

Three Options for Ginny

by Bettina

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The story starts half a year after HBP.

Caught

Chapter 1 of 35

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You guess it -- I don't own them. Never have, never will.

Full summary of this story:

Severus Snape has just arranged himself with his last charge, Draco Malfoy, when he gets yet another, very unexpected task: a young, charming female with flaming red hair and a fierce will to survive. The Dark Lord seizes the chance to finally add a set of Snapes to his Death Eater offspring. He forces Ginny Weasley and Severus Snape into a marriage under his special conditions. The Dark Lord, other suspicious Death Eaters and their spy activities turn their lives among the Death Eaters into unexpected twists. The story starts half a year after HBP.

Let me thank my faithful betas Pennfana, Scarlet Crystal and sirsevchick for all their support, for their help with grammar and style, with the plot and the characters. I still claim exclusive rights on all typos, mistakes in the grammar and whatever else you consider odd.

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Three options for Ginny Chapter 01...Caught

To Severus Snape the scene looked like a battlefield *en miniature*. The heroic quartet around Potter had finally noticed that this was not the location of a Horcrux but simply a trap: a trap designed to separate Potter, Granger and the youngest two Weasleys first from their potential comrades and then from each other. This was the Death Eaters' strategy to make the catch their master had demanded: Hermione Granger.

The Death Eaters had achieved their first goal far too easily; the Order members were fighting on the periphery and had little influence on what happened in the little cluster

of trees and bushes where the quartet was stuck. Trust them to fall into the trap and to let themselves be isolated from all their supporters!

Aware of the dilemma, the Order now paralysed the outer circle of Death Eaters, fighting for a passage towards the centre.

Severus and Draco were close to the forest, laying traps for those who believed themselves to be their fellows. Furiously, Severus considered his chance to create an escape route for the four. Most of the fighters had left the forest itself and were operating in the open. How on earth were Draco and he to keep up their surreptitious tactics if everybody could see them?

He walked to Blaise Zabini, who lay there, spread-eagled, his left leg mutilated. Severus carefully prodded the ankle and calf. Had the boy been alive, he would have winced or twitched, but there was no reaction. The boy had inherited ambition and beauty from his mother but had lacked her cunning. Eager to prove himself to their master on the one side and Miss Parkinson on the other, he had thrown caution to the wind.

Severus could not stall. He observed the four reckless Gryffindors grouping and regrouping themselves, casting spells in all directions. It was Ron Weasley, the chess player, who finally noticed it. He murmured something that must have been along the lines of "They want to catch one of us. Stay together, you three!" When he separated himself a single step from the others, he didn't see any move or increased apprehension in the attackers. Another step. Severus drew his breath until the boy returned. He understood, all right! Only it wasn't him they were after. Weasley then pulled Granger away from his sister just a little bit to leave her by herself. What a risk! He probably considered himself ready to jump to his sister's aid, but he was on the move away from her. It would cost him valuable fractions of a second to turn and accelerate in the opposite direction. Every Muggle his age would know that much about momentum and inertia!

The Death Eaters close by did not alter their tactics in reaction to these new positions. The boy's expression shouted out the conclusion, ready for everyone to steal from him: *not Ginny then, either.*

The quartet was fighting their way towards the dirt track and Apparition border. Flicking his wrist, Severus threw a deflector to meet Alec's Cutting Curse aimed at an Order member looming over there. It homed in on her brother Amicus instead, who dropped to the ground in a hiss. It hadn't ebbed when the Weasley girl twisted her wand and a fine sizzle knocked the wind out of Goyle on the other side. For a short time the field was clear, and at least the boy who was to save the world could run into the arms of Lupin and Mad Eye.

"Run, Harry," Ginny shouted.

To Severus' satisfaction, Lupin did the same while Mad Eye crouched and summoned the bleeding form of Amicus towards himself, artfully steering him in a loop to knock another Death Eater from his feet. Surely even Potter would have enough sense to take the chance! However, their effort was in vain. With typical Gryffindor loyalty, their pretty hero stayed with his friends. The chance was lost. Severus swore silently.

By now Granger had understood what her boyfriend had been aiming at. The cogs of her brain had been working on it for long enough, Severus thought. He drew his breath again when he noticed they couldn't relax yet. Wasn't it clear by now what this was about, whom they wanted? No, Granger couldn't just believe it; she needed evidence--as if everything had to be proved. She headed backwards! *Bloody hell!* She hadn't moved more than half a yard when the sideline of Death Eaters closed in.

Severus held his breath, but she darted towards the others while they quickly moved in her direction, which meant, however, that they were now further away from the safe road. At least now even the last of them understood, because from then on, they took Hermione into their centre and worked their way away from the trees up to the street. They had to duck spells, jumping hither and thither. In parallel one of them needed to cast wide blocking spells. Foot by foot, they fought their way eastwards. Severus felled a tree so *unluckily* that it hit two Death Eater women who had aimed at crossing their way. No one could blame him; they had moved just there when all he had wanted was to frighten the glorious four. He smirked under his silvery disguise.

The group swayed left.

Suddenly the elder Crabbe and Goyle sprinted forward from wherever they had been, caught the last of them...the Weasley girl...by her hands and shoulder, pulling and pushing her along towards the trees. Severus could hardly believe his eyes. This action was not at all part of their plans, but without Lucius Malfoy to lead them, these two brainless protein packs weren't too predictable. They risked their lives with unauthorised actions like that.

There was no one else to rein them in either since the leader of the day, Amicus, was out cold. Alec, his sister, was in no condition to take over from shock**Family** bonds, Severus noted. *They incapacitate even ruthless fighters.*

Protect the children, Severus. Albus had repeatedly reminded him, but how to do so now? From where he stood, it was impossible. He headed towards them.

It was Potter who cast a strong, well-focused Cutting Spell that neatly separated Goyle's left hand from his body. He howled in pain, let go of Ginny Weasley and collapsed. With a last effort, Goyle shouted towards Severus, "Take her!"

Draco knew that at least for the moment, Severus had to play along. He saw his mentor seize the girl's shoulder with the aim of pulling her away from Crabbe. Another Death Eater Draco didn't recognise jumped forward, shouting, "I'm coming over, Severus!" He never reached his goal, though, because Neville Longbottom emerged from within the bushes, Stunning and Binding the third man with the silver face. From the other direction came a curse, hitting Draco's foot before his block was in place. He stumbled and swore. Severus doubled back to him, dragging Ginny harshly along. Crabbe's grip on the girl had been tighter than his footing, so he fell and pulled her arm downwards. She shrieked in pain as her arm dislocated. Granger's forceful Tickling Spell made Crabbe open his grip on the girl, and her brother's Leg Locker immobilised the figure on the ground. Suddenly free on one side, Ginny almost crashed into Severus and stabilised herself by grabbing his arm with her second hand.

Severus pulled both youths close to himself and cast his cylindrical Deflection Dome around the three of them. Crabbe's defeated voice sounded over the suddenly silent field. "A pure-blood for you, Snape. You owe me!"

