focus on the wall over her head, and she's sure the next words he speaks will be a lie.

"Don't bother if you're not going to tell me the truth," she says, feeling irritated. All dressed up and nowhere to go, except to see Harry and Draco. Another wasted excursion. Will she never find out what Snape is up to?

She says, "I'll just go back Tuesday, like they told me to."

Draco nods. "Tuesday nights are for beginners. You'll find out all about it then."

Hermione narrows her eyes at him. "I wish you would just tell me what you know."

"I went to one of the Tuesday night get-togethers, but it wasn't my sort of thing. Friday nights are for couples and people seeking relationships, so they don't admit beginners on Fridays. You can be anonymous if you want. It's just for all different sorts of . . . encounters."

"Do you mean sex?" Hermione asks, intrigued.

"Go find your own man, Hermione," Harry says, returning with a tea service on a tray. "No sex with mine."

Harry gives Draco a look, and Draco smirks at him. Hermione tries not to be envious. Harry has someone. Ron has someone. Even Neville and Ginny have each other. What's the matter with her? Why can't she find someone?

Harry shakes his head, pouring tea into a mug and passing it to Hermione. "I thought you were going to find a blanket for her, Malfoy. You're hopeless at entertaining."

Draco lifts a hand. "*Accio* sofa quilt."

Tucked up on the sofa across from the partners' desks, Hermione drinks her tea and looks around the room. Harry's desk is haphazardly piled with vendors' invoices, fliers announcing the opening of the restaurant on Halloween, and newspapers. Draco's desk holds a framed photograph of him with his parents, an expensive eagle feather quill in a sterling silver inkstand, and a cut crystal vase with one perfect white rose.

She cocks her head to one side. "I didn't know you like flowers, Draco."

He reaches the short distance from his chair to Harry's and flicks a finger gently against the messy black-haired head. "I didn't either, until someone began giving me one every day."

Harry laughs. "The way I remember it is you told me if I wanted to get on with you, I had to provide the proper romantic inducements."

The two exchange a look charged with tension, and Hermione is flooded with a sharp pang of emotion. It seems as if she's on the verge of tears far too often, these days. Orphaned Harry has found his place in the world with Draco Malfoy, of all people, and she couldn't be happier for both of them—but rather sad for herself.

She finishes her tea in one long swallow. "I'm off," she says, slipping her shoes on again. "Thank you for the tea and company."

The young men stand, shoulder to shoulder, and their hands link.

"Do you want us to take you back?" Harry asks.

Hermione shakes her head. "I'm a big girl—I can manage."

She Disapparates from the street in front of the restaurant with its *Opening Soon!* sign glowing in the dark.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 3

Severus Snape slips out the door into the night, thankful to escape the racket of the Halloween Feast in the Great Hall. The students are hyped to the eyeballs on excitement and sugar, and he is pleased to leave them in the care of his colleagues.

Every man needs some time alone...and time when he's *not* alone.

He is forty years old, more than two years past the war that should have killed him, and though he has resumed his career, he feels adrift in this brand new world...the one where Severus Snape is honoured, admired...even sought after.

When a man lives through the death he sought...courted...and pays the debts he took on so carelessly in his youth, what is he to do with himself? How is he to navigate the society he has shunned...and been shunned by...all his adult life?

He has accepted his clean slate...has finally come to believe in this new start...but he still has no earthly idea what use it is to him.

He's in his prime with no clue how to make the most of it.

Lucius Malfoy, ever his tutor in how to get on in life, seems nearly as lost as Severus. He and Narcissa opened their home to the Auror investigation of the Death Eaters after the war. They testified under seal and in open court to their knowledge of the activities of Tom Riddle and his minions. They did so with dignity...and they continued to

serve their punishment of five years' house arrest at the Manor. But with the help of the one house-elf remaining to the Malfoy family, Lucius makes occasional furtive forays to Knockturn Alley. On one such occasion, he introduced Severus to the benefits of . . . social interaction at TPE.

Halloween in the year 2000...what could be a more auspicious time for a man to whom the world is now an oyster ripe for consumption? And Severus Snape is not the only wizard setting out to enjoy his clean slate this damp autumn night...he is, in fact, en route to Harry's Place, where The Boy Who Lived and the one who loves him are welcoming patrons for their inaugural night as restaurateurs.

Hermione takes the glass of champagne from the tray of a passing server and looks around the restaurant. She can see the influence of Draco in the edgy elegance of the retro dark woods and rich fabrics of the cosy nooks...but she can also see that of Harry in the central open area filled with squashy sofas and armchairs, the scattered tables and buffet-style serving of the food. They've captured the Slytherin private alcove elegance and the Gryffindor common room comfort in one go.

Not bad for business partners who, two years earlier, were at one another's throats at every public encounter. The behaviour only fuelled the fire of the passion that consumed them in private life, far from the prying eyes...and the knowledge...of their friends. But now Harry and Draco are hiding nothing...their sexual orientation, their relationship, or their business aspirations.

Ron, Parvati, Ginny, and Neville are at the centre of a group of Dumbledore's Army who stand before the magnificent oaken bar. Hermione makes the rounds of her friends, kissing cheeks, exchanging news, establishing her presence at the opening. She cannot miss this new beginning for Harry and Draco...but she is determined to have her new beginning as well, which awaits her at TPE at eight o'clock.

There's no reason why she can't be at both places in one evening, even if it means cutting her time at Harry's Place a bit shorter than Harry might like.

This time, when Hermione enters the portals of TPE, she is in a well-lit reception room with two people manning the desk. The first is a stunningly exotic woman with white-blonde hair and curiously yellow-green eyes. The second woman is rather plain in comparison to her companion, but she seems unaware of the glaring difference. She has a round face and smiles when she sees Hermione, friendly and cheerful. Her wide-set blue eyes seem to dance.

"I'm so glad you decided to use the card!" she says, extending her hand. "If you don't mind giving it back...we don't want too many of these floating around town."

Hermione willingly surrenders the card. "Were you the old woman who gave it to me?"

"Yes!" She laughs and darts a mischievous look to her silent, watchful companion. "I'm KiKi, and this is Ramona."

Hermione finds KiKi's good nature hard to resist. She smiles in return, though Ramona responds with no more than a long blink of her feline eyes.

KiKi nods to the open doorway leading into the interior of the house. "The parlour is the first room on the left...we have the newcomers' meeting in there. Please make yourself comfortable and we'll begin the meeting at eight."

Hermione enters a long corridor that extends to the back of the building, dwindling to full darkness in the distance. That part of the hallway she can see is lined at intervals on either side by closed doors. Curious, she turns into the small parlour. It is tastefully appointed with a thick rug and elegantly upholstered antique chairs, sofas, and tables. The palette is garnet red, cobalt blue, and old gold.

She is the third inhabitant of the room. The others are both women. She estimates their ages at closer to thirty than her twenty-one. Sensing their nervousness, Hermione speaks.

"Hello. A bit damp out tonight, isn't it?"

They murmur agreement.

Hermione is scarcely settled before KiKi bustles into the room. "Welcome, ladies!" she says, her bright smile making the words meaningful. "Newcomers to TPE always adopt a nickname at first, so I'll encourage you to be thinking of what you'd like to be called."

"Why nicknames?" Hermione asks.

"Some of our regular visitors prefer to remain anonymous," KiKi says. "This is your first visit, and there's no charge for your first time. Each time after the first, if you decide you like us and want to return, there will be a fee charged, based on the service you choose and the amount of time you wish to spend." She hands out sheets of closely written parchment.

Hermione barely glances at it. She is too impatient to know more.

"TPE has been in this location since the end of the eighteenth century," KiKi continues. "It wasn't called TPE then, though...it was called the Wizard's Hellfire Club. The Muggles had a club by that name, but they spent much of their time mocking religious practice. The wizard version was more a place for the practice of sadomasochism."

Hermione blinks and feels a touch of panic. What has she walked into?

"Don't worry!" KiKi says. "TPE has had many incarnations in its time, but the most recent began a few years after the fall of Grindelwald. In fact, this year, we celebrate our fiftieth anniversary." KiKi pauses to smile around at everyone again, but she can see that her auditors are in a state of alarm. "Well, that's enough of our history."

She takes a straight back chair and moves it so that she and the three newcomers sit in a rough circle. Hermione tries, but she finds that she cannot be quiet.

"But what does TPE *mean*?"

KiKi answers, addressing her answer to all the women. "TPE stand for total power exchange."

Hermione feels as if she's going to jump out of her skin. "But what does it mean?"

Now KiKi turns to face Hermione, her tone soothing even as her words incite the clamouring in Hermione's midsection.

"It's a part of BDSM...that's Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), Sadism and Masochism (SM). Dominance and submission is the relationship between a dominant and a submissive. Many say TPE is the pinnacle of Dominance and submission. TPE refers to a relationship or activity in which the submissive gives the dominant partner power and authority over the submissive's body, in exchange for the submissive's happiness and fulfilment. It can be for any duration, ranging from a single encounter to a proscribed period of hours, days, or weeks. Some people even agree to living TPE 24/7."

"Oh, thank you!"

Hermione turns her head to see one of the newcomer women with her hand over her mouth. She is crying, tears running down her face, but it is obvious that the emotion she expresses is joy rather than sorrow. The other newcomer takes the crying woman's hand, with a sympathetic nod.

Hermione closes her eyes against the puzzling exchange between the two women. What can they possibly mean? That the description of this activity answers some deep-seated need inside them? It's preposterous.

But why is she shaking?

She has pursued Snape to this place, because she is obsessed with him and can't stop thinking about him. A shudder escapes her lips at this inner confession. It's true. She's pretended it was about something else all these weeks, but no. It goes back to the first day of her new position at Hogwarts. At the teachers' gathering, her new colleagues standing about with teacups and little glasses of sherry in their hands, Snape had come up to her and offered his hand.

"Welcome back, Miss Granger."

Oh, her hand had lain within his for mere seconds, but the frisson of near-electric intensity that shimmered up her arm had lit her blood to flame. And for another fragment of a moment his penetrating eyes had looked into hers and seen, she was quite sure, to the very depths of her sad and lonely soul.

Learning from Draco that TPE is some sort of hook-up place hasn't discouraged her at all. Here she is trembling all over, the idea of putting herself in the sexual thrall of Severus Snape filling her with an ache unlike any she's ever felt.

KiKi's voice calls her back to the present. "If you choose to stay and experience TPE tonight, you need only complete the newcomer questionnaire and a service chit."

Ramona glides into their midst and hands each of the newcomers a clipboard with a Self-Inking Quill attached.

KiKi continues her explanation. "There are established members of TPE who attend on Tuesday nights to give our newcomers an introduction to the club. You may check off whether you prefer to be the dominant or the submissive, whether you prefer a male or a female partner, and you'll answer a few questions about your limits. The last page lists the members who are available tonight. If you have been referred to us by someone who frequents the club, you may know the names of some of our members. Feel free to circle the name of anyone you wish to meet with. As long as there is not more than one request for a specific member, we should be able to accommodate your wishes."

Hermione immediately thumbs through to the final page. Six names are listed there, and Severus Snape is not one of them.

Hyperion

Venus

John Smith

Freyja

Tobias Prince

Jane Seymour

These are obviously nicknames, rather than real names...and Tobias was the name of Snape's father, while Prince was the surname of his mother. She knows this because she bothered to do the research, all those years ago, when Snape killed Dumbledore.

Without a second thought, Hermione circles *Tobias Prince*.

Severus stands in Harry's Place, empty-handed amongst a crowd of drink-swilling young adults. Had it not been for the importuning of Potter...and the quiet inquiry from Lucius...he would doubtless have given this event the go-by. Others he expected to see here have obviously done so...why would Hermione Granger not be present for her putative best friend's restaurant opening?

And why do you care?

He jerks his head to dislodge the thought, his shoulder length hair swaying against his face. His eyes dart right and left to see who has witnessed this, but no one is looking at him. In the midst of this crowd, he stands like a monolith. His former students move around him, giving a wide berth and keeping their eyes to themselves, for which he can only be grateful.

Moving surreptitiously, he withdraws his watch and glances at it. Just after eight...the newcomers will be nervously meeting at TPE, and he has put his name down to be there tonight.

At TPE, he is oddly comfortable in the company of people who consider themselves to be outside the norm. He is not an anomaly there. And the common use of glamours to disguise one's face is something he always uses. Few people at TPE know his identity.

He glides through the crowd to the proprietors and wishes them all success in their new endeavour. Draco inclines his head in response, but Potter eagerly shakes Severus' hand. Severus scarcely ever thinks of Potter's parents when he looks at him now. The young man has coalesced into a person in his own right, and though he is a bit on the needy side, Severus feels no inclination to repulse him.

When he escapes into the darkness, the cold air immediately clears his mind. There's no need to think about Miss Granger...not her searching brown eyes or her lips, hastily moistened by the tip of her tongue...not her beguiling quickness of mind or her skittishness when he draws near.

And certainly not solving the puzzle of the reason why she chooses to "follow" him when he leaves the castle some nights. He doesn't exactly like all the hype published about his spying, but it is an indisputable fact he spent years of his life sneaking and lurking about. Does she believe it is possible for even a clever girl like her to follow *him*?

Tonight, the mystery of Hermione Granger is replaced by anticipation for the encounter he will experience at TPE, preferably with one of the newcomers.

The newcomers are always so grateful for his attentions and uniformly eager to please. He will enjoy an hour or so with one of them, with no worry of the social awkwardness he always feels when attempting to actually date a woman. The newcomers have no expectations of hearing from him again, and that is exactly the way he likes it.

Some people at TPE actively seek a partner, wishing to be part of a couple. Severus desires no such entanglement. He prefers to keep his little no-strings pleasures separate from the rest of his life.

At TPE, he is always in complete control.

He enters the building. The desk is deserted, which means the newcomers are meeting. He speaks his password, and the members' door opens, admitting him into the members' sitting room. Two dominants are present, as well as a few of the dominas. He responds to their greetings, pours a cup of tea from the service on the table, and seats himself in an armchair. He is decidedly sober...he has taken no beer, wine or liquor tonight. It is considered improper in the BDSM community to engage in scenes if either partner is altered by any substance.

His first visit had been as Lucius' guest, and he had bypassed the usual orientation meeting. After observing some scenes of various sorts, he was convinced. And he was too uplifted by his discovery of this place to be very annoyed with Lucius' gloating...Malfoy had pegged him perfectly.

Within two months' time he was offered membership. Now he visits two or three times a week, for the gratification it provides. Less than half the satisfaction he derives from his activities in this place are related to actual sex. He is an alpha male...a discovery he is pleased to have made, for it explains so much...and he craves the surrender of his partners as much, if not more, than he does sexual release.

KiKi enters the room with a small sheaf of parchment in her hands. She nods around the room, exchanging greetings with those gathered, then she speaks.

"We have three newcomers tonight, all female. I'll need one dominant and one domina."

Lady Jane Seymour cocks her head to one side. "I thought you had three?"

KiKi smiles broadly. "Sir Tobias, I have a special request for you."

Severus has become accustomed to the TPE custom of calling the dominants "sir" and the dominas "lady", although at first he had thought it a ridiculous affectation. However, the special request for him is unusual. He's had previous partners come back and request him again, and he's taken care with those requests, because he has no interest in having a woman become attached to him. In the case of a newcomer, however, he can see no harm in granting the request.

He accepts the service chit and newcomer questionnaire from KiKi. After glancing at the name, he asks, "Did ..*Kitty* say why she asked for me?"

"She says she likes your name."

Severus smirks and begins to read through the questionnaire.

Hermione stands in front of the full length mirror in the changing room, staring at herself in the plain white robes that are so long only the tips of her toes are visible beneath them. As KiKi explained, the TPE glamour has given her a different face and hair...it even changes her voice...but her body is unchanged.

"We leave your body the same, because we're not here to help you hide from the reality of yourself...we simply help you disguise your identity."

Hermione glances at the wooden cubicle in which she left her neatly folded clothes with her shoes. Her two choices of apparel for tonight are to be bare beneath the robes or to wear a sheer white sheath. She is wearing the sheath...she cannot bring herself to appear completely naked. Her heart feels as if it is racing, and she is light-headed with excitement.

What if Sir Tobias is Professor Snape? What if he isn't? And if he's disguised, as she is, how can she be sure?

She smooths the pale blonde hair, so unlike her own, and stares at the average, blue-eyed face in the mirror. He will never recognize her like this, and that knowledge quivers through her like freedom, drawing a gasp from her lips and igniting a smouldering warmth in her tummy.

She can be whoever she wants to be tonight...do whatever strikes her fancy...and no one she knows will ever be aware of her actions.

Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Kitty will cease to exist in two hours...the length of the time the glamour persists...and by that time, Hermione will be long gone from TPE.

KiKi escorts her down a dim, deserted corridor and leads the way into a dark room. The floor is covered with a thick rug, and she can distinguish the shapes of furniture, but she cannot identify the pieces. In the middle of the room, there is a circle woven into the otherwise dark rug, like the full moon in the night sky. KiKi leads her to the circle.

"You'll stand here," KiKi says.

Hermione takes her place and looks to KiKi again.

"Kitty, do you understand that you left your power of choice at the door to this room?" KiKi asks.

Hermione swallows hard, and her anxiety ratchets up another notch. "Yes," she says, though her voice is tight and small, as if she's speaking past some obstruction in her throat.

KiKi smiles encouragingly. "You've made a good choice. Sir Tobias is excellent with newcomers. Trust him, and you'll be in strong, capable hands." With a final pat to Hermione's shoulder, KiKi moves to the door, leaving Hermione alone in the middle of the room. "Stand in that spot, and Sir Tobias will be with you shortly."

Hermione hears KiKi's departure, but she is still stuck on the words *strong, capable hands*. She inhales sharply, trying to calm herself. After his mesmerizing black eyes, Snape's hands are his second best feature. They are elegantly formed, with long fingers...sure and skilled whether wielding his wand or inscribing acidic comments on his students' homework. She watches him at work when she can do so undetected, and she has ample, first-hand confirmation of what those hands can do.

Sweet Circe, her inner shuddering has spread now to her extremities. She's trembling like a leaf in a gale.

Then a door opens and closes, but it's not the one she entered by...it's behind her. He's in the room, and she's not only facing the wrong way, but she's afraid if she attempts to turn, she'll fall.

Her nerves are stretched to the limit...one more stressor will surely send her right out of her mind. She closes her eyes, a whimper of distress like a breath of capitulation passing her lips.

Severus enters the room, making no effort to mute the noise. There are times when it is amusing to enter silently and startle the submissive within, but with newcomers, it is always more satisfying to make an audible entrance, because it never fails to exacerbate their nervousness.

With the flick of his fingers, he creates a spotlight that shines down on her, leaving the rest of the room murky.

His subject stands obediently in the circle, her back to him. The glamour has given her blonde hair, which is a pity. He finds that he prefers darker hair, but it is of no matter. She is rather petite, standing little more than five foot five, he estimates. She has a womanly shape beneath the white robes, with nicely rounded hips. On the questionnaire, she put her age in the 20s decade...a bit younger than his preference, but of no real import.

It's not as if he's going to fuck her. He seldom fucks a newcomer...their sweetly trembling submission is usually enough for the rapacious alpha male within.

In a firm tone, he says, "Remove the robes."

Chapter 1

Chapter 4 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

A/N:A/N:Some smoking hot passion for this lover's day. If you time for him, I believe Severus would be happy to . . . indulge you.

Chapter 4

The voice speaks the command, and Hermione is beset with the desire to ask questions. Should she turn? Should she speak? But no, the unfamiliar voice told her what to do. She left her power of choice at the door, and this stranger has picked up her power and tucked it in his pocket before entering the room. She can almost imagine it there, a glowing golden orb in the keeping of Sir Tobias.

With shaking hands, she unfastens the clasps and allows the robes to fall to the floor. Her skin instantly registers the cool temperature and pebbles with gooseflesh, her nipples becoming taut and pushing against the sheer fabric of the sheath she wears.

Absorbed in her wildly scattered thoughts, she is surprised when next she hears the voice, much closer this time.

"You're a shy one, I see."

She turns her head, trying to look over her shoulder.

"Face the front. I'll tell you if I want you to move."

She only wants to see his face and his form...if his body is unchanged, at least she can see if he's shaped like Professor Snape. Why is he so bossy? Then she remembers why, and an inappropriate giggle escapes her lips.

"Do I amuse you?"

He is directly behind her now, close enough that she can feel the bulk and warmth of him at her back. When next he speaks, he is looming over her, his lips close enough to her ear to make her hair move against her cheek.

"You may speak to answer me. Do I amuse you?"

Hermione experiences several things at once. Her heart rate trips into a faster rhythm, her midsection feels as if it's been invaded by butterflies, and the trembling has spread to her mind...to her *lips*. She has to try twice before she can force herself to speak. When she does, her disguised voice sounds breathy and high-pitched and frankly, stupid.

"No! Of course not. I'm nervous, and when I'm very nervous, sometimes I do or say wrong things."

"I see."

The voice is not Snape's, but there is something in the way he speaks...how he frames his sentences...that is hauntingly familiar to her. Wait...is that real? Or is it just that she desperately wants Sir Tobias to be Severus Snape?

"Kitty."

The way he speaks the name is almost a purr.

"Y-yes? Sir?"

A smooth, dark chuckle rumbles near her ear, and unable to resist, she turns her head until her nose and the side of her mouth make contact with his cheek.

"You're a naughty little puss, aren't you?"

He turns her to him, hands firm upon her shoulders. She has a quick impression of height...*Yes! The right height!*...and then one of his large hands cradles the back of her skull as he bends his head to hers. He stops with his lips a mere breath away.

"You're pushing yourself on me like a girl who needs something. What do you need, Kitty? Is it a kiss? Kisses are on your list of what you want, but that isn't all, is it? You want me to *ravish* you."

Hermione grasps the front of his plain black robes, uncertain if she can keep her feet if this heart-pounding teasing continues. Sir Tobias takes this as consent, and he pulls her against him, his lips fastening to hers with practiced ease.

Her eyes fall closed, her nostrils fill with the scent of his aftershave, and as her lips part, his tongue sweeps into her mouth, bringing with it the flavours of tea and cinnamon.

There is nothing hesitant about Sir Tobias. He is all confidence and absolutely sure of his welcome. His tongue fills her mouth and plunders, as if hidden within lay all the sweetness of the Promised Land. As his tongue caresses hers, claiming his right to her kiss, his free hand begins a leisurely exploration of her back, marking her shoulder blades before finding the dip of her waist and clasping her there.

Hermione lets go of the need to analyse everything and instead goes with what is happening. She gives herself permission simply to feel and to be. In this instant, she has this man's undivided attention, and she revels in it, internalising every detail.

She breathes his aftershave, spice and musk, and absorbs the wild, elemental testosterone of his very being...the breath, the scent, the taste. She presses closer, holds tighter, and suckles his tongue, feeling her response to him like a sudden, flaring need deep in her body.

Trust him and you'll be in good hands. isn't that what KiKi said? Those hands have taken possession of her without a moment of indecision, and in this hour of insanity, she is inclined to yield herself to him. She is wholly outside the context of her life...in this moment, in this hour with him, there is no past and no future...there is only now and this.

Oh, *this*.

Severus lifts his head and sees Kitty's face...eyes closed, lips parted, breathing erratic...and he knows an almost feral instinct to fuck her. Never in memory has a woman responded so utterly to him so quickly. The completeness of her surrender...the sweet trust of her acceptance...the trembling readiness to tumble into his arms...these things and more batter his good sense with the wings of urgency and desperation.

This is what a man is made for...to possess and dominate a willing, impassioned woman who submits to him. The way she quivers in his arms...the way the breath shudders in and out of her...the scent of her arousal...all are potent weapons against his scruples.

This little wildcat will require careful handling, and it is his job to put on the brakes. He needs to step back, take a deep breath, and regain some perspective.

He releases her and moves away, putting distance between them. She sways on her feet as if she will fall, but when her eyes open, and she sees him standing two feet away from her, she seems to snap out of her passion-induced fugue state. She blinks her eyes at him and crosses her arms over her chest, as if newly reminded of the chill in the air...of her near nudity.

He has released her and stepped away, and Hermione is colder than before. In his arms, her blood burned so hot she might have seared his flesh, but now she is bereft. Stupid, inexplicable tears prick at her eyes, and she blinks them away, desperate not to cry.

She inhales deeply and forces herself to concentrate on Sir Tobias. He wears a high-necked dark jumper beneath his robes. He is a bit over six feet tall, she estimates, lithe and graceful...all tick marks in the Snape column. However, his hair is a light brown, and his face is perfectly average, with unremarkable eyes, nose, and lips. He is, of course, disguised as she is, but he *could* be Snape. She realizes she is willing to accept the certainty...to act as if Sir Tobias is Severus Snape...to allow this man to fulfil the unacknowledged fantasies she harbours deep in her soul.

"Arms at your sides...yes, like that. Stand straight...shoulders back, head up, eyes to the front."

Hermione obeys, already yearning again for his touch. He has activated some dormant need inside her, and she can think of nothing but seeking ... satisfaction.

He comes closer, but when she reaches to touch him, he catches her wrist and bears it firmly down to her side.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Kitty. I am going to inspect your body now...to decide how I'm going to enjoy you...and your part is to stand perfectly still while I look at you."

He moves out of her sight, and though she longs to turn her head to watch him, she remembers she is to look straight ahead. She knows his eyes are on her, and it is as if she feels his gaze as a ray of heat on her flesh. Every place he looks, from her heels up the backs of her legs to her bum, leaves a trail of warmth and prickling *want*.

He pauses at her shoulder, his voice in her ear again. "Don't you have a delicious little bottom? More than enough in those round cheeks to fill a man's hands...to take a spanking...to sink one's teeth into."

He wants to cup her arse? To bite it? To spank it? Sweet Circe, she wants all of it. She clamps her teeth onto her lower lip to keep from emitting an embarrassing sound...to keep from blurting unasked for words.

He sees...*he sees everything*...and there is a smirk in his tone when he says, "It is a very biteable lip, isn't it?"

He is standing before her now, and she can watch his leisurely examination of her body as well as feel the heat of his eyes on her skin. There's something so vulnerable about standing before him, not allowed to speak or move...in any other situation, she would never permit herself to be objectified in this way. But now...in this stolen hour, with this man whom she chooses to believe is the object of her fancy...now, it is not only acceptable. It is essential.

She needs his attention more than she needs her next breath.

As if he knows her thoughts, Sir Tobias steps forward, one long-fingered hand taking her chin and tilting it until her disguised blue eyes meet his fake hazel ones. There is still a fragment of the sensible Hermione within...the voice that whispers, *Snape is a Legilimens*.

She Occludes, just in case.

But Sir Tobias seems unaware of her inner dilemma. He caresses her face. "So soft," he murmurs.

The resonance...the intimacy...of his words are like fuel to the banked fire of her need. She sways towards him, her lips parting, willing him to kiss her again.

He responds with the ghost of smile, and the fingers of both his hands thread through her hair...her blonde hair, straight in a way that could never be achieved with her real hair...and he massages her scalp with strong, clever fingertips.

She is amazed at the sensual pleasure of his touch, and her eyes close in bliss, a little murmur of delight passing her lips.

Then he is nuzzling her ear, taking a deep breath of her hair. "Is Kitty your real name?"

Hermione does not hesitate. "No."

"Good girl," he says, his lips trailing down the curve of her jaw to her throat. "Then I shall call you 'Kitten,' because it is far more fitting name for such a delectable little morsel." One of the hands in her hair tightens and he pulls her head back until she is looking into his eyes again. "'Kitten' is the perfect name for a woman as submissive as you are. You'll remember to change it the next time you come back, won't you, Kitten?"

She strains against the hand in her hair, trying to kiss him, but he holds her in place, watching her with obvious satisfaction. Accepting her defeat, she turns her head as far to the right as she can and presses a kiss to his left forearm, to the sleeve of his jumper, revealed by the looser sleeve of his robes. Is there a Dark Mark beneath that jumper? Ah, if she could see even the edge of it, she would know Sir Tobias' true identity.

"You want to orgasm, don't you, Kitten?"

Hermione feels her face burn. She did put that on her service chit...that she wants an orgasm tonight. It's not as if she doesn't have them regularly by her own hand, but that's not the same as having one from *him*. She wets her lips, aware of the way Sir Tobias' gaze sharpens, and says, "Yes. Yes, I do."

There is something almost predatory in the curl of his lip, but rather than frightening her, it simply increases her desire.

"I wonder how I'm to achieve that objective, with you and all your delightful little erogenous zones covered by this silly sheath. Shall we remove it?"

She knows there is logic on his side, but she cannot bear the thought of standing before him in this spotlight completely naked. She gives a quick shake of her head, sorry to deny him, but unwilling to comply.

"They ... they said I can keep it."

Sir Tobias frowns, a Snape-like furrow of displeasure creasing his unlined forehead. "I won't ask you again, Kitten, but if at any point during our interactions you find the sheath to be troublesome, you need only ask, and I will assist you to be rid of it. Do you understand?"

Hermione is entranced by the familiar-seeming glower, and she answers quickly. "Yes, Sir Tobias."

He releases her and steps back again, drawing another whimper of desolation from her. "Yes, my name is Sir Tobias, and you will address me by that or 'Sir.' "

He pauses, as if awaiting a response, and Hermione nods her understanding.

"I have read your list of likes, dislikes, soft and hard limits, and I understand your needs and ... desires."

His voice is such an instrument of expression...his simple utterance of the word "desires" sends a wash of warmth to the fuel-hungry fire now beginning to blaze in her most secret places.

"I am going to satisfy your wants, Kitten...scratch your itch, tickle your fancy, and fulfil your dreams. All you must remember is the safe word I will give you. It is imperative for you to remember your safe word and to speak it aloud to me if you want me to stop what I'm doing to you. You may speak it at any time, for any reason, and I will stop and listen to you. Is it understood? I require a verbal response."

Hermione nervously moistens her dry lips, aware again of Sir Tobias' sharp glance at her tongue, and she says, "I understand, Sir."

His intent gaze moves from her lips to her eyes. "Your safe word is 'Bubotuber.'"

Hermione is startled into a giggle, and there is the flash of a smile from Sir Tobias. His even, white teeth are a startling contrast to Snape's unfortunate ones *Disguised*, she reminds herself, but then he is advancing on her, and she steps forward to meet him.

He stops her by taking hold of her upper arm. "You said you wanted to try a spanking...I think we'll begin with that, shall we?"

Hermione wants to kick herself. She *did* put that on the questionnaire. What was she thinking?

He's watching her with enigmatic hazel eyes. "Changed your mind?"

It sounds like a challenge, and she knows he means it for one. Well, she'll do it. He seems to want it, and he said he was going to make her orgasm, so she'll get what she wants before they're finished together.

"No, sir," she says.

Half a smile this time. "That's my little Kitten. Come along to the spanking bench."

He pulls her closer with a hand at her waist and walks her to an elevated, well-padded device with different levels and attachments. She is able to see clearly because the spotlight follows her as if its magic is keyed to her movement.

Sir Tobias indicates the lowest level, which is perhaps two feet off the ground. "Kneel here," he says, "and rest your stomach here..." he indicates the next level, gently sloped "and your arms go here."

He watches while she arranges herself on the apparatus, comfortable save for the feeling that her bottom is ridiculously thrust up and out. Well, he said he likes her bottom, so who is she to worry that it's too big?

He touches her hand, resting now upon the arm of the spanking bench. "There are ways for me to tie your hands down, Kitten. Shall I take care of that for you? Some little ones enjoy the sensation of ... helplessness."

As he speaks the last, delicious word, he moves her hair aside and presses a kiss to the back of her neck, his lips cool, his tongue warm, his teeth sharp...and the inside of his mouth as he sucks on her skin *hot*...perhaps as hot as the lava pit aching between her thighs. Her nipples, pressed to the padded slope of the bench, harden to peaks, and she draws her lower lip between her teeth to swallow a moan.

"I'll take that for 'yes, please, Sir Tobias,' " he says, his face so close that his cheek is pressed to hers. "You're lovely, little Kitten...I will enjoy you tonight."

Her teeth tighten on her lip, but a murmur of helpless desire shudders through her.

He notices...of course he does. He notices everything.

"You're my good girl," he says.