Severus ushered them on towards the northern border of the Apparition barrier. Lacking any other idea how to keep advancing Death Eaters at bay, Severus Apparated with Ginny a few times. Ignoring his foot, Draco followed. They were safe as they reached the edge of the river close to Spinner's End. Safe for the moment.

Without further ado, Severus and Draco silenced their prey and frog-marched her through the abandoned railings past rows of dilapidated brick houses and pushed her rather sharply inside one of them.

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Once inside, Draco immediately loosened his grip on Ginny but stayed close at her side. Suspicious that someone might be in the house, Severus peeked into the kitchen, the bathroom and a bedroom, dragging her along so that she hissed. Satisfied, he flicked his wand and closed all curtains. "Miss Weasley, calm down. You are not in immediate danger. Draco, check if someone followed us."

Draco nodded and went back to the entrance. Ginny, panting quickly from more than the run was being drawn around. Her professor turned to face her so that she looked up at him. His eyes bored into hers without a word. She took a careful breath around her pain. She knew she had to listen and absorb his every word now. He was not known to repeat himself. "Miss Weasley," he began. When he saw she was listening, he explained, "You are in my house. Draco Malfoy lives here as well. Nobody else is here, and no one can enter without our knowledge."

He paused to let his words sink in. Ginny looked into his face. This was Severus Snape, for five years the most dreaded of all her professors, today believed by most to be a traitor. She had not seen him for half a year. He had tanned a little but was thinner than she remembered, his cheeks sunken in, his dark eyes appearing even larger and fiercer in their deep sockets. The ever-billowing robes and the frock coat he wore at school had always covered his features. Today, though, he wore Muggle-like clothes under his Death Eater robe. They clung to his sweaty form. His body was extremely thin, unhealthily so.

When Ginny didn't react to his speech other than looking at him, he continued with a sigh, "We cannot let you go. Two Death Eaters have recognised me." She felt unable to speak and only nodded weakly. What else was there? At least he directed full sentences at her, not bellowed commands.

Sharply, he added, "Don't try to leave!"

He quickly scanned her from head to heels. "The shoulder? Other injuries?" With careful movements, she indicated "yes" and "not really."

Wordlessly, Severus beckoned her through the door to her left and made her sit down on the bed, the only suitable furniture the room provided. She did so, her eyes not leaving his face. "This will hurt," was all she heard before he rapidly tilted her arm back into place. As her shriek filled the house, her professor did not comment other than putting his hand on her other arm.

When Draco returned, reporting the coast was clear, Severus made to go for some potions, but Ginny cried out in panic, "Don't go!" and took hold of his arm although the quick movement caused a stab of pain through her body. She winced. He looked at her hands clenching the sweaty cloth, and she let go immediately. "I'm sorry, sir."

Draco averted his gaze. "I can fetch what we need," he offered. "Would that be all right?" Acknowledging her nod, he listed, "Bruises, wrenched tendons, scratches. Any big open wounds, broken bones?"

While the girl shook her head, Severus proposed a Dreamless Sleep potion. Draco observed how her eyes widened in fear, and after rapid consideration he said, "I don't think Miss Weasley wants to sleep right now. She might prefer to see what is going on." He hesitated slightly before adding, "Then she sees that we're not harming her." He turned to her, his voice devoid of the drawl she expected from him. "Miss Weasley, you must understand that we have to continue our work, and we must prepare the house for you to stay over night. We cannot guard you the whole day." With a smirk, he added, "There isn't a deep dungeon we could lock you in either." Instinctively Ginny jerked back from him at the idea and looked up to her teacher. She heard Draco declare, "Yes, well. I think I know what we can do," and saw him leave.

Severus huffed and then bent his knees to get down to her height and looked at her again. This was very different from his normal stance, when his gaze pinned Ginny into her chair from above, far above when she was a first-year. With a deep, soothing voice she had never heard from him, he assured her that there was no danger waiting for her in this house. The dungeon had been meant to be a joke, though admittedly not a good one. She seemed to have calmed down a bit when Draco came back.

After taking off her shoes, she needed help with her torn jacket. The remainder of her t-shirt underneath was hanging loosely. She turned away from them to gingerly pull it over her head, but it wouldn't work with the pain in her shoulder. So she lay down on the bed, her back up and her face towards her former professor. "Just... tear it off, sir. It is useless anyway."

When her professor gingerly widened the tear enough to carefully apply the ointments, Ginny twitched a few times, but the pain eased rapidly, and his warm hand on her body felt soothing and reassuring, as did the pricking of the ointment. Severus reached over her shoulders as far as he found safe. He checked her arms next, moving them and considering and treating all the bruises there. "We could not show any mercy while some of the others might be watching." Ginny closed her eyes, exhaling deeply. This was no doubt the closest to an apology she had ever heard from this man!

Draco opened a small phial. He applied a smoking, purple liquid on the cuts on her calves. She instinctively pulled back when it stung but then recognised it from the hospital wing. Working himself up to no further than her knees, Draco addressed her in a matter-of-fact tone. "When your wounds are healed and you've overcome the shock, you will feel stronger. You might want to explore your possibilities but we cannot risk you leaving, and we cannot guard you. Thus, we need to calm you." He waited for her nod and then used a lighter, conversational tone all new to Ginny and continued. "I see you don't want to sleep right now. I think we can use a Reflex-Lax instead. I've learnt it recently. N.E.W.T.s stuff. Severus made me do a self test; it isn't too bad. It keeps your brain working rather normally but the commands to your body are delayed. You can not run away, cut yourself or throw anything, but you can hear and see what we are doing. You can walk around, but slowly. Mind your balance. You can speak, but again, it will be slow. It holds for six hours, which should give you an idea what is going on here. You'd be back to normal for dinner when we have finished working as well. How does that sound?"

"Impressive, Draco. Miss Weasley? Any of our other options will either hurt or leave you unconscious...or both."

Not turning more than her torn shirt allowed, she asked, "What if they come and fetch me, sir?"

"Unlikely. You were not whom the Dark Lord wanted. I am in a position of trust." When she did not show any reaction, he added, "We have an antidote for the Reflex-Lax. I will keep one dose nearby, and we'll deposit another at the entrance door. It works within seconds."

"Nice to hear! You could have offered it to me, you know," Draco remarked with a rise of his eyebrow. "I will fetch a shirt for Miss Weasley."

Ginny rotated her shoulder with relief. It felt much better, but more needed to be done. She covered her front with Draco's sweatshirt and went past her guards to the bathroom. They'd not watch her use the toilet! The room was small, old and chilly but it was clean. She washed herself as best she could, applied more bruise ointment to her front and put on Draco's shirt before she opened the door. The men stood a foot away from the entrance, the elder offering the phial. She took the potion. What other options did she have?

The shirt appeared a bit too warm, but Draco had told her that the potion could make her feel a little cold, which it did, although her anxiety might have contributed its share of the shivering that took hold of her every now and then.