Then she feels silk on her wrist, and opening her eyes, she sees his able, agile fingers tying her to the bench with a red silk scarf. She knows those hands. How can she doubt for a moment this is Severus Snape, preparing to spank her bottom...the bottom now clothed with nothing more than a see-through piece of fabric?

At this thought, miraculously, she relaxes completely. She releases her lower lip and draws in a deep, steadying breath. She wants to be fully present in this out-of-context moment with him, closed into this space where she owns his full, undiluted attention.

Then his hand is on her bottom, stroking down first one cheek, then the other. Hermione pushes into the hand, arching her neck too, as if that will bring her needful centre closer to the hands promising her deliverance.

"It is a pity, of course, about the sheath," he says, and she realizes his hand now strokes flesh...his first touch made the fabric of the sheath dissolve, exposing her arse to him. "I only spank bare bottoms, Kitten...don't you agree it ought always to be that way?"

She scrabbles mentally for the pure relaxation of mere moments before, but she is rigid with embarrassment. Then he takes the matter completely away from her...she has given him her power, has she not?...when his hand delves between her thighs and cups her vulva.

"Let's see if you're wet for me."

And with two fingers he slips between her nether lips and owns her pulsing heat.

"You are a very, very good Kitten," he says, rolling her clitoris beneath the faintest touch of his proficient fingertips. "You're already quite prepared for me to make you scream with ecstasy, aren't you?"

She gasps, and her head slowly falls to the padded surface of the bench. Almost against her will, she moves her legs further apart, giving him more complete access to her heat.

"That's right, Kitten. Such a good girl. Now, let's purchase your pleasure with a taste of pain, shall we?"

Wait! What?

But before she can protest, his slick fingertips paint the flesh of her arse cheeks with her own essence.

"Gorgeous."

The word is more a breath than an utterance, and then she feels his lips on her bottom, sucking the residue of her wetness from her skin. The pure, carnal decadence of the gesture is like a drug to her mind. She is enveloped in *him*, completely in his orbit, a satellite to the sun of his existence.

When the palm of his hand lands on the fullness of her bottom, she absorbs the sting like fuel. The blows he delivers are like the point and counterpoint of the finest symphonic music. No two successive blows land in the same exact spot, and the ones that land on the lower portion of her arse feel like slaps to the slickness of her cunt. She is enthralled, inhibitions melting away as if they were never a true part of her personality. She feels every blow in her cunt...she embraces the naughty name for it...and as long as his actions promote the pure pleasure in her aching cunt, she does not care what he does to her.

It's all good.

She hears her own gasps and cries as part of the symphony he plays on the instrument of her body. She is not embarrassed or ashamed of her vocal responsiveness...somehow she knows he inhales her sounds like the aroma of her arousal, as turned on by her cries as he is by the slickness of her vulva.

When the blows to her bottom cease, she is quiescent, her breaths panting, but her spirit accepting. He is in control. He has a plan for her, based on the deepest wishes and desires of her authentic self. He will tell her when more is required of her.

Then his fingers are at the red silk scarves, releasing her wrists and thrusting the scarves in his pockets. Without words, he assists her up to a kneeling position, then he scoops her into his arms, cradling her against him and walking across the floor as if she weighs nothing at all.

As before, the bright light follows them, and Hermione looks up into Sir Tobias' face, willing it away, wanting to see the hawk-faced Severus Snape, to look into his never-ending black eyes.

When he becomes aware of her regard, Sir Tobias stops and presses a kiss to her forehead. "You are the very best Kitten of my acquaintance, little one. You are a good girl. I could not be more pleased with you."

The words of praise feed directly into the depths of her bottomless need for approval. Hermione presses her face against the black robes, one hand stroking down his light brown hair and ending at the high neck of his jumper. She runs a fingertip along the edge of the knitted fabric. Severus Snape has a scar on his neck. He might wear such a jumper to hide the tell-tale scar. But Sir Tobias captures her hand and raises it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm.

She stops thinking about the scar.

He sits on a sofa. It is covered in a dark paisley fabric, all blues and browns and creamy ivory. The seat cushions are particularly wide, as if to accommodate two reclining bodies, but he settles Hermione in his lap, his upper body maintaining a gentle rocking motion, as if to soothe her.

She closes her eyes and rests her head on his shoulder, one hand tangled in the fabric of his robes. After a moment, she realizes there's a hard rod of muscle beneath her bottom. Her lips curve into a smile, and she squirms gently for its benefit.

"Naughty Kitten," he says, but his hips thrust upwards, belying his words. He nuzzles her hair, and one hand strokes down her flank, dissolving the sheath, leaving bare skin in its wake. He smooths his fingertips down the newly naked flesh, and Hermione purrs, not even aware she knew how to make the vibrating murmur in her throat.

Sir Tobias chuckles appreciatively. "The Kitten purrs," he says. "You are an unending delight, little Kitten."

She opens her eyes and raises her head. "I want to delight you. Tell me how."

A slight frown touches his forehead, and he looks searchingly into her eyes. Hermione touches the edge of her Occlusion, finds it intact, and opens her eyes wider, as if to assure him of her sincerity. Abruptly, almost as if against his will, Sir Tobias kisses her.

Severus stares into the young woman's eyes, scarcely able to believe his ears. He has pleased many an emergent submissive in this place, coaxing her into yielding her will to him, but never in his life, whether within or without these walls, has a woman ever spoken such words to him. It rocks him out of his complacency, out of the safe confines of his Sir Tobias personality, and it is Severus Snape who crushes his lips to the woman's willing, inviting mouth.

Kitten squirms more upright to gain the use of both arms, and the movement sends another shock of want through his cock. She twines her arms around his neck, pressing her delicious little tongue into his mouth, aggressively pursuing his tongue, bringing the flavours of champagne and something other...more elemental...to his taste buds. He suckles her tongue, drawing a moan of unadulterated arousal from her throat. No longer the contented, purring Kitten...now she's the wanton, demanding Kitten...but he does not begrudge this little wilful expression. This is her first time. He will have plenty of time to school her to...

What the *fuck* is he thinking? He cannot see Kitten again...cannot meet her in this room to enjoy her luscious woman's body and fuck her hot little cunt. Not after this time. Never again.

So do you want her to see some other dominant? Lucius Malfoy, perhaps? Or perhaps Sir John Smith? Or...

He threads his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck and gently but firmly takes control of her motions, reasserting his power. She immediately relaxes into his hold, prettily offering up her will to him, compliant, passionate, and beautiful.

Buggering fucking hell.

Hermione relaxes into his hold, awaiting her sure reward for experiencing her first ever spanking. Not even her parents have ever raised a disciplinary hand to her...no, her parents, now lost to her by her own actions...her parents were adherents of a non-violent disciplinary process.

She blinks slowly, looking into Sir Tobias' face, but it is almost as if someone else is looking out from those somewhat commonplace hazel eyes. He has a slightly different aura about him now, one that is tinged with danger.

This does nothing but increase her desire for him.

With great deliberation, he strokes a hand from her jugular notch to the apex of her thighs, the sheath disintegrating at his touch, baring her flesh to his hot, hungry gaze.

Hermione instinctively raises an arm to cover herself, but his strong, insistent fingers close about her wrist.

"No. You want me to look at your succulent breasts and your hot little cunt, Kitten. Say it out loud to me."

Hermione feels her face flush, even as her inner pragmatist points out the folly of her modesty. How does she expect him to fuck her...to pinch and suck her nipples, to push the length of cock pressing against her arse into her heat...without undressing her?

And sweet *Circe* but she wants it.

"I want you to look at me, Sir." Her voice is tiny, barely audible, but she can't seem to make it sound louder, firmer.

"Just look, Kitten?" he says, allowing his fingertips the ghost of a touch to one pebbled, erect nipple, then stroking across to the other.

"N-no!" She has no problem saying this with more volume than strictly necessary.

His lips twist, almost a cruel expression, but he accompanies this with taking a nipple between his forefinger and thumb and compressing, then releasing.

Hermione's torso jerks in response, as if she is trying to press her nipple back into his fingers. His snarl intensifies, but the expression in his eyes marks it as a gesture of dominance rather than one of derision.

"I want you to touch me and kiss me and finger me and fuck me," she says, the words tumbling out so quickly that she's said them before she can consider.

He does not move to touch her, his expression at once cold as ice and hot as fire. How can he be both at once? But he waits, as if there is no urgency. His hold on her is such that she can neither raise to kiss him nor to move to touch him.

What does he want?

"Please," she says.

Before she can complete her sentence...*tell me what you want*...he cups her vulva and presses a kiss to her open mouth.

"That's my good girl," he murmurs into her hair, a finger sliding along her clitoris, wringing a cry from her. "Beg me for what you want, and I'll give it to you, Kitten."

"Oh please, Sir," she says, her hands stroking his face. "Please touch me and fuck me and make me come."

He spreads her labia, the air cold against the wet heat of her arousal, and he looks at her exposed sex. Hermione feels a touch of shame...no one has ever looked at her in this way before...but in the next instant, the palm of his hand presses against the slickness between her thighs, and two long fingers tease up into her body.

"Sweet Circe," she says, the words a moan, and she goes slack in his arms, able to do no more than lift her hips and thrust against his hand.

"That's right, Kitten," he says, and he thrusts his cock against her bottom, joining the erotic exchange, like taking his place in a carnal dance.

Hermione presses her heels into the sofa cushion, spreading her thighs more...certainly far enough to accommodate his slim hips, but he makes no move to change positions, and his expert touch on her clitoris is driving her surely along the path of explosive orgasm.

"You are such a nasty little Kitten, aren't you, pet? You need my fingers up your cunt...you need to spread your legs for me to look at you, don't you?"

The words ought to have been embarrassing...denigrating...but she is only further aroused by the calculated taunting. He isn't shaming her...he's delving into her deep-seated fantasies, ratcheting up the tension, the delicious abandon of what he's doing to her.

"Don't be shy...don't hold back...let me hear how much you like it when I finger fuck you."

She is not aware of holding back, but at this command, she emits a whimpering cry, hearing it echo back to her from the walls of the room.

"Such a beautiful little pet...precious Kitten...give me your orgasm, little one. Fuck my fingers and come all over them."

This is spoken in a voice of command...no entreaty, not taunting, but decisive, controlling. Her body, his instrument and pleasure toy, responds to the voice of the master...*Master!* the delirium of her mind chants...and the body he has so surely put his stamp of ownership on arches from his lap in an orgasm of mind-shattering thunder.

She heard herself scream, heard the sobbing gasps of breath, but it was as if she no longer inhabited her corporeal body. Her self was elsewhere, wrapped in cotton wool and lovingly cradled by Sir Tobias.

She slowly returns to herself...to what some would call her right mind, though she had felt perfectly right when it was as if the spark of her soul inhabited ~~her~~ ^{his} soul...and knows that she is held against the long, fit body of Sir Tobias. She opens her eyes, and she realizes he has felt some concern for her. He is looking down at her face, mere inches from her, hazel eyes sharp and searching. His right arm holds her securely against his reclining form, the cushions of the sofa back on her other side.

With an gesture almost too tender, he dries her cheeks with a clean white handkerchief, soft and smelling of sunshine, as if it's been dried on a bright, sunny day.

"Did I cry?" she asks, her voice sounding scratchy as if from disuse.

"Yes," he answers simply. "Are you alright?"

She nods solemnly.

"Are you ready to leave?"

"Must I?" She has no desire to leave him, but if he says she must, she will. She's given over her power, hasn't she?

And besides, he's as moved by their interaction as she is. She's sure of it. She'll see him again.

Won't she?

"Not if you prefer to stay a while longer," he says. "If, perhaps, you might wish to do something about this."

He's shed the robes, but he's still fully dressed in a dark high-necked jumper and black trousers. He lifts her left leg and rests her knee on his hip, then thrusts, his erection prodding against her.

She reaches for him, not terribly adept at handling a man's penis, but more than willing to give back for the grace she's received. He's stiff and straight in his trousers, and when she grasps him, his eyes flutter closed.

She strokes up experimentally, feeling inordinately proud when she sees him take a deep breath, and then strokes down to the root, reaching down to fondle the sac beneath. His eyes open when she does this, and he shifts partially over her body.

"Kitten knows something about petting a randy tomcat, doesn't she?"

Hermione giggles, but her giggle turns into a gasp when he lowers his head and licks a nipple. He raises himself up on an elbow and leans forward to push his face between her breasts. Unable now to reach his erection, Hermione contents herself with stroking his face and hair. She's had her (rather mind-blowing) pleasure, and she wants with all her being to allow him the same release. She thinks she's past passion, but the more he plays with her breasts, the more she begins to feel it in her cunt.

He suckles a nipple, plucking at the other with fingertips, and soon she is arching into his mouth, loving the attention to her breasts. The intensity increases, and Sir Tobias shifts himself between her legs, kneeling to unfasten his belt. She is riveted on the action of his fingers, waiting for her first sight of his cock.

The placket of his trousers falls open and she sees that he wears no underpants. He smirks at her. "Saves time," he murmurs, then he strokes down his length and the purpled head of his erection appears from the foreskin.

Hermione makes an inarticulate sound, wanting to touch...to taste...but he foils her attempts to reach him.

"You're a relentless little tease, Kitten," he says, his voice almost a growl. Her parts her labia and deliberately draws the head of his cock over her clit. When she cries out and arches up, his snarly lip-curl reappears. "If I let you touch my cock, you'd have to lick up all the spunk I'd spew...wouldn't you rather I do that as deep in your cunt as possible?"

She gasps and reaches for him with her arms. He teases no more, but pushes his thick cock slowly into her body, his upper body still clothed, the rasp of the fabric lightly abrading her stomach. She feels him inside her, a welcome intruder, but an alien one, nevertheless. The breadth of him stretches and fills her as no one and nothing else has ever done. She wraps her legs about his hips, feeling the trousers slide down so that her bare legs caress his bare hips and tense, muscled arse.

Severus thrusts slowly but surely to his full length, eyes closing as if to protest the incredible rush of pleasure her tight cunt provides. She's slick, hot, and wanton, her lovely, bare legs wrapping about him and holding him deep in her body.

He's lost his fucking mind...there's no denying it...he's breaking every rule he's ever made for himself, both in and out of TPE. He never fucks a newbie submissive, yet here he is, balls deep in one whose sweetness sears him like burning brands.

She's perfection...he tries not to think it, not to believe it...but the needy side of himself he represses with the ruthlessness of a tyrant cries out for her, the little Kitten/His Kitten.

He looks down into her face, her clear blue eyes (what colour are they really?), and in them he sees hero-worship. It's just the reaction of a submissive to her first dominant...nothing personal...but the whinging inner voice he never listens to doesn't believe that.

She sees me. She knows me. She wants me.

He struggles to push the needy voice out of his mind, even as he begins a slow, methodical fucking. Her eyes have fallen closed now. Her breasts bob rhythmically, an erotic sight at any time, but doubly so when he's the one causing the bouncing. Her lips are parted, her breaths tiny gasps and whimpered murmurs, her body learning the pace of their joining and beginning to move in concert with his. Not perfectly...fucking isn't meant to be perfect...but effectively, and he feels his bollocks tighten, preparing the tidal rush deep into her womb.

Close as he is to coming, he's determined to bring her off again too. He snaps his hips and feels the satisfying contact with her inner wall...the sweet spot. Her eyes fly open in surprise.

"Oh...oh Sir..."

She's gibbering now, and he does it again, feeling the impact at the base of his spine.

"Come on, little one...don't make me go there by myself...come with me ..."

She seems to be listening to him with her whole self. One last time he snaps, and with this impact, his control is gone. The physical expulsion has begun, and if she doesn't climb aboard this Express, he'll have to bring her off with his fingers.

He allows himself to plunge, driving now, mindless, and as the first hot jet of semen leaves his body, he hears her scream...piercing, desperate, and music to his ears.

Her mind liquefies and rushes out with the voice she gives to the concatenation he creates in her body. She hears her cries echoing around the room as Sir Tobias collapses to one side of her, his face and hair wet with sweat, his eyes closed, breath gasping from him.

Hermione is no virgin, but this is nothing like the sex she's had with the young men of her acquaintance. Nothing has ever spent her like this...pulled her soul from her body into another's keeping...left her too scattered to think or put words together. She'd read about such things, but thought it was poetic license...she never suspected for a moment that such a thing could happen to her.

She trembles, her sweat, mingled with his, drying on her body with the mix of their other body secretions. She feels as if she's been anointed by a god, and for a wild, silly moment, wishes that she did not have to wash him from her.

Severus regains his breath, staring at this newcomer, a submissive who has placed herself in the care of TPE, as represented by Sir Tobias. It is easy now to push Severus Snape back into his box, to bring Sir Tobias to the fore to deal with Kitten...no, Kitty.

Her name is Kitty.

He turns from her and rolls to his feet, doing up his fly and fastening his belt. She is limp on the sofa, looking like a well-shagged young woman. He raises his hand, and her white robes fly obediently to him. He can feel her wand, secured in the inner pocket sewn there for precisely that purpose. For the last ninety minutes, this witch has given her power over to him, not once even feeling for her wand. She has done tremendously well for a first-timer.

Fully in his Sir Tobias persona, he proceeds with after care. It is a necessary part of total power exchange. It is his responsibility to make sure the submissive is fully recovered and steady on her feet...no longer in sub-space, not physically shaky...before he allows her to leave the room.

She sits docilely on the sofa, allowing him to tend to her.

"I just want to make you aware that you have a bruise on your bottom," he tells her, quietly, helping her to stand. "I apologise...generally, we make an effort not to mark one another during sessions here. Many people have partners outside of TPE."

She allows him to help her into the white robes. "That's not a problem for me," she says.

He tries not to hear...not to *know*...that she has no boyfriend or husband waiting at home for her.

He fastens her robes up, his hands gentle but impersonal. She leans into him, her arms stealing around his waist, and she rests her cheek on his chest, her eyes closed in contentment.

He hardens his inner resolve. Submissives often feel quite affectionate after a session. It's only natural. There's nothing personal about it.

After a moment, he steps out of her embrace and places hands on her shoulders to hold her off.

"Alright, Kitty? Do you feel well? All recovered?"

He sees a flash of pain cross her face and presses down hard on the part of him that wants to soothe her hurt feelings. What a fucking idiot he was before, telling her she ought to change her name to Kitten...as if it mattered to him...as if he'd see her again.

Of course she feels it as a rejection of some sort.

After a moment, he sees her pull herself together. The fuzzy, just-fucked, bedazzled look fades from her eyes, and she takes a step back, allowing his hands to fall away from her. Her little chin comes up in a gesture that seems eerily familiar to him, as does the stiffening of her spine.

"I feel fine, thanks," she says, trying and almost managing to sound indifferent.

"I hope you found your first time at TPE to be satisfactory," he says, dutifully repeating the words he is supposed to say to her.

She cocks her head to one side, as if trying to see past the shield he is projecting to the real person behind it. "I think you know I found it ... doubly satisfactory," she says with a small, genuine smile.

She sees...she likes what she sees...she's perfect...

He ruthlessly slams the lid on his puling inner voice and nods, projecting just the right mixture of cocky dominant, friendly TPE member, and equally satisfied sexual partner.

"Very glad to hear that," he says, his voice infused with a heartiness he despises. "Please feel free to return at any time. You'll find a listing of our calendar of events and price list in the dressing room. If you need anything, just ask KiKi, and she'll assist you." He makes an expansive gesture towards the door, encouraging her to walk towards it.

Kitty goes with him to the door, but when his fingers touch the knob to open it for her, she fleetingly touches the back of his hand.

Unable to prevent his reaction, he jerks away from her, as if burned.

Her chin rises another notch. "I can ... request you again, if I return?" she says.

Severus uses a non-verbal spell to open the door and takes a step away from her. "There are a number of dominants at TPE. You are always welcome to make a request, but if I am unavailable, you'll still be well taken care of." He attempts a smile to bolster the credibility of this blatant lie. The expression feels alien on his glamoured face.

She swallows, but he can see the tears shining in her eyes. He wishes he'd never come here tonight...wishes he could carry her off with him to his rooms...wishes he were dead and in the ground.

"Thank you," she says, her voice only slightly choked by the tears. "Good bye, then."

He opens his lips to answer her...to call her back and apologise...to give her a cold canned response...but she's gone, the door closing firmly in his face.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 5

Hermione stands in the changing room, the white robes puddled on the floor at her feet, and looks at her body. There are strips and strands of the sheathe remaining...mainly those attached to the woven collar of the garment. She flicks her fingers angrily and the remaining tatters Vanish. Now it is just her, in her skin, save for the glamour still disguising her face.

She turns her back and picks up a hand mirror to see her back and bottom. Just as he said, there is a darkening bruise marring the curve of her left buttock. How dare he mark her with ownership if he never meant to follow through?

In another burst of temper she hurls the hand mirror at the wall mirror, but it pings off harmlessly and falls to the floor.

"Well, I never!" the wall mirror exclaims, sounding quite indignant. "None of that from you, missy. You'd best get your clothes on and go home. Break mirrors there!"

Hermione thrusts herself into the shower. Had she actually been thinking of *not* washing him off her? She twists the taps, turning the water as hot as she can stand it. She'd scald him from her skin if she could ...

In the privacy of shower stall in the dressing room at TPE, she slides down the tile wall, her face in her hands, and cries until the water runs cold.

Severus walks out of the session room and flings himself into the cold air of the October night. It's late now...he stayed with her for nearly two hours, fool that he is...and he needs to be back at the castle for a last patrol of the corridors for Halloween high-jinks. The ghosts do their part, but he has promised Minerva he will do a final check.

He darts a nervous look around him. Here he is, a mighty war hero, terrified of being found on the street by a little girl. Surely she's no more than twenty-two, could scarcely weigh eight stone, and if she's like most of the young witches he meets at TPE, she hardly knows her wand is good for anything more than applying cosmetic charms.

Even so, he turns into Disapparition, and arriving at Hogwarts, he Disillusions himself. The gates are Charmed to allow him through without opening, and he strides up the long drive, his mind seething with jittering confusion from thought to undisciplined thought.

She is lovely, his little Kitten...not his and not Kitten but *Kitty*, bugged it all...but she is too young, too unspoiled, too innocent (for all her sexual appetite) for the likes of him.

If he were looking for a partner...which he certainly isn't...he would look for a woman no younger than the mid-thirties, intelligent, with some life experience. A woman who might be able to grasp some small part of the life he's lived. She needn't be particularly pretty...he did not want to be one of those men constantly on the look-out for other men wanting his woman...and he didn't even mind if she had children. Merlin knew he was familiar with disciplining them, and for a period of time, he could play the father role, if he had to.

He feels like an idiot. He allowed himself to become immersed in the moment with a submissive, and he lost all perspective. He behaved like the veriest beginner with her, as if he were wooing her, rather than servicing a need. He made her promise to call herself "Kitten" just to please him...and she was oh, so willing to do it.

The sudden pain is like a knife piercing his chest. It is only emotional anguish...nothing real or important...but it staggers him with its intensity.

She saw me...saw my soul...and she liked what she saw

He forces himself to walk on, shaking his head to dislodge the silly, sentimental *adolescent*, even, and he knows of no greater insult than that...feelings about Kitten. It was an illusion. She is a submissive who responded beautifully to him...she would have done for any dominant who went to her, no doubt...there is nothing personal about it.

There is. It's personal. And when I called her Kitty at the end ...

The memory of the hurt on her face feels like a twist of the knife in his chest. It is behind his breastbone, making him feel short of breath. He is likely having some sort of breakdown. It's of no consequence. He'll persevere. He'll patrol the halls, go to his rooms, and down a stiff brandy.

He'll be fine. And he won't think of Kitten again. It's pointless.

Hermione is climbing up the marble staircase to the third floor, where her room is located, her thoughts far away. She nearly walks into Professor Snape, who is standing on the landing, his black eyes narrowed and suspicious.

For a moment, Hermione is a student again, almost always guilty of something Snape will disapprove of. That lasts only an instant, then passes. She meets Snape's eye and raises her chin, straightening her spine to stand as tall as she can.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she says, moving around him with her head held high.

"Where have you been?" he asks sharply.

Her back is to him, but she turns her head to the side to speak to him. "I think, Professor, that is none of your business."

When he moves around her and forces her to stop again by standing in her path, she is impressed. He is remarkably quick on his feet for a man of his age.

"I would like to know," he says, his thin lips pressed into a line of displeasure. "Humour me."

She inspects him, wondering how she ever imagined this man would want to ... do things to her. She glances from his face down to his clothing. No jumper beneath his frock coat, but a black cravat, as always. His arms are crossed over his chest, a belligerent attitude to block the hallway. She looks at his hands, which are resting on his elbows, and she weakens. Those could easily be the hands of Sir Tobias. Does he have a red silk scarf in his trousers pocket? What would he say if she put her hand in there to find out?

"Well?"

She responds with the first thing that comes to her mind. "I was at Harry's Place. It was their opening tonight, you know."

His frown deepens, but Hermione does not stay to argue. The turmoil she suppressed as she left TPE is rising in her chest like smoke, thickening by the second, to the point she feels she can scarcely draw breath.

She hurries to her room, her head down, her arms wrapped protectively around herself.

Severus watches her retreating figure, his righteous indignation at her late return on a school night supplanted by other thoughts.

She left the Halloween Feast before he did...he saw her go. *And* he was at Harry's Place. She wasn't there...he even remarked on her absence.

Where has she actually been?

Bugger Granger. He has problems of his own. He glances at his watch. It is nearly midnight. The corridors are quiet, no students out of bed. He can leave the ghosts to patrol the castle and wake McGonagall if there's an issue.

For himself, Severus finds that he needs another point of view...a worldly, sardonic one, preferably. And if that input should come with a snifter of cognac far better than any he could ever afford, all the better.

Lucius Malfoy sits in his study with his old friend, swirling the Grande Champagne Cognac in the finest wizarding crystal, a delicate tulip glass. The decanter from which he has dispensed the liquor sits on the table at his elbow, a thing of beauty in itself. Hand-blown from gothic black crystal, it was given to his ancestor, Louis Malfoy, in 1673, for service to the Ministry. It is one of the treasures of his family, and he brings it out only for special occasions...or when he needs a bit of a lift, which occurs more frequently now because of the tedious house arrest he endures.

Besides, Severus looks like death warmed over. He deserves a special treat.

Severus is one of the few former associates who continue to visit. Lucius, who is easily bored, rewards this constancy to encourage frequent repetition. Narcissa, unruffled and magnificent as ever, is better able to amuse herself with projects around the estate, but Lucius is a social creature. He misses society.

Narcissa is sleeping. She maintains a strict schedule, as if nothing in their lives has changed. Lucius is unable to be as disciplined as his wife. He stays up late, reading into the wee hours. And very occasionally, once Narcissa is safely tucked up for the night, he manages to escape to TPE with the help of Slinky, his only remaining house servant. House-elf magic continues to be undetectable to Magical Law Enforcement, so Slinky can take him to London by Side-Along Apparition. And the glamour Lucius wears at TPE gives him complete anonymity as Sir Ambrosius Aurelianus.

Lucius can be a selfish creature, vain and thoughtless, but he is still recreating himself, after his dismantlement by the Dark Lord. This time around, he can choose the characteristics he will possess. He has no intention of "reforming," as directed by the Wizengamot, but there is no harm in being more mindful of the important things in life...his family, Narcissa and Draco, and friends.

Friend.

Now he exerts himself to be a good listener. Severus tells his story in painful stops and starts, his self-blame radiating like heat from the sun.

"Kitty, you say?" Lucius says.

Severus nods morosely and takes another sip of cognac. "Newcomer, but not awkward and frightened, like they usually are."

Lucius nods to indicate understanding, though he has no experience of the newcomers. On his rare visits to TPE, he seeks out experienced partners...he finds the encounters far more satisfactory that way.

"She is perfect. She is all curves, ivory and rose skin. Intelligent, too...I can tell. And responsive. Sweet Merlin."

Lucius, shifts in his chair, crossing one exquisitely clad leg over the other, admiring the cut and colour of his dove grey trousers. Dragging his mind from his tailoring, he cocks his head to one side.

"I'm not following you, old man. What is the problem? She told you she has no husband. If you're concerned that she's lying to you, I could speak to my man of business ..."

Severus raises his haunted eyes to Lucius' face. "Don't you see? I can't become involved with some girl who knows nothing about who I am and what I've done."

Lucius places the cognac glass on the table and leans forwardly slightly. "Why ever not?"

"I have no room in my life for a young woman with a hero worship fixation," Severus replies. "And I have no interest in settling down."

Lucius holds out his empty hands. "I see. It is not a matter of scruples. An entanglement would be ... inconvenient."

Severus drains his cognac and stares down into the empty glass, twisting the fragile crystal stem between his fingers. When he speaks again, he speaks to the glass. "She's perfect. It felt like she saw right through the glamour...as if she knew me right down to my soul."

Lucius watches him, sorting out the puzzle of Severus' behaviour. Clearly, something has wedged itself between Severus and his inimitable equilibrium. It is almost indecent for the spy who played both ends against the middle to be brought low by something called "Kitty."

"Perhaps she was using an additional enhancement glamour...as a newcomer, she would be insecure and wish to use all her resources to engage her partner."

For the briefest moment, relief flits across Severus' face...after all, it is better to have been made a fool by a young woman's admiration than to be a fool in love...but then he raises scornful eyes to Lucius' face.

"Do you think I have fallen so low I cannot perceive the use of magic in my presence?"

Lucius' reply is immediate, and he injects his words with all the sincerity at his command. "Of course not. Don't despair. You need never see her again...you never repeat your performance with any of the others. Your inclination to avoid her is simply an extension of your already well-honed talent for remaining ... singular."

He rises and pulls the fleur-de-lis stopper from the decanter, tipping another generous measure into Severus' glass. The cognac sells for more than a Hogwarts teacher makes in a year, but it is a luxury well-spent on a friend. He smiles, exerting the full force of his charm, pleased with himself that he has fulfilled his duty as a friend.

Kitty.

Lucius files the name away for future use.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 6

November arrives with sheets of icy rain and freezing mist, and Hermione's spirits match the weather exactly. She goes through her days on automatic pilot. She teaches her first and second year classes, and the students see that the cheerful Miss Granger is gone, replaced by a person who is an almost exact mix of the two deputy heads. She is as uncommunicative and unencouraging as Snape, and as stern and humourless as McGonagall.

She hears the students talking about her, but she doesn't care.

In the deputy heads' office, she clears her desk every night before she leaves for the day...even when the work keeps her past supper. She goes in the quiet of night to the kitchen, and the house-elves feed her, but they won't let her eat there. They still remember the badly knitted garments she left scattered around the Gryffindor common room in the misguided attempt to save them from their lives of drudgery.

They will feed her, but they may never trust her again.

In her room, she eats the food but has no appetite for reading before sleep. She attends to Crookshanks, feeding and brushing, but her heart isn't in it.

She blows her candles out and lies in her bed. She stubbornly recites the Twelve Uses of Dragon Blood or Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration and its Five Exceptions...anything to keep her unprincipled mind from dwelling on unproductive thoughts.

But always, her body betrays her, and she sleeps. In sleep, she is vulnerable to dreams...and in dreams, he comes to her. He is faceless in her dreams. She hears his words, his diction and intonation, but it's Snape's voice that speaks those words. Over and over again he kisses her, he teases her, he spans and fingers her...he pushes himself into her body, and they are one being. And through it all, Snape's voice in her ear, breathing her name.

Kitten.

She wakes from these dreams in distress, sometimes in the throes of orgasm, sometimes in the thrall of tears. Either state is untenable for her...she cannot bear to think, bear to remember...bear to be tempted to return to TPE to ask for Sir Tobias.

Severus strides through his days, busy with teaching, with administering, with discipline, with patrolling the cold, stone corridors. He stuffs down his *feelings*...a word he cannot even say without a sneer...as he has always done, and he gets on with life.

It is only at night, in the solitude of his quiet rooms, that he thinks on the flash of hope he felt when Lucius said: *"Perhaps she is using an additional enhancement glamour...as a newcomer, she would be insecure and wish to use all her resources to engage her partner."*

Severus does not believe Kitten used additional magic to ensnare him. He is fairly certain no one could use magic in his presence that he is unable to detect. Kitten's allure isn't about beauty or physical attractiveness...though he certainly finds her physically attractive. No, it's about something deeper...something internal, somehow.

The word *spiritual* flits through his mind, but he bats it away impatiently.