They returned to the sitting room. Apprehensively and yet strangely slowly, Ginny looked around. Books were the first things that held her eyes. One shelf held thin books in all colours, but the others were filled with lots of old, large, black or dark brown tomes covering the walls from floor to ceiling. All the walls and even the door to the bedroom were covered with books. There was no way of knowing if the bookshelves hid anything or who or what might be behind other covered passages...or how those passages opened.

A window and door opened towards a garden or yard. There was the bathroom door and the kitchen door close to a dining table.

Few threadbare, mismatched pieces of furniture filled the little room. The fireplace looked uncomfortably small for Flooing. It reminded Ginny of the description she had heard about the barred fireplaces at the Dursleys' or the Grangers'. Was this a Muggle house? She proceeded towards the only armchair, sat down and slowly drew her knees up and under the wide sweater to warm her legs.

"Severus, do you happen to have a pair of warm socks for her?"

When her former professor made to leave for his bedroom, Ginny became agitated. Although her movements were paralysed, both men saw how the notion filled her with panic. "Miss Weasley?" Severus asked with a frown and sat down on the sofa opposite to her. She relaxed visibly.

"Shall I fetch them, Severus? Which ones do you want me to bring?" Then Draco was providing her with a pair of thick woollen socks that he shrunk to fit *how did they both manage to walk and speak this rapidly? Oh, yes: the potion...* She rushed to finish the thought to observe the men.

Draco must have fetched parchment and quill as well because the men went straight to work. They reviewed the battle in the morning with the aid of a sketch of the area they had drawn on a piece of parchment, discussing which side had taken which strategy and how successful they had been. "At this moment the tall Order member close to the fields here," her professor said, and the minute figure waved, "called back his three colleagues. I'm not sure what he wanted to achieve, but the Death Eaters around Mulciber got a clear path towards the target group. The target group was you four, Miss Weasley," he added, turning to Ginny, who was following the discussion in silence. She understood well enough what was being discussed but didn't manage to participate. Whenever she had formulated a coherent thought short enough to throw in, they had already proceeded to a new topic. However, this time Severus paused, giving her room, "Do you happen to know why they did that?"

"Ssee whoo iiss inn charge," she answered slowly.

Draco picked up her thought, "Of course! That makes sense. Two of these four are new, and the hierarchy is often changing. I have always wondered how they can identify individual Death Eaters at all." He moved uneasily in his place, Ginny noted with satisfaction. She would not explain it to him.

To Ginny's surprise, the two of them seemed to have taken ample time to observe and had intervened only little, and if so then they had acted in rather peculiar ways. Well, she knew, or had hoped, that Professor Snape would not harm the Order members, but what about Draco Malfoy? He was the one who for a whole year had planned to kill Headmaster Dumbledore. Not to speak of what he had done and said in all the years she had known him.

They came to the point where Ron had separated himself from the group. They analysed it exactly as it had been; he had figured out the goal and then offered himself as prey and was not taken. Neither was Ginny. "But when Granger stood separated, Avery and Flint senior acted rapidly. She was lucky to make it back in." Both young people nodded at their former teacher's remark, although Ginny thought that Malfoy's head might fall off with his speed. Snape continued riding on the fact that foolish Potter had not taken his chance. Ginny preferred not to look at either of her guards. She had thought the same.

When they came to her capture, Severus looked up at Ginny. "Your retreat was planned abysmally, if at all. Potter should never have swung so much to the left, leaving you within reach of Crabbe and Goyle. Even if they worked against instructions and had luck on their side, they did succeed, and here we are! I could not let you escape. Pulling you away from Crabbe was risky enough. Miss Granger reacted adequately, and so did your brother, surprising as it was."

"Adequately? Come on, Severus. The Nerve Teaser was the stroke of a genius. He lost his grip and his balance with one curse. And Longbottom's Stunner was good," Draco added. "By that time, many Death Eaters had already fallen. We lost the commander and possibly his sister, didn't we?"

"So it seems. The second officer and the commanders of the flanks are currently reporting to our master," Severus said in contemplation. He had to thank the fates that it had not been him today. Draco shuddered. They left it to the girl to deduce whatever she wanted, but Severus observed that she probably got their meaning just right.

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The screech of an owl interrupted the silence. It dropped a letter and left without a second glance at the assembled group. The Dark Lord informed them that he expected all three of them to attend a gathering on Tuesday night. A selection of Death Eaters would have dinner, where Ginny was to serve them. Severus was to interrogate her thoroughly beforehand and present his findings. After dinner their master would verify his findings. Draco flinched. Severus regarded the letter for a long time, his face unreadable.

"The schedule leaves you this evening plus three days to prepare yourself. The Dark Lord will not rely on my report. On the contrary, even if I am in a favourable position right now, he will use the opportunity to see how seriously I have questioned you," Severus noted. "What do you know about Occlumency or Legilimency, Miss Weasley?"

It took Ginny lengthy seconds to inform them, but she lifted her chin and did so with pride. "Moody helped us. I'm far better than any of them, even Harry."

Severus' face sported his trademark sneer. Since she seemed to wait for an answer, he finally settled on, "That is a relief."

Given the girl's condition, they would have to postpone this discussion until the next day, Saturday, November 22nd. Instead, Severus pointed his wand over Ginny's head at the wall of books behind the armchair. Ginny heard a bang, and by the time she had twitched, calmed and turned around, a shelf-clad door stood open where she had not seen anything irregular before. "We will show you the rooms upstairs," Severus said and beckoned the young woman to proceed to the door. He showed a remarkable patience as she slowly made her way to the stairs and up. By now, she was more used to the concept of herself being the slow one here, not the others rushing. She balanced every step carefully, dreading the thought of tumbling and being picked up by either of the men.

Once she was upstairs, she looked around.

There were two small rooms close to the landing, already in the roof, allowing standing upright only under the ridge. They had dormer windows, though. The right one, equipped with a narrow bed, a table with books and stationery, a wooden chair and a small cupboard, was Draco's room. In the other room, the bed was covered with files and glass phials, tins and cardboard boxes, each neatly labelled. More documents, printed on paper or handwritten on parchment, were piled on the desk while large rolls of parchment had found a place in an umbrella stand.

The opposite side of the house was used for storage. A tiny bathroom completed the floor.

"Even if I could clean it up, I could not give you this room here because I cannot leave you to yourself. You would be tempted to use what you believe an occasion to escape. It would be your death. Secondly," he paused, "this would be hard to explain if we get visitors. The trip up here was only meant to show you that there is nothing hidden, and there will be no use in trying your luck up here. The door will not open for you."

Slowly the girl nodded. Did she actually look relieved?

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Back in the sitting room, Ginny was exhausted and headed for the armchair. When she noticed that Severus continued to the kitchen, however, she followed him. "Nothing to see in here, Miss Weasley," he said but allowed her in all the same.

Indeed, there were only two cupboards, a stove, a sink and a few shelves. The kitchens at The Burrow and number twelve, Grimmauld Place as well as every other kitchen Ginny had seen usually had a shelf with spices close to the stove or fireplace. Also a container for ladles, stirring utensils, pot holders and the like were usually at hand. She didn't see anything like that here. This kitchen was not in regular use. It was of Muggle origin with little alterations.