Still, Lucius' words instilled an idea in his mind that he cannot banish. Suppose the emotional impact of his encounter with Kitten had been a one off? If so, he could see her again...touch her again...without endangering himself.

She is only a very young woman, after all. Yes, she looked at him as if he had personally hung the moon for her delectation, and he liked the admiration. But if she were looking for a *boyfriend*...a word he would never permit to be applied to him...or a husband, she would not be looking at TPE. That is not the purpose of the club. People come there to escape their everyday lives, not to find lifetime partners.

Which is not to say that some people of his acquaintance had not developed long-term relationships, up to and including marriage, after an introduction at TPE. But such happenings are aberrations...he is sure of it.

He leaves off wondering to change into his nightshirt and climb into bed. But the unruly part of him takes over in the darkness, and he relives again and again his time in what he's begun to think of as the Kitten Dimension.

When sleep comes, she does not leave him, but nestles in his arms and perfumes his dreams with her sweet scent.

Three weeks into November, the rain lets up, and a Saturday morning dawns with enough sunlight to generate mild warmth beneath the bowl of welcome blue sky.

After a quiet breakfast in the Great Hall, Hermione throws open the heavy draperies in her room to let the sunlight in. It lifts her spirits to see a break in the dreary weather. She determines that she will go into Hogsmeade for lunch...visit the shops, enjoy the sunshine...she's weary of being sad all the time.

The brisk walk to the village is accomplished with no interruptions. The students avoid catching her eye, and she sees none of her colleagues along the way.

Her first stop is the Post Office, where she arranges for a large eagle owl to deliver a paper-wrapped parcel to her mother...it is a novel she enjoyed and wishes to share with her mum, who has similar taste in books.

It isn't until she pays and turns to go that she sees Professor Snape in conversation with the assistant Post Mistress. She is about thirty years old, with laughing eyes and dark red hair.

Hermione wonders if Snape fancies the woman. Then her eyes briefly meet his, and she escapes into the sunlight and window-shops her way along the High Street.

Being in Hogsmeade reminds her of her student days, and she feels a pang of nostalgia for Harry and Ron. But the brief flare of sadness disappears when she enters Scrivenshaft's...the boys were never interested in shopping with her here. She cannot explain why, but the stationery shop is second only to Flourish and Blotts in her esteem. She loves the smell of parchment, the colourful inks, and the variety of feathered quills available for purchase.

She browses through the selection of parchment, from the rough sort used by students for completing reams of homework, to the creamy vellum used by artists and calligraphers. Then she rounds the end of the aisle to browse the other side of the shelf, where personal stationery in varying shades and patterns is available for one's correspondence needs. Hermione is attracted to a soft pink set with deckle edge paper, the envelopes bearing a raised circle on the flap, embossed with a large cat.

She ghosts a finger over the image, wondering if it might be a lioness. With a little thrill of pleasure, she picks up the box and continues down the row, just to be sure there isn't a set more to her taste.

When she completes her browsing and goes to the counter to pay, she finds Professor Snape again, this time in conversation with the shop assistant. Refusing to be daunted, she marches up to the counter, and the clerk turns away from him to assist Hermione. This woman is nearer Snape's age than the one in the Post Office. She has silver streaks in her dark hair, and she is pretty.

No wonder Snape likes her.

Does he have a flirt in every shop and business in Hogsmeade?

"I begin to think you're following me, Miss Granger."

Her impulse is to turn on him and say something snippy, but Hermione keeps the rigid control she has learned to use in Snape's presence.

"I was about to say the same thing to you, Professor."

She accepts her change from the shop assistant and darts a quick look at Snape's face. He is watching her with something approaching amusement in his dark eyes. Perhaps he appreciates it when she shows she is not afraid of him or his needling.

Then she turns away and leaves the shop, heading for the Three Broomsticks.

Severus completes his business with Scrivenshaft's, and he has completed his to-do list, as decreed by McGonagall that morning.

"We've left it very late, Severus, making arrangements for the Christmas cards."

Severus thinks the practice of Hogwarts sending Christmas cards to the Board of Governors and other significant contributors and friends of the school is a waste of time and gold. Nevertheless, it is a duty of the school head to make it happen, and when McGonagall tells him it's "his turn" to do it, he does not argue with her.

Now he has ordered the cards and arranged for the necessary fleet of owls. He is free to go to the Hogs Head Inn and have a pint and a quiet chat with Aberforth.

It is over lunch, which Hermione tops off with a second Butterbeer, that she decides she will return tonight to TPE. She will ask for Sir Tobias. If he isn't available, she

might go to Harry's Place or simply return to Hogwarts...but she also might accept another dominant's ... ministrations.

Pleased with her decision, she begins the trek back to school, her mind full of imaginings...full of Sir Tobias.

It is over his second pint, drunk with Aberforth in the musty old pub smelling of goats, that Severus decides he will go to TPE tonight. If Kitten is there...if she asks for him...he might see her again, to test out his theory that a second encounter will have less impact than the first. If she isn't there, he might offer his services to another submissive.

Or he might drop by Draco's new restaurant, to see how business is going for him and Potter.

It's been three full weeks since he was knocked off balance by his encounter with Kitten. He's fully recovered now. There can be no harm in going back to TPE.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 7

Hermione enters the returning visitors' room upon her return to TPE, using the password she was given at her last visit. As she passes through the portal, she feels the magic of the glamour shimmer from the crown of her head to the tip of her chin.

Now she is Kitten again.

There are three people before her, and she queues behind them, taking in the room.

The décor is similar to the newcomers' parlour. There is a full tea service on a table against the wall, and an arrangement of settees and chairs nearby, but no one is sitting there. Are there people who come to TPE simply to drink tea and chat? It seems very strange to her.

When she is at the front of the queue, she sees KiKi's smiling face. Ramona is not present, but the beautiful white cat with the knowing yellow eyes sits on the counter, as if in charge of passing inspection on all who enter.

"Welcome back, Kitty!" KiKi says. "I'm so happy you've returned. All of Sir Tobias' newcomers return, it seems."

Hermione delivers a perfunctory smile and says, "I must make a slight emendation to my profile, please. I am to be called 'Kitten' rather than 'Kitty'."

KiKi obliging makes the correction on the parchment bearing Hermione's registration information.

"Do you have a list of the available dominants?"

KiKi picks up a clipboard and places it on the counter before Hermione. "I do, but let me explain how it works. You may request the company of a particular dominant, but if he is otherwise engaged, we will be unable to accommodate you. To streamline the process for everyone, we need to know upfront if you will accept another dominant's company."

Hermione has reached the point of no return. She must decide now whether she is willing to yield her power to someone other than Sir Tobias. Does she simply want another opportunity to exchange her power for pleasure or does she want to see Sir Tobias again?

KiKi awaits Hermione's decision serenely. The cat, however, flicks its tail repeatedly, as if irritated by something.

Hermione glances down at the clipboard, but the top parchment is a coversheet...it says, "Availability Roster". All she must do to see if he is here is to turn the page. What if he is? What if he isn't? What does she really want?

I want his hand in my hair, controlling me, and his tongue in my mouth, claiming me. I want him inside me, making me his.

A piercing combination of hope and desire floods her all at once, and her fingers tremble as she pushes the clipboard back to KiKi. She looks directly into KiKi's eyes.

"I want Sir Tobias. And if he isn't here, I'd like to wait for him. He might come later." She swallows. "And if he doesn't come tonight, I would not care to meet with any other dominant."

The white cat stands, arches its back in a luxurious stretch, and butts its head against Hermione's hand. She obliges by gently scratching behind its ears.

KiKi's eyes dart from right to left, as if to ascertain that they are alone, and then she leans towards Hermione and speaks in a lowered voice. "Kitten, I hope you get exactly what you want...I really do. But I want you to know something. Sir Tobias has never been with the same submissive twice. Even if he's here to receive the request, he declines it."

KiKi pats the hand not caressing the white fur and smiles sympathetically. "We know how ... difficult it can be to want someone who prefers no entanglements."

Hermione feels a flash desperation. He practically told her he wouldn't see her again, didn't he? She's foolish to even ask for him.

She's about to gather her self-respect and leave when KiKi stands.

"Let me find out if he's here. If he is, I'll tell him you want to see him."

Hermione nods wordlessly, and the cat begins to purr beneath her hand. The purr is comforting...Crookshanks does not possess such soft fur as this white cat, but he does purr. She continues to stroke the cat, trying not to think about where KiKi is going...who KiKi might see...and what answer she might receive.

Instead, she says, "You'd like Crookshanks. He's my cat...well, he's half Kneazle. He lives with me at Hogwarts."

Severus enters the members' sitting room, noting the crowd. Saturday nights are busy at TPE. Even the reserve playrooms are used on most Saturday nights.

He nods greetings to those who glance his way, including two submissives with whom he has shared encounters in the past...Ursula and Yvette. Yvette turns from him with an air of cold dignity, but Ursula gives him an appraising eye, followed by a smile.

Severus turns from them to pour a perfunctory cup of tea. He is tense and wants something to do with his hands. Sir Grantham Hill joins him at the tea table, taking a small wedge of lemon from a plate.

"Busy night," Sir Grantham says conversationally.

Severus has had a few civil exchanges with the man before...he seems a decent sort. So he says, "Have you heard any requests for me?"

"Sir Tobias Prince?"

Both Severus and Sir Grantham turn towards the voice. KiKi is standing at the doorway to the playroom corridor. Sir Grantham laughs and claps Severus on the shoulder.

"No, old chap, I hadn't heard a request for you...not until now, that is."

Other dominants chuckle, but Severus pays them no mind. His attention is upon KiKi, who comes to stand at his side. When she speaks to him, she does so quietly.

"There is a request for you tonight...you saw her before, on her newcomer's visit. She was called Kitty, although when she came in tonight she asked me to change her name to..."

"Kitten," Severus says, replacing his cup and saucer on the table without a rattle of china. His face remains blank, his voice even and perfectly modulated, his hands steady.

"Yes," KiKi says, obviously wildly curious to know how Sir Tobias could have been in possession of that information. But her position requires her to show deference to dues-paying club members, so she does not question him. Instead, she says, "I don't have her service request yet. She wanted to be sure you are available."

Severus watches the club manager closely. Will she tell him if he asks or will she try to protect Kitten's confidentiality?

"She hasn't placed her service request? How odd."

KiKi nods but says nothing.

"Is it, perhaps, because she does not plan to stay if I am not available?"

KiKi returns his questioning gaze with a steady one of her own. She nods once, then says, "Will you be available?"

Elation bursts into being, giving him a glorious, giddy rush. "Yes," he says.

"I'll return with the chit." KiKi is all business again, turning to hurry off and perform her duties.

Severus halts her with a murmured question. "Is the green room available?" When KiKi nods, Severus says, "Bring her there. I'll be waiting."

KiKi opens her mouth to object...that's not the way it's done, the chit is handed to the dominant, and he studies it before the submissive enters the room...but Severus strides past her into the corridor, heading for the green room.

She's here. She wants to see me. Me, and no one else.

He feels a satisfactory thrum of something dangerously close to possessiveness.

It is the same room they met in before.

Hermione enters in darkness, barefoot and clothed in the white robes. She sees him standing in the centre with a spotlight shining down. Sir Tobias Prince wears a dark, high-necked jumper beneath his robes again. He stands at ease, facing the door she entered, his arms by his sides.

She hesitates when the door closes behind her. She has her service request in her hand, but she's not quite sure how to give it to him. She stands and waits for him to tell her what to do.

"Come here."

She walks to him, her heart seeming to lighten with every step nearer she draws. She was so afraid he would not be here...would deny her...but he's right in front of her, waiting.

He's so like Professor Snape...the height, the fit body, the commanding presence. Could he possibly be ...

When she reaches him, she stops and looks up into his disguised face. "You came to me," she says.

"You asked for me, Kitten."

She knows it's silly, but to hear him speak her name...the name he gave her...fills her with light, and she utters a breathy laugh, unable to contain her joy.

He seems to understand. His lips do not move, but his eyes crinkle at the corners.

She offers the service chit. He takes it from her but does not look at it.

"Have there been any changes in your limits?"

"No, Sir."

"Then shall I choose for you what we will do?"

She is almost too breathless to speak. "Yes...please."

He releases the parchment and it disappears. "Have you been a good girl since last I saw you?"

She nods her head. "Yes. But I've also been lonely and rather sad since my last visit."

He seems to hear only the last few words. "Was it your last visit? Our time together? Or have you been here with some other dominant?"

His questions are very specific, as if he cares whether she's been with someone else. As if it matters to him.

"Our time was the only time I've been here," she tells him.

"So you've missed me."

She leans into him, her hands grasping his robes. "Oh, yes."

He smirks, and her heart turns over. Such an obnoxious, cocky expression, but one she remembers with great fondness...one she was afraid she would never see again.

His fingertips ghost over her cheek, and he takes her chin in his hand. When he speaks, his voice is lower pitched, rich with intimacy. "Do you remember your safe word?"

"Bubotuber," she answers promptly. She has something to ask...something she has to know...and her voice trembles a bit with the temerity of her question. "And you, Sir? Have you been back here since our time? With another woman?"

His eyelids fall to half-mast, and his lips curl into the sensual snarl she recalls with such breathless delight. "Who holds your power, little one?"

His aftershave is the same as before, spice and musk, and she inhales, wishing it were as easy to absorb his voice...his touch...his will. "You do, Sir. You hold my power. And I don't mean to be impertinent, but I would really like to know, if you don't mind."

His hand slides down from her chin, caressing the skin of her throat, coming to rest over her larynx, with the very slightest exertion of pressure on either side of her neck. "Perhaps I will tell you. What will you give me?"

Hermione is very excited by his hand on her throat, but she fumbles and finds the fastening for her robes. She shrugs, allowing them to puddle at her feet. She is naked and terribly embarrassed...but her embarrassment is tinged with a delicious naughtiness...and knowing that he approves her audacity only makes it sweeter.

His eyes rest appreciatively on her breasts before making the leisurely journey down to her pudendum, ending at her feet. "Good girl, little Kitten," he murmurs. "The answer is no. I have been very busy and have not had the opportunity to visit again since our time together."

He does not say that he didn't want to be with someone else.

She's not ashamed. She'll say it.

"I think about you every day. I dream about you at night. I don't want to be with anyone else."

Severus schools his face to impassivity, stunned to silence by her words. The girl has no finesse, no savoir faire. She blurts out the thought on the tip of her tongue and hands herself to him on a platter, with no concern for how he might use her words or feelings to his own advantage.

She behaves like a bloody Gryffindor.

Even worse, he is finding the emotional impact of this meeting to be every bit as disconcerting as the first time. Instead of the previous tryst reducing the tension between them...a reasonable expectation, surely...their time apart has brought his desire to dominate her to a fever pitch, and he can see she is in the same state.

He is a fool of the first order to have thought he could see her again with no repercussions. Even so...even though he has yet to touch her sexually...he can no more walk out of this room and leave her than he can forego oxygen.

She sees me...she sees to the depths of me...she wants me for who I am.

He feels Sir Tobias slipping away from him, as if he is a creature sloughing off a skin he no longer needs. He cannot fight the voice in him that believes every outrageous word this woman speaks. He cannot withstand her disingenuous spilling of all her pearls at his unworthy feet.

All he can do is give her what she wants, what she unquestionably needs, and in so doing, satisfy the deepest desires of his dark, dishonourable heart.

He does not speak a word...does not respond to her confession with the slightest change of expression. All he does is scoop her into his arms and walk with her to the extra-wide sofa. He puts her on her feet and gestures for her to recline on the cushions. She lies back, her hands fisted at her sides to prevent her from covering her breasts or her sex.

As he looks down at her like a starving man considering the offerings of a banquet, he unfastens his robes and steps out of them, still clothed in his dark jumper and trousers. Then he lies down beside her, stroking a fingertip along her lower lip until her mouth opens.

He kisses her, his tongue sliding into her mouth with a hint of cinnamon and a flood of testosterone.

This is nothing like their first time...there's no stand up kissing, no bare bottom spanking...there is only her desire colliding with his, and the conflagration raining down upon them both.

He sucks her tongue into his mouth, his imperious touch trailing from her throat to her breasts, kneading, then leaving a wake of fire behind as fingertips trail down her ribcage, dip into her navel, and part her labia.

His lips travel down her throat, and he nips the lobe of her ear before he whispers, "Who has your power?"

Her hips thrust up, helplessly seeking contact for her aching cunt. "You, Sir...you have my power."

He draws a finger over her clitoris, pulling a gasping cry from her. Then he slides two fingers into her body, slowly thrusting. "This is mine, Kitten...this pretty little pussy."

She wants him so badly, she feels as if her very blood is burning in her veins. The provocation of his possessive words simply increases her agitation. She wants to feel his skin...to touch his cock...to get him as naked as she is. But he is in control, finger fucking her and sucking a nipple into his mouth with a moan. He will set the pace...he will decide everything that happens tonight...and she has given over her control to him.

She relaxes onto the cushions and lets him have his way.

As if he is aware of the tension leaving her torso, he looks up from suckling her breasts. "That's right, Kitten. I'll take care of you...I'll take care of it all. Just yield to me like the good girl you are."

He shifts away from her, off the cushions onto the floor, and she misses the warmth and the weight of him...but then he grasps her hips, moving her bottom to the edge of

the cushions.

With the first application of his tongue to her clitoris, she loses the capacity for thought, although speech seems to be no problem, providing coherency isn't what's required.

Her focus narrows to the cleft between her thighs, the plump lips of her labia parting to provide access for his tongue, lips, and hands. He feasts and fingers, lapping at her juices and then pulling the core of her into his mouth. Deep in the heat, his tongue flicks and slides up the underside of her clit to the nub, and when he applies pressure with the flat of his tongue, she begins to unravel. It's almost too much, too intense, but when she tries to move away, he pins her hips to the sofa and looks up the length of her body.

"My power, little Kitten. All mine. And I'm going to keep eating you out until you dissolve like a lump of sugar in my mouth."

The lower portion of his face is slick with her essence, and she is on the cusp of climax. She sees the long, clever muscle of his tongue dart out, and when he closes his eyes and bends his head to her again she submits to the intensity, the overwhelming enormity of the feeling.

His fingers are pumping in and out of her body, he suckles and massages with his lips as if he's kissing her mouth. When next his lips close over the engorged tissue of her clitoris, there is a flash of light behind her eyes, and she's falling helplessly through light and heat into space.

He settles her on the cushions again and lies behind her, an arm about her torso holding her against him. It is as it was in his dreams, the sated Kitten lying quiescent in his arms, the scent of her slick wetness and her clean hair permeating the air. His cock is like a rod in his trousers, and he anticipates burying himself in her, this safe harbour, and taking his pleasure. But for this moment, he is content to hold her, to ignore the imperative of possession and simply be with her.

Slowly, her breathing evens, and she says, "Thank you."

He presses a kiss to the back of her neck, first a lick, then a soft bite, then a strong suckle. She murmurs and presses her bottom against him. He presses back, increasing the suction on her nape.

"It was entirely my pleasure, I promise you."

She giggles and turns, burrowing her face into his jumper, as if she might find some aperture through which she can slide into him. She runs a hand down his belly to his slowly subsiding erection, and he twitches instantly to life again at her touch.

"Hell-o," she says, in a sexy, breathy voice.

He feels an urge to tumble her over and finish what they started, but he exercises restraint. He wants tonight to last...he won't allow himself to consider why it's important to prolong their time together.

He does not obstruct her investigative hands, and soon she is half upright and unbuckling his belt. He watches her with enjoyment. Her breasts are a bit larger than average, plump and bouncy. Her nipples are rosy pink, pebbled now with the cool air, looking as if they need sucking. And biting. And clamping.

She succeeds in unfastening his trousers and extracting his cock. This time he does not prevent her when she bends over him and places an open-mouthed kiss on the knob. Her lips are soft, her inner mouth is warm, and he groans, thrusting very lightly to see how serious she is.

She opens her mouth and slides her lips over the bulbous, slick tip, sucking very lightly and swirling her tongue for good measure. She handles him more like a curious beginner than an experienced cocksucker, and he finds that he prefers her to be that way. Less satisfaction initially, but to be the man who schools her in fellatio ...

No. He won't think about that.

She moves farther down his body, and now her hot little mouth is closing over the fleshy front of him, suckling her way up his length. Her oral explorations are enjoyable, but he wants to...needs to...fuck her.

He levers partway up, gets a hold on her, and drags her up lie on top of him. She promptly kisses him, and he tastes the salty residue of his lubrication on her tongue. When he speaks to her, his voice is commanding growl.

"Pick a place, Kitten. Do you want to be on top or on the bottom?"

Her face lights up. "I can choose? I want to be on top. I've never done that before."

He doubts the wisdom of his acquiescence, but once the impossibly tight heat of her slides down his cock, he is beyond caring. She is upright above him, the globes of her breasts like the world's most entertaining bobble toys. He pays little attention to the details of her glamourous face, save for her expressions. She is clearly diverted by riding him, and for now, he is content to watch her do it.

After a time, he licks his fingers and touches her clit. She gasps, her eyes opening wide, and he uses the other hand to fondle her breasts. Her arousal is rising now, her breathing quickening, and he feels the urge to finish.

She angles her torso forward, her breasts dangling enticingly, and he grasps her hips.

Hermione throws her head back, revelling in the rocking motion of her body atop his. It's like nothing she's done or imagined, and the rekindling of her passion is slow but sure. This man entices her full capacity for passion from her with little more than his presence.

His intensity increases, and he grasps her hips, thrusting up into her body. She misses his fingers in her cunt, so she mimics him, licking her fingertips and touching herself. The sensation is immediate. The great thickness of him spreads her wide, he labours beneath, fucking her, and her fingers move faster and harder on her clit. Her orgasm takes her by surprise and she cries out, eyes wide.

She leans farther forward, as if all the starch has gone from her, and she braces one hand on the cushions and the other on his shoulder. He stiffens beneath her, his head arches back, and he emits a muted roar.

Hermione watches him as if she's viewing a work of art...performance art...but something jars her out of her reverie. She closes her fingers on the fabric of his jumper, tugs lightly, and she sees it.

At the edge of the collar is a band of raised pink skin, rimmed by an angry red line. Knowledge, full and complete, washes over her.

Quickly she releases her hold on the jumper. He mustn't know she has seen.

His face is sweaty, his eyes closed, and when he lowers his chin again, even the hint of scarring disappears.

Hermione tests her emotions, and she finds herself surprisingly calm. She had followed him here, hadn't she? She had hoped...pretended...that Sir Tobias was Severus Snape, and here is the indisputable proof that she's been right all along.

But now that she knows who he is, she knows too why he's so phobic about an entanglement. It's alright. She's found him...she's not afraid of hard work...she can slowly show him that she's made of sterner stuff than he imagines.

And one day, she can even reveal her true identity to him.

They lie in each other's arms for a long time afterwards. He is reluctant to end their tryst, and she seems perfectly content to simply be, without needless chatter.

Another little piece of perfection on Kitten's ledger.

It is only when they approach the ninety minute time mark that Kitten stirs in his arms.

"I should go," she says, smiling down at him, stroking his cheek.

He tries to pull himself together. It's *his* responsibility to make sure she's alright, to say when they should part company, to send her off with a positive leave-taking. He's falling down on the job.

He rises and tucks himself away before Summoning her robes and helping her dress.

"In the interest of full disclosure, you should know there is a love bite on the nape of your neck."

"Is there?"

She smiles at him. She is almost unnaturally serene, full of tender smiles and gentle touches. It's a bit perturbing. She does not seem at all sad or anxious about leaving him.

Perhaps the bloom is already off his rose?

"Thank you," she says at the door, and she puts her arms around him and rests her cheek on his chest.

He is strict about end-of-session kisses...he doesn't do them. It's important to emotionally prepare the submissive for their separation, and that requires gradual detachment. Yet in spite of all his rules, he is moved to kiss her forehead, and before he knows what he's about, they are lip-locked.

She is the first to pull away. "Good night, Sir. Until next time."

He opens his mouth to say they won't be meeting again, but she is gone before he can speak a word of denial.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 8

Hermione hurries from the building and Disapparates. She does not want him to arrive at the school before her, this time. She knows from long experience that at Hogwarts, it is nearly impossible for her to hide from or sneak around Severus Snape.

In her room, Crookshanks greets her with a meow, twining between her ankles. He leaps onto her bed, and she reaches to stroke him. He is instantly riveted by the smells on her hand, and she laughs. "She's a beautiful white cat with big, yellow-green eyes," she tells him. "I'm not positive, but I *think* her name may be Ramona."

She sheds her clothes and goes into the tiny bathroom. In the candlelight, her reflection shows a woman who was clearly just shagged into submission. Her eyes are dreamy, her lips plumped by rough, demanding kisses, and she can smell him on her. The memory of their intimacy shudders through her and she grips the sink to steady herself.

It is as if he still holds her power, though he is far away from her now.

She turns on the shower and climbs in. She presses her back against the tiles, letting the water pummel her with its heat. It is pleasant, but nothing in comparison to the effect of *him* on her, heating her from within with carnal desires she never knew she possessed.

She knows it's true, but the truth seems incredible...her little crush on Professor Snape has led to intense, enthralling, slightly kinky sex. Safe in his disguise, he is free to express his sexuality... dominant, confident, and astoundingly sensual.

She climbs out of the shower and wraps her hair in a towel. All she has to figure out is how to get what she now knows she wants more than anything:

Professor Severus Snape, AKA Sir Tobias Prince, for her very own.

Severus enters Harry's Place to find it nicely full of paying customers. A former student...aren't they all former students?...escorts him to a quiet table in a darkened niche, then returns with a smoking tumbler of Ogden's Old Firewhisky.

Severus sips the drink and ponders the mystery of Kitten. Clearly, he is obsessed with her...and she certainly seems to return the interest. What can be the harm of seeing her upon occasion in the safe confines of TPE? The very nature of the place promises no-strings-attached arrangements. Anyone who seeks out interaction there values two things...anonymity and a lack of entanglements.

He smirks into the glass. She's sure of herself, the little Kitten. She displayed no anxiety about leaving him this time. She is certain she will see him again...does she imagine she has some power over him?

She bloody well does, you nitwit. And you're feeding her delusions.

He cringes a bit from the derogatory voice in his mind. It is true that the wary, distrusting part of him has provided him with a longer life than he ever thought to enjoy. But the Dark Lord is dead, the Death Eaters are no more, and the war is firmly in the past. Isn't it safe now to permit the other part of him a bit of enjoyment?

Draco slides into the booth across from him, his white blonde hair seeming to have a light of its own in the dim enclosure. He offers his hand with a smile of genuine pleasure.

When they aren't rivals over the task of killing Albus Dumbledore, Draco and Severus have an easy camaraderie.

"How are things at Hogwarts?" Draco asks.

"Uneventful, which is the way I prefer it."

There's a flash of white teeth. "I'm all for a quiet life."

There's a shout of laughter from the bar area, where Potter is the centre of a group of young adults.

"You describe life with Potter as quiet?"

Draco looks serene as he nods. "It's the best life I've ever had...I'm happy. I have nothing to fear and nothing to worry about."

Severus says quietly, "You deserve it."

Draco leans forward, intent. "You deserve it as well, sir. Is there someone special? A lady you're seeing?"

He means it...Severus can see the genuine concern in the grey eyes, so like his father's. He feels the impulse to confide, and realises he's ingested the whisky on a nearly empty stomach. Anticipation of his visit to TPE had deprived him of appetite at supper. Still, he nods.

"Perhaps."

"Someone I know?"

I don't even know who she is, he thinks. But he says, "I think not."

Draco cocks his head to one side. "I suppose I should be glad you trust me enough to say even that little bit. Although you might unbend a bit more, you know. We're at peace now."

To be honest, Severus does feel oddly peaceful. Is it the drink? Or is it the after-effect of time with Kitten?

To Draco he says, "Old habits die hard."

Draco indicates the empty tumbler. "Another one?"

"Thank you, but I have one last corridor patrol before bed tonight."

They stand, and Draco touches his sleeve. "Give it some thought. There's no need to be alone."

It is not until mid-week that Severus considers going back to TPE. Mondays they are closed, Tuesday has lost its allure...he has no interest in breaking in newcomers any longer. But Wednesday night is just business as usual...perhaps *she* will be back. He will go to his rooms, order up a sandwich, finish reading the Board proposal for hiring new teachers, and go to TPE.

He walks past Miss Granger's desk, where she is tidying her things as a prelude to ending her workday.

"Have a good evening," he says magnanimously, then he is out the door and on the revolving staircase. It is not until he reaches the bottom that he realises he left his reading glasses on his desk.

He goes into the office again, but Miss Granger is not in the room. Instead, she is in the ensuite lavatory...he can see the light around the doorway. The door is ajar...she believes she is alone, after all.

He cannot help but see her washing her hands at the basin. She is dressed warmly, in Muggle denims and a tight-fitting jumper of a bright golden hue that goes well with her hair. He is unable to prevent himself from noticing her womanly shape.

Her body reminds him piercingly of Kitten. He pushes the thought away. He is about to go to his desk when she does something truly strange. She turns from the mirror, her side now to the sink, and bends at the waist, causing her unruly mane to fall forward and hang almost to the floor. She brushes it vigorously, and he struggles to fight off the image of standing behind Kitten in such a position, taking her jeans down and ...

His lascivious reverie is interrupted when he spies a purplish-yellow mark on the nape of her neck, bared now by her bizarre hair-brushing posture. A healing bruise, just where he left one on Kitten ...

It is said that epiphanies come with a flash of illumination, a blinding light of realisation. His comes with a sensation not unlike being kicked in the stomach by a Thestral. And rather than all becoming clear in an instant, instead, everything in his life becomes an indisputable catastrophe.

A brave man would stay, confront the girl, and come to some sort of understanding.

But the bravest man Harry Potter ever knew...Severus Snape, who danced a line for twenty years between the two mightiest wizards alive...flees like a craven, his spectacles lying abandoned on his desk.

His Kitten is Hermione Granger.

He winces and presses a hand over his eyes. In spite of the evidence of his eyes, he cannot accept the truth.

If she had any idea Tobias Prince is Severus Snape, she would be horrified. Sir Tobias looks the same age as Severus, but he's better looking. She would never want to see Sir Tobias again. She would never be able to look Severus in the face again. She might leave Hogwarts.

And maybe that would be best.

He tries to read the Board proposal, but he cannot concentrate on it. His mind will not let him rest.

Kitten is astride him, rising and falling, her breasts bobbing, but her face is now that of Hermione Granger. Kitten stands before him, naked and blushing but unafraid, and she says, "I think about you every day. I dream about you at night. I don't want to be with anyone else."

No wonder she behaves like a bloody Gryffindor.

He puts the proposal aside and stands, beginning to pace. He knows now the identity of Kitten, but how does that change anything? She doesn't know he knows. She will continue on her way, going to TPE to meet with Sir Tobias...she left him in no doubt about her intentions when they parted.

Well, she'll be disappointed. He won't see her there again.

And then what do you think she'll do? Go home and cry in her pillow? Why should she? There's a club full of men perfectly willing to take your place, dunderhead.

He stops pacing, the reality of this fact echoing through his mind. He has no trouble identifying the painful, twisting emotion that follows...jealousy is an old and dreaded companion. He has no desire to invite it into his life again.

He is an adult. He is a respected professional. He is an acknowledged war hero. He is not the friendless, hopeless wretch he was before the Dark Lord died.

He will not allow the giggling detail that he's been unknowingly fucking his teaching assistant to disturb him.

Even as he comes to this decision, he is rifling the top drawer of his desk until he finds it...the bloody Marauder's Map, a gift from Potter when he left the hospital and returned to Hogwarts. "Use it in good health, Professor," Potter had said.

He finds her almost at once. She is in the Entrance Hall, and in the next instant, she is through the front door of the castle.

He snatches his cloak and all but runs from his rooms. He must hurry if he's to catch up with her.

How else can he follow her?

Hermione breathes deeply of the cold night air. It's not uncommon to have the first snow of the winter before December arrives. Snow would be fine...snow would be grand. She's in love with the world, because she's truly in love for the first time in her life.

It's the most glorious and most painful emotion imaginable.

Tonight is particularly beautiful, because she's going back to TPE. She isn't sure where Professor Snape is...he didn't show up for supper in the Great Hall...but he seemed in a good mood before he left the office. Perhaps he's going to TPE as well.