Severus opened a half-empty cupboard holding teabags, instant coffee, a packet of pasta and three tins Ginny could not identify. All were from Muggle shops. He fetched four teabags, brought a whole kettle full of water to boil with flicks of his wand and prepared a pot of tea. He handed Ginny three chipped mugs while he levitated the tea and a plate with half a cake back to the sitting room. With her delayed reaction, Ginny didn't want to risk a burnt lip and asked for a cooling spell on her tea. It was still good enough against her shivers, but the crumbly cake had a stale taste.

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They paid the potions lab an even shorter visit. Seeing her unsteady moves with only socks on the steep concrete stairs, Severus held onto one arm at her elbow. "It will wear off completely," he reassured her almost nicely and stopped half way down. Then he straightened and continued sharply, "We have work to complete. You stay upstairs and out of trouble." He supported her with a hand in the small of her back on her slow way back upstairs.

While the two men brewed, Ginny lay on the sofa, thinking of her family and friends, brooding and worrying. She had no patience for the books she had been offered. In three days she would meet the man whom she had already known and feared five years ago in his state as a boy of sixteen years. This time, he would have a whole army on his side and hold her life in his hands with no chance to escape.

Lord Voldemort was not known to keep prisoners for longer periods. Where would he do so? He tormented them to get all the information they held, and then he killed them. Some, especially women, had to endure an existence as slaves for a while. Maybe that was what Professor Snape was planning for her? The way he treated her, she decided, she could go with this solution. Rather than die from torture, certainly! Did she have to appear horrified at the notion of this? Probably. In front of the Dark Lord, she would have to look injured and desolate. Better still she had to be injured. Desolate she would be.

Of course, she would be forced to tell a lot of what she knew. How could she do that without really telling the monster that had once been Tom Riddle anything important? She must not reveal anything...or at least not too much. They would have to work out a plan. If she proved unable... She shuddered.

Or should she devise a plan to escape before the hearing? Snape had already told her that she would be caught within minutes. If he caught her himself, he'd show his worst side towards her. And if somebody else caught her, her prospects would only get worse. Ask him to help her escape? No, he had made it clear that she could rule

that out immediately. She would have to face torture and most likely death, and she would not plead and pledge... or at least she would try not to.

Best not to think of it.

Think of nothing, Ginny Weasley.

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They found the girl in a restless slumber. She tossed her head left and right, her hands moving agitatedly, her mouth open in soundless cries. She had some new bruises on her side from the table that kept her from rolling off the sofa. Severus rushed over and spoke to the girl in a voice more soothing than he had trusted himself able to muster. He sat down at her knees and let his hand rest on her back, which calmed her slightly. He summoned a warm, wet towel from the bathroom to wash her face.

Suddenly, she jerked away from the touch, and her words became comprehensible. "No, Tom, no! Don't make me do this. Please, no!" Waking up slowly, she shortly clenched her teacher's hand but retreated quickly. "Oh. I'm sorry, sir."

"It is all right. We left you here for too long."

The potion-induced relaxation was nearly gone, her movements were more coherent, and her responses came fairly quickly again. She sat up to lean against the armrest and drew her feet close. Her professor had sat down and looked at her. Encouraged by the simple fact that he wasn't berating her, she spoke. "I was thinking of the Tom Riddle from the diary. He has been haunting my dreams regularly for years. The end of the Triwizard Tournament refreshed my just fading memory."

Severus was nonplussed. "I have not thought of the events in the Chamber of Secrets for a while. I failed to recognise that you must have a very unusual connection to the Dark Lord."

"Sir, do you happen to know how much he knows about this?" Overcoming her dislike for the boy, she added, "or maybe Malfoy knows?"

Severus did not know, and Draco, who was laying the table for dinner, shook his head. Investigating a fork whose prongs pointed in different directions, Draco mused without looking at them, "My father told him proudly about smuggling a diary into school, and that Potter had nearly failed to rescue a girl that had been in the Chamber of Secrets. However, I'm not sure if he revealed who that girl was or if the Dark Lord paid enough attention to the name to connect it with you, Miss Weasley." Draco stopped and stared at the wall before he continued. "He was outraged at the loss of the diary. He performed the punishment in secret, which is a rare thing for him. Father was more than physically hurt, I recall."

Ginny and Snape exchanged a short look at this statement. They were both aware of why that was, and they also knew that it was best if no Malfoy ever learnt of the true significance of the diary.

Not having had any lunch, they took their simple meal of fried potatoes, ham and a tomato each in silence.

With trained motions and spells, the men Transfigured the sofa into a bed for Ginny. It was the way Draco had spent his nights in the first month with his mentor. Back then, Severus couldn't let him out of sight for the same reasons he wanted to keep an eye on Ginny now. Severus alone knew a second reason: Pettigrew had occupied the first floor at that time, too.

Wordlessly, Draco went to his room and returned with a wide t-shirt and a pair of fairly long boxer shorts. They both blushed when he put the garments on her bed. Soon, he retired for the night.

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In bed, Severus had a hard time mulling over the possibilities they had...or did not have. In a rush of anger, he wondered why it was always him that ended up in these situations.

Checking on the accident-prone Longbottom boy was something Severus had volunteered for, considering his parents' fate. Observing the Longbottoms, Severus had learnt a lot about non-Slytherin purebloods.

He had also watched over the Potter brat a few times, had given him a magical hand to speed him up when his monstrous cousin had pursued him, or when his aunt's petty taunts had become too dangerous. The stubborn and nosy boy had needed it even more once he had been at Hogwarts and again it had been Severus Snape to supervise him. Upon Albus' urge he had done it surreptitiously so as to not damage his delicate ego...as if that ego of his wouldn't have benefited from some reprimands! Severus had agreed, for he knew all too well that the boy was his key to freedom, and he had a debt to pay. Did he also have to like it?

Then Dumbledore had made him brew Wolfsbane Potion for Lupin and endure his presence at meals and staff meetings. A year later, he had been supposed to arrange himself with Black, a request Severus had thwarted, although the death of the man wasn't in his plans and certainly was not helpful for the Order.

Yet another blow had been Dumbledore's request that he volunteer to shelter Pettigrew here. The wizard debt, the bond, so Albus had argued, obligated Wormtail to the boy who had saved his life in the Shrieking Shack. Eventually, their relationship might come in handy for the oh-so-glorious boy.

It had not been enough with this unwanted guest: Dumbledore had forced him to care for the most spoiled Malfoy in history. Admittedly, this had proven a good choice, but why was it taken from Severus to make his own decisions? You've made one, and you've regretted it a thousand times, a small voice in his mind answered.

Besides helping Draco, saving him from falling into the abyss that Severus had needed years to climb out from, Dumbledore had beseeched Severus to take care of any brat in the Order who might fall into the hands of the Dark Lord's followers. And here was Ginevra Weasley. His task again.