And Sir Tobias and Kitten will have another encounter.

She is incandescent with hope.

It becomes something of a dance. She leaves the castle. He follows her. He has followed her in Hogsmeade, in Diagon Alley, even to Harry's Place. He'd been tempted to remove the Disillusionment Spell and let her see him there. But his imagination can't cope with the possibility of pursuing a public association with Hermione Granger, so he watches from the shadows.

And over the space of two weeks, she goes to TPE six times. *Six*. Six opportunities when he might have been with her again...touched her again...possessed her again.

That first night, he acquires an informant at TPE. Ramona, the odd-looking woman who works the evening shift, agrees to his proposal...his gold for her information. Thus far, the arrangement has worked perfectly. He is to be told if Kitten asks for him. Kitten is always to be told he is not present. He is also to be told if she agrees to see another dominant.

Thus far, that hasn't happened. She goes in, she asks for him, she drinks tea and dallies, waiting for him, and then she goes back to Hogwarts.

At first, it is a bit like a game. He has to *win*. He has to control the outcome. He will deny her the comfort of his presence and somehow make sure no one else enjoys her either.

It seems a perfectly reasonable objective.

It isn't until the second week that he begins to see the change in her. The spring in her step disappears. Her smiling, cheerful mood diminishes day by day, until she is quiet. There is nothing antagonistic or aggressive about her apparent misery. She just seems to turn inward.

She is rather like a balloon slowly losing air.

It seems less like a game all the time.

Hermione is completely confused by the behaviour of Sir Tobias, AKA Professor Snape. She was not alone in the bubble of transcendence that marked their interactions. He was every bit as involved as she was. Why does he avoid TPE?

She decides to follow him, to find out what he's up to these days, but she can never find him. He teaches his classes, he does his office work, he appears at meals...but otherwise, it seems that he goes nowhere and sees no one.

Her happiness slowly leaks away, until she's full of nothing but sadness. She's found the one she wants...the one who will be to her what Draco is to Harry and what Parvati is to Ron...but he wants nothing to do with her.

Before long, the sadness begins to mutate into anger.

The first week in December, the staff decorate the school for Christmas. Hagrid brings in the enormous trees, and McGonagall oversees it all. There are carols playing the halls, coming from the odd suit of armour. Eggnog is available in the staff room, and the teachers and the students become light of heart, happy about the coming holiday.

Severus is working at his desk, keeping a weather eye on Kitten...on *Miss Granger*...as she leaves off her desultory marking of homework to stare off into space. She does this far more than she used to do.

Is she hurt? Does she wonder where he...where Sir Tobias...is?

McGonagall comes into the office with a basket in her arms. In the basket is a cat.

"Whose familiar is that?" he asks her. Students are allowed to have their familiars at school, but the animals are not meant to be a problem to the staff.

"I don't know, Severus. I found her in the Entrance Hall. I wonder if she's meant to be Christmas gift for someone?"

But Severus has already lost interest in the topic. He's watching Miss Granger again, and she appears completely unaware of McGonagall's entrance. She seems pale, and there are dark circles around her eyes.

Is she actually becoming ill? Is it his fault?

McGonagall, having collected her grade book, is standing before his desk now. The white cat in the basket looks him over with intelligent yellow eyes.

"Isn't she a pretty moggy?"

Severus recoils from the soppy tone of McGonagall's voice. "I wouldn't say so, no, Professor."

"Severus, you're as severe as Scrooge. Have you no holiday spirit? Call her a moggy, call her a kitty, but don't deny she's a fine specimen."

He has nothing to say in reply to this, and McGonagall departs the office with the cat.

The clock on the mantle chimes the half hour. It's time for supper. McGonagall obviously expects him to preside over the meal, since she's off with the inhabitant of the basket. She would undoubtedly transform and go mouse hunting with her newfound cat friend at the first opportunity.

He stands and tidies his work space, muttering to himself under his breath.

"I wouldn't call it a 'moggy'. I've never said the word in my life. I wouldn't call it a 'kitty'..."

"No, why would you? You'd call it Kitten, instead."

He freezes, and only his eyes move, tracking to the right, where Hermione Granger stands looking at him, tragic and accusing.

He doesn't need Legilimency to know that she's onto him...somehow, she knows he's Sir Tobias.

He feels as if he's in public with no clothes on.

He swallows, trying to think what to say...how to deny it, to make her feel stupid and small even to have suspected him...but how can he repudiate an accusation that has not been spoken? If he responds at all, he will lose the sliver of advantage he retains, because only Sir Tobias would understand the significance of "Kitty" versus "Kitten".

As he watches her, she lifts her chin and visibly straightens to her full height. The move is so quintessentially *Kitten* that he cannot move...cannot think...cannot speak. All he can do is stand like a pillock and stare at her.

After what seems an aeon, her lip curls, and when she speaks, it's as if she's hurling poisoned needles at him.

"Sir Tobias never existed. He's just a part you played. I am in love with a phantom."

He watches her march to the door, but she stops before stepping on the staircase and gives her final malediction.

"Severus Snape, you are a fucking coward."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

A/N: One more chapter after this will bring us to the end of this tale. Thank you very much for taking this journey with me.

Chapter 9

It isn't until she sees an angry red spark land and extinguish on the cold stone of the corridor floor that Hermione realizes she has her wand clutched in her fist. She is radiant with fury, and like a firstie, her emotions have her shooting unintentional sparks of magic. She scarcely cares.

She wishes *he* would come after her so she can hex him. Perhaps a flock of birds to peck his face...eagles this time, rather than the little songbirds she sent at Ron. Or a curse of boils across his face to spell something out. Jerk? Scrote? No, that might be too long. "Sneak" was five letters, and that's about the longest word one could get on Snape's long, narrow face.

Perhaps if she concentrated very hard, she could manage all six letters of C O W A R D.

She reaches her room and opens the door. It isn't until Crookshanks races out that she notices the elegant white cat from TPE sitting in the shadows of an alcove. Ought she to allow Crooks to interact with a likely Animagus? But really, Kneazles...even part-Kneazles like Crooks...are excellent judges of character. If anyone knows whether Ramona's intentions are positive or negative, Crooks will be the one.

She turns from the circling, sniffing cats, forgetting all about them as the door closes behind her. She paces back and forth between door and window. She's steaming with

rage, but she has her wits about her enough to realise she cannot approach Snape...not on school grounds, at any rate...and give him either the hexing *or* the telling-off he so richly deserves.

Still, she wants to strike a blow. If she cannot make a strike *at* him, she can make a strike *for* herself. She knows the sort of message she wants to send...both to the bogus Sir Tobias and to the very real Severus Snape.

Frankly, it's a message she is desperate to also bring home to herself.

And she knows just how and where to deliver it.

Lucius enters the drawing room as requested, his face a mask of courtesy. Narcissa rises to meet him, her smile all the reward he needs for performing this necessary, husbandly duty.

"Darling, you remember my Aunt Maia and my cousins, Mimosa and Capella?"

Lucius makes his bow to Narcissa's frightful Black relatives...why did they persist in naming their children after stars, long after the decent names were already taken?...who are on their bi-annual visit to the English Blacks. This branch resides now in wizarding Turkey. One would think, with such exotic origins, the Turkish witches might have something of interest to say.

One would be quite wrong.

Having politely extended his welcome, he is permitted to take his leave of the guests.

Narcissa follows him into the hallway. "Are you sure you won't take supper with us?"

She is no fool, his beautiful wife. She loathes her relatives as heartily as he, but she has too much elegance of mind to let it be known.

She also knows he's up to something.

"I wouldn't dream of gate-crashing your ladies' confab. I would have little to contribute."

She surveys him with icy blue eyes. "You would rather sit with the house-elf than with my family."

He bows without speaking.

"You'll do nothing foolish? Nothing ... dangerous to us?"

He presses a kiss to her smooth, perfumed cheek. "You may rely on me."

Her words are spoken as his lips touch her skin. They are barely audible, and therefore, by Malfoy family rules, they do not count.

"I wish I could go with you."

Then she turns from him and glides again into the drawing room, the perfect hostess.

Lucius smiles after her, his admiration unflagging after these twenty-five years. There is no equal to the well-bred, perfectly behaved Narcissa Black Malfoy, not in all the wizarding world.

He turns away, walking towards his study. Slinky is waiting for him there. He does not often leave the house when Narcissa is awake, but he knows she will be fully occupied for the next three or four hours.

He is keen to be away from Malfoy Manor. He must never come to think of his home as his *prison*.

These excursions are necessary.

"Severus Snape, you are a fucking coward."

The words are still reverberating in his head when the door closes, and he sags into his chair, his hands shaking.

How long has she known? When did she find out? What was her reaction to the discovery?

He rubs at the pain behind his eyes, trying hard to concentrate and sort out the mess in his mind.

Hermione Granger is Kitten. Beneath her clothes, she is soft and lovely, ivory and rose, enticing and luscious. Beneath her know-it-all insufferability, she is curious about her limits, interested in off-beat sexual practices, seeking a partner to safely surrender herself to. At her depths, in the Kitten Dimension, she is submissive, responsive, eager to experience, avid to learn, rapaciously needful.

She has lived a life more similar to his than any female alive. No one, save Dumbledore, knew the ins and outs of his existence in detail, but this witch is Harry Potter's best friend. She has known fear, she has looked death in the eye, she has raised her wand and pitted her mind against Death Eaters...she has taken outrageous risks in her life in the service of her beliefs.

She accomplished all of these things before her nineteenth birthday.

He rises from the desk and goes into the lavatory. He stares at his pale face in the mirror, sees his haunted eyes, and bends to splash water on his face. As he sluices the day away, he forces himself to let go of her parting shot...to remember the rest of what she said.

"Sir Tobias never existed. He's just a part you played. I am in love with a phantom."

He grabs a hand towel and stares into his own eyes as he dries the water from his skin. She didn't say, "I hate you," indicating zero chance of repairing the breach. She didn't say, "I was in love with you," indicating an unfortunate malady from which she has thankfully recovered.

She said, *I am in love with a phantom*...an on-going state of affairs.

"She says she's in love with me."

He speaks the words aloud to hear them, but he can see the incredulous look on his own face. Even the mirror, schooled for years in the art of ignoring Professor Snape (or suffering the consequences), is unable to keep quiet on the subject.

"I think that's hardly likely, don't you?"

He drops the towel and leaves the lavatory to begin pacing the office.

She called him a coward...the terrible word still stings like rubbing alcohol poured on an open wound...and walked out. There is a finality to the words and action. Perhaps she means it as an ending. To Kitten and Sir Tobias? To her employment at Hogwarts?

Is that a good thing or bad?

Fuck it. He doesn't know what to do, and there is no one to ask. Dumbledore would have been useless, and even Lucius would never understand this dilemma. Lucius did not possess the life experience necessary to grasp the soul-deep conviction that is the bedrock of Severus' world view:

Severus Snape will never be allowed to have something he wants so very badly.

He closes his eyes and leans against the nearest surface...Miss Granger's desk. He sees the disarray she left when she stormed out...she is always very tidy in her work habits. His thought process tries to reassert itself, but he forces it away, engaging his attention in putting her quill back in its place, closing the hinged lid of the inkstand, straightening the desk blotter...and spying the edge of a pink envelope hiding beneath the blotter.

Without compunction, he Summons the envelope, extracts the matching pink paper, and begins to read.

Dear Sir,

I saw the edge of your scar beneath the collar of your jumper. I know who you are...I am excited that you are who you are...but I don't know how to tell you. I am not sure you will be as pleased to know who I am.

I would be so proud to be seen with you...to be known as your witch...but it seems quite possible that you are interested only in having a secret, hidden relationship. Perhaps you would be embarrassed to be seen with someone as young as I am. Or maybe you just value your privacy too much to invite comment and speculation by being seen with me in public.

If that's the case, I cannot complain. I will continue to see you in secret, with our true identities hidden, and confine our relationship to the room of TPE. In time, you may be willing to bring our association out into the open. It is also possible that we may grow bored and wish to stop meeting.

But to be perfectly honest with you, I don't expect that to happen. You thrill me and fulfil me beyond my wildest dreams. I feel complete and utterly safe in your arms.

I love you and want you for my own. Is there any hope you might one day feel the same?

All my love,

Your Kitten

Severus does not realize he has sunk into her chair. He does not realize he is crumpling the paper in his hands. He does not even realize there are tears on his cheeks until he rises to snatch up his cloak, pulling the Marauder's Map from its hiding place in an inner pocket. Then the drop of a salty tear falls on the paper, and he is quick to dry his eyes.

No witch wants to see her wizard crying. Not when he's begging her forgiveness.

It is the work of a moment to ascertain that she is nowhere to be seen on the Map. He returns it to his secret pocket, accompanied now by a pink sheet in a matching envelope.

She may not have yet given the letter to him, but it belongs to him, nonetheless.

Perhaps one day he will confess to her that he took it.

He sets off with purposeful strides through the castle corridors and down the staircase, out into the cold night.

He knows precisely where she is waiting for him.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

Two years post-war, the world is settling again into a regular rhythm. The Boy Who Lived has a lover and a new business, and his two best friends are embarking on careers of their own. Working as an administrative assistant and teacher-in-training at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger becomes suspicious of the unusual behaviour of her boss, the Deputy Headmaster. Where does Severus Snape go several nights a week—what is he up to? Why is she the only one who notices? Can Snape really be trusted? The resourceful Miss Granger knows one sure way to find out: She will follow him.

Chapter 10

Lucius enters the members' entrance at TPE and finds himself in a nearly empty sitting room. Its only inhabitants are two dominas, sitting together against the far wall, drinking tea and speaking in quiet, earnest tones. The first is a woman called Lady Jane Seymour. Lucius has known her for years. He finds her abrasive and uncouth.

But her companion is a different woman altogether. She is perhaps ten years his junior, a woman built along the voluptuous lines of the ancient goddesses of Athens. She has an indisputable air of good breeding, and with her glamour, she is an auburn haired, blue eyed wonder.

Lying within her reach on the coffee table is a black leather riding crop. He shivers.

When he looks at her again, she coolly meets his gaze. After a moment, she resumes her conversation with Lady Jane, effectively dismissing him.

His lips curve in appreciation.

After a moment, Sir Channing Casey strolls in with his submissive, Corinna. She is a plump, pretty woman wearing a jewelled collar. Sir Channing holds her lead.

"Sir Ambrosius," the man says. "I'm surprised to see you here on a Friday night."

Friday night? Bother. Friday night is couples night. He has no partner and no wish to acquire one. He's looking only for a spot of fun.

Sir Channing and Corinna disappear into the party room, and Lucius is pondering how to entertain himself, when KiKi enters.

"Oh! Good evening, Sir Ambrosius. How lovely to see you."

Lucius gives her a regal nod.

"You're actually just the man I'm looking for," KiKi says.

Lucius raises an imperious eyebrow.

"I have a rather insistent submissive here tonight, demanding to see a dominant. I told her it's couple's night, but she insists I check to see if anyone is willing to session her."

She really does not sound like his sort, but he's a bit at loose ends, as it were. "May I know the . . . desperate submissive's name?"

"She's called Kitty, Sir...oh, I beg your pardon. She prefers Kitten now."

Kitty? Truly? Perhaps it is a lucky night for him after all. He moves towards KiKi to engage her in quiet conversation.

"Has this Kitten seen my good friend, Sir Tobias Prince? He recommended her to me, you see."

KiKi had begun to look troubled, but at these last words, her face clears, and she smiles broadly. "Yes! Shall I tell her you'll see her?"

Hermione stands in the dark of the session room, wearing naught but the white robe. Being here is her choice. It's a good one...it must be. Tonight will help her realise there's nothing special about her sessions with Sir Tobias...no, she'll think of him by his true name...Severus Snape. Any competent dominant can satisfy her and make her feel as safe and protected...and simultaneously as wanton and weak-kneed...as Snape does.

She's sure of it.

Then why does she feel so very sad? And why does she have an inchoate ache behind her breastbone, as if her hopes and dreams are shrivelling in her very soul?

Now she hears the door open, and the new dominant enters.