But this time even Dumbledore would have to admit that Miss Weasley's future was not in Severus' hands. For the sake of the whole, they could not risk blowing his cover only to save a Weasley.

Saving people the Dark Lord wished dead was highly dangerous. When Severus had been ordered to kill a pair of Muggle-born wizard boys to prove his loyalty, he had brought one to Augusta Longbottom instead. This had been a risky venture, although at the time, no one had suspected anything. The case of Miss Weasley was far more complex. His house was undoubtedly under observation. She would not get far; they would not get far. On Tuesday night, her presence was expected.

He could only see to it that her three days here would be comfortable, and maybe, if he knew in advance what she had to expect, he could do something...

No, not even this was wise. First, he would have to assess her ability in Occlumency. Tomorrow. He would have three days to teach her, force her and possibly steal her memory. Mental rape. He could not even allow her three comfortable last days. And in less than a week, the shrieks of another victim would haunt his dreams. A victim that was more than a face to him: his pupil, a girl that he had to torment before their master would finish her off. He ran his hand through his hair. Why did it never stop? Why did he always have to load guilt upon himself to serve the cause?

Analyse, Severus; it is what you do best. He had known her for five years. She was strong, stronger than most of her peers. Did a sixteen-year-old have to be so strong? People say that defending your position as a younger child in a family makes you strong. Maybe this was part of it; he would not know. Miss Weasley had been forced to develop inner strength after her first year at Hogwarts when she had had to fight the memory of Tom Riddle.

Of the many Slytherins he had taught, Severus did not know many as strong as Miss Weasley. A childhood in a pure-blood Death Eater household was no doubt demanding. Ginevra Weasley, however, had experienced Tom Riddle directly. Being so close to the Boy-Who-Lived had shaped her as well.

Draco had grown strong in the last year or so. Spoiled rich child that he was, he had not had the need before that. His arrogance had carried him through his years at

Hogwarts.

And Severus himself? He had not been strong. Not really, not inwardly. He had become used to aggression at home until he had grown a dragon hide against insults, attacks and humiliation at school. However, in the core he had remained vulnerable all too long until his heart had dried out. Shrunken and deformed, it had finally hardened like a Shrivelfig.

His reverie was interrupted by tiny, suppressed sobs. Quietly he stood and went over to the half-open door. *Lumos!*

He inched over to the bed in the corner. Tresses of red spread over the pillow. The shape of her body was outlined under the light cover. It shivered in rhythm with the sobs. What was he supposed to do? It was pointless to offer empty words as if to console her. 'All will be well' didn't hold in the face of death, and it wasn't like him to say such nonsense in any situation.

He stooped over her, reached out an awkward hand to touch her shoulder and, when it didn't help, started stroking her back. She turned and pushed wet tangles of hair out of her face. She moved her body to the side, inviting him to sit down. "I feel so hopeless, sir."

His mouth went dry. This was just how he felt right now, and that wasn't the thing she needed to hear. What would Albus have said in a similar situation? He certainly would be calm and reassuring. How did one do this? "We must not lose hope, especially when it appears to be the last thing we have. There can always be hidden doors, secret passages that allow us to detour."

"It doesn't look like it this time, sir."

"That is the idea of secret passages, Miss Weasley. One only sees them at the last moment." *Impressive; he had found Albus' tone.*

She relaxed a bit. "What are we going to do tomorrow?"

Yes, Miss Weasley, think of something concrete. "I will go through your memory and your Occlumency skills. Make a plan." He paused. Depending on her abilities, she might reveal even this discussion. He could appear friendly as long as he could argue he was luring her. For details, however, he had to rely on her imagination. "You could make up your mind, if you agree to permanently lose some information."

"What is permanent if I have only three days?!" She looked up into his eyes.

Severus made every effort not to reveal how desperate he felt. "We cannot know how long it might be. You were very close to Mr Potter, were you not? This can make you more valuable to the Dark Lord than he believes today. If he gets an idea of..." Feeling uneasy, he stalled. His fingers moved slightly against his thumb. "Your feelings... for each other, he might want to lure Mr Potter to you."

Ginny's eyes had left his; she was staring ahead, unfocused. "We are friends, nothing more. There was more at some point, but we noticed quickly that it did not work out." In an afterthought she added, "More exactly, I did."

Severus raised an eyebrow in surprise. He continued, "Maybe your relationship has not reached the Inner Circle or the Dark Lord yet. Or perhaps your separation has reached him. Do you have a scene where Mr Potter is... close to someone else? Else, there is a risk that he wants to get at Mr Potter through you."

"No! He must not! We all entered this fight voluntarily, and we knew the risks."

Severus snorted, and his sympathy for the young woman faded away. Those little Gryffindor brats were playing the heroes. "And how exactly did you come to that conclusion, Miss Weasley?"

Even with her back on the mattress, she managed to pull back from his harsh words. "We have talked about this, sir. We have sworn to keep our secrets."

Disdain in his voice, he repeated, "Sworn. Solemnly, I assume." He saw the brats in his mind, scented candlelight and fancy flourishes to create red and golden ribbons. Ribbons of empty beauty.

She tried for a sneer. "We didn't use an Unbreakable Vow, no." Seeing how he stiffened, she hesitated. "We did not put ourselves under a magical binding like that. My Dad has warned us so many times. It is cruel, even if done with consideration."

Severus let out a breath. It was, and he should know. Yet he had felt he needed one from Draco, and he was not proud of it. His voice betrayed his disgust when he asked, "Then how did you swear, four Gryffindors honest and brave?"

Ginny, who had only heard of one Unbreakable Vow, wasn't sure how to interpret the tone. Did he mock her? Most likely. Yet what else than an honest answer could she provide? "We felt we needed something, sir. Maybe it was childish, alright."

At least she can admit that, Severus thought.

"We felt we needed something special, sir...to remind us."

Here it comes, Severus thought, *booze for the spirit; then some wand tapping on their hearts. They had no idea what it was like.*

"We allowed us two days to prepare ourselves individually. Then we swore."

Severus had to admit that two days of silent consideration impressed him, as did the fact that she admitted freely it might not help. Suspicion was better than overconfidence.

"I... cannot speak for them. Or for my family, but..." She finished the sentence with determination. "I expect them not to risk it all in silly rescue attempts that are bound to fail."

Severus huffed. *How unrealistic can she be?*

"Once I'm... dead..." She swallowed but continued firmly, "Harry has no need to come and risk it all."

He suppressed a shudder, forced his voice neutral, and answered, "Your point is valid. Only as long as you are alive can you be the bait to get at Mr Potter. Do you trust him and your family not to try anything so foolish?"

Ginny took her time to debate the question before she answered. There were so many people to consider. "It was our agreement, and it is also true within the Order. But family bonds are the strongest, I can imagine. Mum is a wreck of nerves, I'm sure." Her look went distant, and her voice nearly broke, "I cannot say if they wouldn't disobey the Headmistress."

"I suppose you are right." This was why he didn't want to ever bind himself. However, life had not asked him. Not with Albus and not with Draco.

Ginny's eyes returned to his. "We also intended not to tell anything to... him... or to any Death Eater. But Sir, I'm not sure I can keep up this part under torture. Then there is always Veritaserum."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "With whom exactly are you discussing this right now?"

"But sir, you're a member of the Order! You're not like them!"

"Hmm, let's assume you are right." He stood, caught his right hand with the left behind his back and, pacing now, he continued in teaching mode, "The Dark Lord does not approve of Truth Potions. He always uses Legilimency. And pain -- a method as old as mankind. Often the threat thereof suffices."

"Sir, I think I need to know what he looks like before I see him."

Taken by surprise, Severus stopped and lost much of his businesslike posture. "Merlin's beard," he said, staring at an imaginary point. "No one wants to look at him, if they can avoid it."

"I know. Harry has tried to describe him. But, you see, I know the face of Tom Riddle at sixteen, and I must not confuse them, sir. I suppose there are no photos. Can you somehow show me? Could I use Legilimency on you? Just for that, of course," she added rapidly when he glared at her. She reminded herself again to be extra polite and address him correctly as if back at Hogwarts. "Please, sir."

"I will... think about it." He conjured a glass of water with a light lemon taste and handed it over. "Sleep now, Miss Weasley. We have plans to pursue tomorrow."

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First Preparations

Chapter 2 of 35

Ginny learns about life at Spinner's End and interacts cautiously with the two inhabitants. She informs Severus Snape about the Order, and he assesses Ginny's ability in Occlumency in his well-known caustic style.

First Preparations

They had crumbly bread with strawberry jam for breakfast and either tea made with tea bags or an instant coffee. The men made a face that reminded Ginny of Ron's frustration at an empty shelf at Headquarters when their mother had been too busy working with the Order. Ginny accompanied the men to the kitchen and surreptitiously had a look at all cupboards. Her overall impression was best described with the word 'empty'. *No surprise here*, she thought.

Their professor demanded that he and Ginny start immediately with the preparation for Tuesday. Draco was to go shopping. He looked incredibly Muggle-like in his jeans, trainers and loose white shirt. He always wore long sleeves, Ginny noticed with a shudder. Avoiding touching his left arm...or actually any part of him...Ginny slipped a folded piece of parchment into his hand as he was about to leave. Opening the door, he looked up into the sky. He shook his head in disappointment, returning briefly to fetch a windproof jacket from upstairs.

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Severus beckoned his involuntary guest back to the battered table where they had had their spartan breakfast. He asked her what she assumed he was doing in this war. He leaned back and considered her, giving her time to develop an answer.

Ginny reconsidered her situation. She had three options at her disposal:

1. She could refuse each and every chance to cooperate the two men would offer her and try all on her own. It would be a disaster for herself and highly risky for the war. Furthermore, she did not truly believe Professor Snape would not invade her memory before she had made up her mind, although she was sure he had not done so yet. Mad Eye had been pushing her, and she wasn't too bad... but who knew how strong a Legilimens Snape was...or Voldemort?
2. She could pretend to accept help from the men but leave the decisions to herself of what to show and what not to reveal. It would allow her some freedom, certainly. How could she use it? From her limited knowledge about the Death Eaters, what could she base her decisions on? Her faked training would reveal some information to the professor anyway.

Clearly, neither of these two was realistic, leaving her with option three:

3. She would heed Severus Snape, trust his judgement. He was a quick thinker, had miles of a head start of information, and if he was on their side, only he could avoid a disaster, if not for herself (she gulped), then at least for the war. And if he was after all a traitor, as most in the Order believed, catching her was already so terrible that... No, she was sure he was not on the side of the Dark Lord. She almost had proof, although the circumstances that convinced her otherwise she would not reveal.

Her well-formulated and short answer surprised him. "You were a spy all the time, working for the Order, for Albus Dumbledore and for the good. You still thwart Voldemort's plans."

This last sentence, however, brought him to his feet. "*Do not* use his name. Never again. It could be the last thing you say in your life. Yet," he conceded, sitting down and letting his voice turn back to what could be called normal, or even amiable, for him, "your description is correct. The three of us are all working on the same side. And we all agree on that."

"With all due respect, sir, you would say so in either case." She held her breath but all she received was a raised eyebrow, and it looked almost more appraising than threatening. "Also, I don't trust Malfoy, sir," Ginny ended evenly.

"I do. This has to be enough for you." It sounded very much like Dumbledore's repeated affirmation that he trusted Professor Snape. "You noticed it yesterday," he added. This was true, and maybe more proof than the old Headmaster had ever provided.

Her former professor went on. "He is not as good an Occlumens as I would like him to be. He has to be extremely careful, and I am careful not to tell him anything that would endanger his life, my life and now also yours." Again, Ginny had nothing to add to this. She depended on his judgement, and this all sounded reasonable enough.

"Our short term plans are to keep you alive and out of harm's way. If you want my assistance, you will have to heed me."

Ginny nodded. He could not give her wide explanations. It would be a waste of time to go through every relevant aspect in the precious three days they had. He would also

have to Obliviate the information away before she was taken to Vo... the Dark Lord. Still, it irked her to have nothing to contribute but the occasional nod.

Severus, on the other hand, knew he had to collect any information the girl had on the Order or the Horcruxes. It was safest to do so while Draco was not there. Legilimency would be needed, but not right away. With questions and encouragement to tell him freely, he could much better determine her state of mind, maybe even make her comfortable, if such a state was possible for her at all. He was grateful that she wasn't on the verge of a collapse, as it was.

So she reported. The Order ran short of potions because the lab at Headquarters was not well equipped and too many shops had closed. But the main reason was the lack of Severus' skilled hands. The last batch of Skele-Gro had been scourfied when it had glimmered orange.

He reacted predictably, snarling, "Pathetic. Pray tell me, isn't there anybody who can cut tiger whiskers into quarter inch lengths?"

Shacklebolt was in charge, but he didn't have much time, especially not very regularly. His Auror job kept him occupied even on weekends, and sometimes he returned with a cold or caught one right after, so they assumed he was travelling a lot through climate zones. Time zones, too. He was almost always in a bad mood. He did not inform the quartet of his work, although some Order members seemed to know very well what he was doing, and they didn't envy him.

Severus considered the approach wise and did not tell her that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been living a Muggle life for more than a year now. Inconvenient as his current accommodation was, he did not envy the Prime Minister's secretary either.

Ginny then told him how the quartet was training and working. The Order members were more of a hindrance at times, especially her own parents, Headmistress McGonagall and Bill. Some were supportive at times.

Severus heard how they had found the locket and the assumptions they had made as to the other Horcruxes. Hermione Granger had searched through *Hogwarts: A History* and thoroughly marked how often each family name was mentioned. Severus gave a sharp huff at this remark. "Why am I not surprised? *Hogwarts: A History!* Doesn't she know it by heart now? How very Muggle to tick off the names like that."