Lady Grey, Lady Jane's companion, considers the blonde from the corner of her eye, only half-listening to Lady Jane's conversation. The blonde is tall, the way she likes them, and broad of shoulder. There is about his face an arresting beauty, which manages to be nevertheless entirely masculine. She can see his eye colour quite clearly, despite the dim gas lighting...it is a nearly translucent grey.

He steps forward to converse with the club manager...something about a needy submissive. He has no need of *her* services, it would seem.

She turns back to Lady Jane.

Mere seconds later the door bursts open and another man enters the members' room...a man who seems strangely familiar. The blonde steps forward and speaks to the less-than-comely black-haired newcomer.

"Here, old friend! Haven't you forgotten something?"

The scowling newcomer stops to glare at the blonde. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demands roughly.

The blonde smiles, and Lady Grey feels a little tingle. He is a handsome devil. He could undoubtedly use a bit of a ... firm hand.

"Oh, had the chance to slip out for the evening, you know." The blonde steps closer to his glowering friend and says quietly...but not so quietly that Lady Grey cannot hear him..."Where is your glamour?"

The newcomer makes no effort to speak quietly. "Bugger the glamour. I'm not here to see *you*."

The blonde arches his eyebrows, but he does not appear offended. His response is spoken rather drolly. "Well, that's put me in my place, hasn't it? Never mind. Why don't you have a cup of tea and relax? I have an engagement."

The blonde walks towards the doorway to the playrooms, then glances over his shoulder and says in a provocative tone, "It seems your little Kitty is in need of ... sustaining company."

Lady Grey is rather surprised when the black-haired wizard grabs his friend by the front of his robes, a wand materialising in his fingers. The business end of the wand probes the underside of the blonde's exquisitely formed chin, and the dark man says, "You will never even *think* of touching her...unless you care to encounter the Ball-Breaker Curse?"

The blonde's answer is an expressive eye-roll, and the dark man releases his robes with an unbalancing shove.

The blonde climbs gracefully to his feet and checks the drape of his trousers and the cleanliness of his robes before he speaks to his aggressor.

"Well. I'm happy to know you've worked through your issues concerning her, at any rate. Please, don't let me stop you."

The blonde makes an elaborate, somehow mocking bow, and motions for the violent man to enter the corridor. That is when Lady Grey stands and walks away from the still talking Lady Jane.

The blonde watches Lady Grey's approach, but she already knows the outcome of their conversation. It's too easy, really...scarcely a challenge at all...because his eyes move from her impressive chest to her riding crop, where they become riveted.

He's pretty to look at, though. And possibly trainable.

When Severus enters, she's standing with her back to him, on the white circle in the middle of the floor. His body reacts with anticipation, seeing Kitten in her white robes, ready to yield her power to him. And the needy inner part of him rejoices, insisting that she sees him and knows him and understands him. But neither his body nor his

puling inner weakling is running the show tonight.

Severus Snape, forty, fully formed, and full of resolution, opens his mouth to speak.

He is forestalled when Kitten, unbidden, drops her robes to reveal her nakedness, then turns to face him.

He is instantly...and possibly unjustly...infuriated.

Her mouth drops open when she sees him, unglamoured and scowling, advancing on her with great purpose.

"Have you lost what passes for your mind?" he bellows, reaching her only to drag the robes up from the floor and wrestle her back into them, taking little care to be gentle.

If she wants gentle, she ought not to be looking for herfun at TPE.

"I didn't ask for you! I'm supposed to see Sir Ambrosius! I don't want you! Get out!"

She is shouting too, her disguised face twisted and furious, with tears glinting on the lashes of her glamoured blue eyes.

"For your information, your 'Sir Ambrosius' is actually Lucius Malfoy. Do you still want to be naked and helpless for him? Take the robes off, and I'll go fetch him for you."

The horrified expression is real enough, he can clearly see. She has accepted Draco into her life as an extension of Potter, but to Severus' knowledge, she has never spoken to the elder Malfoys since the Battle of Hogwarts.

Some old wounds take longer to heal than others.

Her voice rises to a screech, her anger all the worse because of the fate from which he has just saved her.

"I hate you! I never want to see you again!"

She reaches up to scratch him, tears now running freely down her face, but he imprisons her wrists.

"If that's true, then why are you crying?"

He is slightly calmer now, the flare of violent jealousy calmed by her actions. She asked for another dominant only to make him jealous...and it worked. But she isn't behaving like a woman who hates someone.

She struggles fruitlessly against his relentless grip on her, then sags against him. She stares down at the floor and mutters something.

"I can't understand what you're saying when you natter to the floor."

She raises her face again and speaks in a calmer tone. "I said I always cry when I'm angry."

"Are you going to try to hit and scratch again?"

She shakes her head.

He releases her and says quietly, "I think we should talk."

She looks at the floor again, her arms wrapped protectively around herself. He wants to soothe her...to pick her up and carry her to the sofa and pet and kiss her until she is calm...but he has no right to do so.

She says, "I don't know what we have to talk about."

"Miss Granger..."

Her head comes up, and her eyes are blazing. He wishes she weren't wearing the glamour...her brown eyes would be magnificent filled with that fire.

"My name is *Kitten*."

Kitten? She wants to be Kitten? Well, Miss Granger and her high-handed dignity belong in his office at Hogwarts, but Kitten? Kitten belongs to *him*, anywhere and everywhere.

He swings her up into his arms and carries her to the wide sofa...why do they always end up in the green room?...and rather than fighting him, she puts her arms around his neck.

He sits on the sofa with her in his lap, and she leans into him. He presses his cheek to the top of her head, and ever so gently, he rocks her in his arms.

He hasn't weighed all the pros and cons of his behaviour and arrived at a logical conclusion. No, he's thrown himself carelessly from a cliff, clutching his prize in his arms.

Perhaps before they hit the ground, he will remember he knows how to fly.

"Would you please remove the glamour?" he says.

Hermione looks into his eyes...the endless, midnight eyes...and strokes his hair.

"I'm not as pretty without the glamour," she says.

"Bollocks," he replies.

She laughs...can't believe she feels *light* enough to laugh.

"You're insane," she accuses him. "If people see us here together without glammers, we might as well invite in the reporters and photographers."

"We'll put the glammers on again before we leave," he says. "And after today, I don't know why we need to come here again. Do you?"

She sees him...Severus Snape, unaltered, with a bit of five o'clock shadow and hair beginning to show some end-of-day oiliness...looking at her, speaking to her with intimacy, holding her on his lap, even. It's all a bit much. And to hear him saying such things...things she's dreamt of, but would never dared have spoken aloud...gives her a feeling of unreality.

He is wearing his teaching robes, and she grasps one of the buttons on his cuff, staring at it as if it's the most fascinating item imaginable. "No," she says, speaking to the button, "I don't know why we need to come here again, either." She raises her face to look in his eyes, and with the wave of her hand, her glamour disappears. "Not if we're

going to see one another ... elsewhere."

His eyes widen when she reveals herself to him, and although he doesn't smile...not as other people do...one side of his mouth curves up, and his eyes are alight with warmth. "Kitten," he murmurs, and wrapping one hand in her hair to control her movements, he kisses her.

It is their first kiss in weeks, and it goes on for a rather long time. When he lifts his head from hers, they are both a bit breathless, and she's delighted to know that the stiffness beneath her bottom is definitely for her, and her alone.

He wraps his hand lightly around her throat, his thumb and first finger at the pulse points on either side of her neck. This excites her, and her heartbeat quickens.

"I'll see you whenever and wherever you permit, little one. As often as you permit. In public or private. I would be very proud to be seen with you...for people to know that you're mine."

The words register...she hears and understands...but the emotional impact is like a bubble of joy that swells inside her until she can hardly breathe. "For them to know you're mine, you mean," she says in a tiny voice, but it's very clear that he hears and understands her. Because he tumbles her over, until her back is on the sofa, and he's on top of her, his black hair hanging down and his entrancing eyes fixed on her face.

"Who has your power?" he asks her, and to hear the words finally in his own voice...a voice that turns her insides to jelly...gives Hermione a thrill.

"Here...in this room...my power is yours. But I want it understood that outside the playroom, my power is my own."

She watches his face carefully, wondering how he will react. It had been hard to say the words...hard to break the mood...but judging by the firm length pressing against the vee of her thighs, his mood is unchanged by her clarification.

"That's exactly the way I want it," he says, and then he grasps her wrists and holds them down on either side of her head. "It doesn't matter which of us has your power, my Kitten. You're mine. You belong to me. Everyone will know that."

She presses her hips up against him. "That's exactly the way I want it," she says, in deliberate imitation of his words and tone. "And everyone will know you belong to me."

He murmurs an incantation, and they're naked, his body over hers, full skin-on-skin contact, and she's overcome with the divine perfection of it. For the first time, he shows himself to her with nothing held back, and she loves him for it. How hard must it be for him, with all his years spent hiding his agenda, to trust anyone enough for this sort of intimacy?

She urges him over, until he lies upon his back, his black eyes burning with emotion. She sees the enormous scar at his throat...how had anyone survived such an injury?...and with the lightest of touches, she traces a portion of it, then presses her lips there. Though he doesn't say it, she suddenly knows an irrefutable truth: He has never shown this scar to anyone before. Other than the Healers at St Mungo's, he has voluntarily revealed it to no one.

Next she takes his left arm and turns it to see the mostly faded black mark he's worn since he was younger than she is now. She can feel the tension in him...the thin white line of his lips, pressed together to prevent speech...almost as if he expects her to see him, fully and completely, and reject him for his imperfections.

Silly man.

She presses her lips against the defunct Dark Mark, in greeting and acceptance.

Her actions...her tender acknowledgement of all he has been and all he is...draws something from him, something deep, powerful, and overwhelming. How can she...how can anyone...accept with such love the things he is most ashamed of?

He kisses her roughly, tongue thrusting too hard, too fast, teeth scraping her lips and skin around her mouth, but rather than object, she sucks him in, matching his intensity. He doesn't have the words to tell her what he feels...he cannot even articulate it to himself...but he can show her, with his hands and mouth, his tongue and cock, the strength of his arms, and the superior bulk and weight of his body.

She seems all eagerness to receive this demonstration of thankfulness. She is as frantic as he to twist and wriggle into a position from which their bodies can join. They find a balance, and he thrusts inside. She is beneath him, her real face less pretty and infinitely more beautiful than the non-descript guise she had worn before. He knows he is ugly compared to Sir Tobias, but somehow he also knows she prefers him this way, exactly as he is, and that knowledge gives him the assurance to fuck her with all his skill and might.

He pounds deep, giving her no respite, finishing his thrusts with a finesse that impacts her inner vaginal wall. He sees her lovely brown eyes widen with each tap against her sweet spot. She grasps his wirily muscled upper arms so tightly that her nails dig into the flesh, and she bites on her lower lip, whimpering noises coming from deep in her throat.

"Don't hide from me, little one," he says, panting from effort. "Let me hear you...tell me how it feels when I fuck you so hard."

She responds instantly. She releases her lip, and with his every thrust, she utters a sharp cry. She wraps herself around him, legs holding onto his hips, and she arches the lovely column of her throat, her eyes squeezed tight, a little chant beginning softly and coming more loudly with every second.

"Oh please oh please oh please oh please oh please oh please oh SEVERUS!"

She is flame, and he is fuel, and together they are wildfire, burning everything in their path. He erupts with a shouted roar of rapture, their orgasms binding them tightly together, wrapped in blazing light, the echoes of their passion reverberating around them as they fall irrevocably into one another.

She is in his heart, nestled in his soul, a permanent resident of his waking mind. He is her breath, her sinew, the beat of her heart and breath of her lungs.

But time, and the world it rules, has little respect for the reverent hush of newly acknowledged love. Their playroom interval has passed, and the room must be vacated for the use of others.

Severus and Hermione are quite ready to depart.

Their things are in a heap near the door. Severus dresses whilst Hermione goes into the dressing room to retrieve her clothes. They reapply their TPE glamours, and he takes her out through the members' sitting room.

They are holding tightly to one another, still wrapped in the mystic cocoon of their oneness, when through the open door to another playroom, Severus sees Lucius, still in his Ambrosius guise, kneeling at the feet of a voluptuous redhead. Lucius is deeply involved in his interaction, so Severus does not interrupt him.

He has found what he wants in this unlikely place, and he is content to leave with his prize.

As they exit the building, they remove the glamours for the last time.

Hermione walks with her love...the answer to her unspoken prayer...down a street where once she stalked him, hiding herself in every way. Now she is open. She is fully

revealed to him, and he to her. They have seen everything there is to see, and nothing could be more exquisite.

The shops are closed, but the Christmas decorations are lovely, and without consultation, they turn as one to walk along and see the sights. It is as if they are reluctant to return to Hogwarts, to resume their responsibilities and identities, deputy head and teaching assistant.

There are few people about at this late hour on a cold December night, and the feeling from their lovemaking...that they are the only people in the world...wraps them in enchanted silence. Hermione is surprised to hear something resembling a laugh come from Severus, and when she turns inquiring eyes to him, he leads her to stand beneath a gaslight.

"Look up. Even the weather adores you," he says, and she sees that snowflakes are falling...winter's first snow.

It's an extension of their world of two. He bends to kiss her, and she twines her arms around him and surrenders to the magic they make together.

"Hermione? Is that you?"

A voice...a loved voice, but an intrusive one, nevertheless...speaks her name. She stops kissing Severus, but he will not permit her to pull away...the most she can do it turn in his arms, her back warm against his chest.

"Hi, Harry. Yes, it's me. Out to see the snow, much like you, I expect."

Harry and Draco stand together, hand in hand, the snowflakes collecting in their hair and scarves. Draco murmurs something in Harry's ear. Harry looks at him incredulously, but Draco speaks to Severus.

"I see 'perhaps' has become 'definitely'."

Another rare chuckle comes from Severus, a vibration against her back and a deep rumble in her ear.

"Definitely," he agrees, tightening his hold on her.

"Is this a secret? Shall we keep it to ourselves?" Harry asks, looking from Hermione to Severus.

Hermione can tell from his tone of voice the answer he expects to receive. She opens her mouth to speak, but Severus beats her to it.

"Shout it from the rooftops if you like," he says. "We certainly will."

Draco laughs out loud, then hooks an arm around Harry's shoulders, forcefully turning him. "We'll see you for Christmas Eve drinks?" he asks over his shoulder.

"We'll be there...won't we, Kitten?"

Harry and Draco stop and turn around, their mouths open in surprise. Harry says, "Did you just call her..."

"Kitten," Hermione supplies, turning her back to them, looking up to Severus with imploring eyes.

"Take me home," she murmurs quietly.

Half a smile and he says, "Your room or mine?"

She nestles in his arms, holding him with all her strength, breathing deeply of him. "Yours. Crooks has a houseguest."

"You'll have to tell me about that," he murmurs.

"I'll tell you everything," she promises. "Just ... take me home."

In the dark of the night in the snowy Scottish countryside, an ancient castle hosts a medley of dreams come true.

On the third floor, white fur twines with ginger before a glowing fire.

In the dungeons, a man who could not work out what his life was good for finds his answer, deep in the harbour of his life's love.

And the woman with no one to call her own finds her heart's desire in the undisguised face of Severus Snape.

Finite Incantatum

A/N:

This story would not be what it is without the careful beta reading and Brit-picking provided by Diabolica. Thank you, darling. I am forever grateful.

It was written for the 2014 sshg_giffest on Live Journal, for Amorette. The story is a blend of two different prompts:

- A year after the final battle, Hermione starts working as a Professor's Assistant as part of training to become an actual professor. She gets assigned to assist Professor Snape in potions. They have to overcome their differences and work together.

- Era: Eighth Year. Snape is obviously still "up to something", exhibiting mysterious and secretive behavior. Now that Harry's not in school, it's obviously up to Hermione to find out just what it is that Snape is doing.

Title for this fic comes from the song [Into Your Sunby No Second Troy](#). If you loved this fic, I wish you would give this song a quick listen.

Before I saw your face, it was done

You were always the one

Before I knew your name it had begun

You were always the one

I follow your eyes as they're kissing mine

And it's there I want to fall asleep

The light begins to fall upon my crooked mind

You're the one I thought I'd never meet

And by the way I'd like to tell you

After all that I have done

I spent every moment looking for you

I cross the shadow and step into your sun

Your faces leave their traces in the places where we meet

And all the places we will go

And it's never been so easy as I'm down on bended knee

A husband and a wife will know