"She does, and it grates on my nerves at times. But, sir, this is important. Dumbledore... Professor Dumbledore believed that the Dark Lord does not have any object from Godric Gryffindor himself. Only the sword is left, and it has been kept safe in the Headmaster's office. There wasn't a chance that it could have been transformed into a Horcrux." He took that in with tilt of his head. She did know a lot!

Leading the tick list after the four founders was the name Crockford. Over the past thousand years this family had produced several Headmasters, including a very early one, two Heads of Gryffindor House and four other teachers. Most of the Crockford family had been Gryffindors. Thus the very honourable family of Crockford had seemed a natural second choice. Tracking the Crockfords down further had indeed revealed they owned precious items from the time the school and the castle had been founded.

Harry had noticed that he got a slight prickling in his scar when he was close to the Horcrux-locket. They assumed that it would lead them to the other Horcruxes once they were physically close enough. The scar had tickled also in Hogwarts when Harry had thought of the locket. Revisiting the same place the next day, his scar had shown no sign. Thus the link could also be called forth by a mental or magical proximity.

Yet, one Horcrux seemed to be in Hogwarts. When Severus now learnt of the secret passage from the one-eyed witch to Honeydukes, he fumed internally. This had to have been the way Black had entered the castle at Hallowe'en four years back. Since Pettigrew knew of the passage as well, the quartet assumed, the Dark Lord had used it to deposit a Horcrux inside Hogwarts. Now it was safely buried under layers of rubble and debris.

Severus was utterly surprised at the damage done to the ancient walls. There was a group of volunteers cleansing Hogwarts grounds and castle. Hagrid was very helpful for his physical powers as well as for his giant blood. Even Grawp was put into service, and the respect and the company was doing him good, although many of the helping hands refused to work when he was close.

Severus was concerned that some of the cleaners could be working for his master, possibly attempting to secure the Horcrux. "So are we, sir. The Headmistress ordered that she, Moody or at least Remus must be on the watch whenever this particular area is being cleaned. Her reasoning was naturally lacking substance. If they want to reopen the school after not more than one year of interruption, the enthusiasm of the helpers shall not be broken with irrational commands. She is walking a fine line there." Severus took this in but didn't give any comment. He could not reveal how every thought of the castle, of teaching and of his colleagues hurt.

The quartet had followed a track to an old hut that might have been in the possession of Helga Hufflepuff's heirs. They had not found anything in or around it. Harry's scar had tickled, although he wasn't sure if it was only that his concentration had fooled him.

Visiting Godric's Hollow had not been overly important. Not even a distant relative to Harry lived there. They had not found any hint of a Horcrux close to the remains of the house of James and Lily Potter. This was no surprise. If the Dark Lord had intended to use the deaths of the Potters to make a Horcrux, he could not have completed the task. The question was if he was a Horcrux short because of this failure. The house of Harry's grandparents had been cleansed of all magic, and a Muggle family lived there now. Ginny tried her best to keep Harry's depression at this revelation out of her report.

Besides locating them, there was the question of what to do with a Horcrux: how to destroy it. Moody had volunteered to destroy the locket, but so far it remained intact and unharmed. They feared he may be injured as the Headmaster had been. They needed the old Auror who was working fulltime with the Order now. So they had decided to only gather the Horcruxes and replace them with harmless copies as R.A.B. had done. No, they didn't know for sure who that was, but did it matter?

Ginny also told her former professor that her brother Bill had been bitten by Fenrir Greyback and now resembled a werewolf. "He is not entirely like Remus. He has adopted disgusting eating habits, and he doesn't seem so wild at the full moon. Well, of course we don't see his behaviour. We only know what Remus tells us." A sharp look made her add, "They go out to the Forbidden Forest together."

"Don't they use Wolfsbane?" Severus asked in a rage.

The girl's eyes flashed up, and her voice mirrored his own as she retorted, "The Order lost their Potions master, didn't they?" She blushed for an instant and raised her hand to cover her mouth, expecting to be reprimanded.

Severus decided not to react at all. She was right, of course. When nothing more came forward, he prompted her with a minute tilt of his head.

Swallowing hard, she elaborated, "Hardly anyone is up to brewing it. Fred and George scan the apothecaries regularly, but the ingredients are hard to come by now that Diagon Alley is a mess." She dropped her head and continued in a beaten tone. "We save the first batches for the child and two men Remus freed from Greyback." Tears ran down her cheeks, and she struggled with the last sentence. "Remus and Bill normally can't get any."

Severus remembered the rage of his master at the intelligence that two men, two teenage sisters and a ten-year-old boy had been lured away from Greyback's pack. At least the boy seemed safe. He enquired about the young girls and heard that they lived abroad with their family, who provided them with the potion. Very wise. Greyback had been insufferable after the loss, and Severus had the distinct feeling he had minded losing the girls more than the fighters.

With the Dark Lord's dubious contacts, Severus had a much better chance of getting Potions ingredients of premium quality than the Order with its limited financial support and the restriction on legal trade. His own restriction was that he had to be very careful that nobody suspected what he was brewing. With luck, Severus' recent research would turn out well, and with even more luck, he could provide the Order with the new product... or with ingredients. Yet he could not tell the girl that; he had to let her suffer.

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Draco returned with two bulging plastic bags, shaking himself. He ruffled his wet hair, spraying them with water. His muddy shoes soon stood in a murky puddle. With a slight glance at Ginny, he left for the kitchen. Severus flicked his wand in the direction of the kitchen, and the door closed.

Severus sorted Ginny's knowledge. She could not follow the scheme, and he made it clear that this was desirable. He defined which information she should give quickly and which she should hesitate to reveal. What to do with the information she was not to give at all? Or relate in a twisted, misleading way? They had a whole list of those.

"I will now break into your mind. Try to lead me away as soon as I get too close to an image you must not show him."

And so they began.

At times Ginny managed to avoid the most dangerous topics while her instructor did not press matters.

She had serious trouble twisting the semi-dangerous images. He could easily force her into a direction she was to avoid. She had to make the Dark Lord believe that Harry was still her love and that Harry loved her absolutely. An outdated picture of Harry's affection would, they hoped, make the Dark Lord believe that the young man would eventually come for her rescue, and thus it would be worthwhile to keep her alive. Maybe he would even allow her to give a sign she was still alive to her family.

Ginny managed well to present scenes of warm looks between the two. But as soon as Severus probed deeper, he saw the final discussion of their break up. Ginny also noticed that Severus did not probe deeper than to a shy kiss. Probably Voldemort would not stop there. From the non-personal point of view, she didn't have trouble with letting him see the more passionate snogging scenes. Ginny didn't like the idea, obviously, but that could not be helped. Merlin's beard, this was a minor concern right now!

"Miss Weasley, if I manage to reach into this heartbreaking debate tomorrow and still on Tuesday morning, we must have it removed from your memory."

Ginny swallowed hard at this prospect. "Would that mean I would consider Harry and me a pair again?"

She got nothing but a short sneer. "Was he that pathetic?*Legilimens!*"

It had come without a warning. He went deep into a scene with Ginny alone in a dark room. Fear gripped Severus. Utter loneliness. They would not come. He...who now was she...knew it. Something had addled the brains he now shared. Not too much but enough to weaken his or her judgement. The room seemed endless, and time was passing in leaps. How long had it been? What was that place? There wasn't a door, he was sure, although her mind didn't provide Severus with a reason for that. Anyway, she could not move. It was a given, not the result of experience. The agony lasted for hours, interrupted only by the occasional stomping steps somewhere far away. Dangerous people, who would not care, people in silvery masks and dark cloaks.

This thought drove Severus out of her mind. She was trembling, and so was he...for a short moment at least. These masks had not been genuine Death Eater equipment, and from all he knew she had never been caught before. "Where or what was that?"

She looked away...ashamed, possibly. "I brewed myself a mind soother and... botched it. I let the thorn apple steep in undiluted essence of belladonna." Fury passed through him. "Haven't I made it clear to you to use a vinegar extract of belladonna? The brew you drank must cause states of fright, where each calamity is believed without critical reflection, as we have seen in its purest."

"I did it deliberately, sir. I took it in the early evenings of my two days of contemplation before we made our vows, sir. I..." She looked up again, hoping he would understand. "I needed to know... The brew was safe otherwise, I understood."

The last, while not really a question, he answered anyway. "It was lucky for you that it was. What made you think you could get away with it?"

"You made Colin take a spoonful, sir. A mate of Fred and George's, too."

Yes, he recalled the instances vividly. Minerva had been harping at him for longer than these boys had suffered. About his inadequate forms of teaching, which he had taken in stride. However, then she had accused him of carelessness. *Him*, who had never had a fatal accident in his classroom, or ever had more than three students go to the hospital wing in any one week. As if he would deliberately poison the dunderheads!

"So you thought it couldn't damage you?" he spat. She nodded sincerely. She had looked through him, and he didn't like being assessed by a pupil. He recalled what he had seen. "This... did not look like a spoonful, Miss Weasley?"

"I took half a beaker..."

"You wasted away about six hours like that?"

"I needed some sort of reference, a clue. What point is a vow if you don't even know what you're talking about?" Severus was at the verge of admitting that this was what he had thought the night before. So she had seen that point...impressive.

Not that he had ever done that. He had learnt it the hard way, and yes, he had suffered similarly as a newly inaugurated Death Eater. Today he knew full well what was at stake, but the merry quartet...at least three of them...had nothing but hear-say. Reality could be worse than this experience. However, she had created herself a benchmark. That was more than he had expected. Voluntarily putting herself under that condition?

Not quite voluntarily, though, since she had had little idea what would happen. "And in the second night?"

"A full beaker," she said, pointed chin up.

As she gave her reply, which he had not expected at all, he swiftly struck again. *Legilimens!* This time the room was brightly lit, and loud scratching noises stimulated his ears to agony. His head felt twice as large as normal: each noise resonated and caused him to shudder. She...he was brushing an incredibly sticky cauldron with a brush of brass. He felt convinced that the softer he scratched, the less noise he would make, even if the clinking of the bristle-wires told him the opposite. He pressed only lightly, trying his very best to ease the pain in his ears. The troubled mind of which Severus was now a part did not provide him with the simple solution of just dropping the task. His eyes were attacked by flashes of light. Again, there wasn't an end to his agony, no helping hand to be expected. His fate was clear; when the cauldrons were clean he would die. So he brushed on. In its hopelessness, his agony resembled the first memory, but now pain was added.

Severus withdrew slightly and probed in again, certain that she could not have any resistance up. His mind was, however, hurled around and skidded into an idyllic scene of her childhood, riding her father's shoulders and catching a little Snitch that Arthur Weasley steered with his wand. She squeaked in happiness when he let her catch it.

Severus didn't want to look for happiness. He searched for more recent memories, such he had to evaluate. There, a dim lit room; Potter, Granger and both Weasleys. Weasley promising to Granger that he'd not expect to be rescued. Ron Weasley standing before him...that is, before Ginevra Weasley...solemnly swearing he would not want her to risk the cause by rescuing him.

The scene repeated itself with other pairings but Severus felt (even without his own judgement) that it had not sufficed. "This is not right," he heard himself speak in a Weasley-voice.

"Why ever not?" That was the brother, looking dumbstruck. "We agreed to do this."

"I can see it in your eyes; you don't feel obliged to follow my request. We need the opposite." He...she was shaking when she continued. "Ron, you must declare to us that... you would not... drop the cause to rescue us. That you would let us be tortured and let us die to save the cause." She went silent, imagining in horror what she was now supposed to do herself as well.

Wide-eyed, Ron stared at her. His hair stood on end and even the freckles could not keep colour in his blanching face. "No!"

"See! This is what I meant." No triumph was in his...her...voice. It revealed nothing but defeat. "We cannot seem to do that. And when I say the next thing that needs to be

done, Harry will freak out." Fearfully, Severus looked up at the boy. For once, he found his face smart, his eyes and the messy hair attractive, "Because we must make an exception with you."

"NO! I don't want to be the exception. I'm nothing special."

By now Hermione finally cottoned on. With their combined effort, they convinced the boys.

Placing an expression of ice and disgust on his face...the feeling was oddly familiar...Severus made Hermione kneel down and swear she would not come for him. "Even if I know that you will be tortured, if I know it means your death. I shall sacrifice you, Ginny Weasley, to reach our final goal: to free the Wizarding World from Voldemort."

When a sobered Potter knelt down, a hard pounding at the kitchen door interrupted them. Severus left the memory and looked up, ignoring the boy.

In a voice void of all emotions, the real Ginevra Weasley said, "It was terrible. We all did it, although Ron was furious at the thought alone...and Harry was angry that we refused to swear the same to him."

Severus tilted his head and let Draco out.

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Bored as he had been, Draco had started to prepare lunch but now asked Ginny to join him in the kitchen.

They soon emerged with a rather fancy meal of two salads...one with spicy curry chicken...two kinds of bread with a variety of cheeses, ham, eggs and bacon. To drink, Draco served orange juice and apple juice as well as water and tea.

Ginny decided to risk a hint of a smile at him and helped to lay the small table nicely. She found it slightly easier to relax with him today as long as she knew Snape close. It certainly helped to see him insecure for a change.

Much to their amusement, the professor inhaled deeply and took in the variety of food placed before him. He easily managed second and third helpings of everything. Although their meal was a silent one, the sheer fact that they were all three sitting there concordantly soothed her nerves like a Phoenix song. "Could you hand me the tomato salad, please?"

"Here you are."

"Thank you."

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After lunch, Ginny had a shower (the door a little ajar) and emerged with the new t-shirt she had asked Draco to buy. She was secretly impressed that he had accepted even this point on her additional shopping list, but she had seen no other way to get to own clothes and a toothbrush again. Now she became restless. "Sir, would it be possible to get a bit of fresh air? Just in the street, or in the garden?"

"Not before I have seen the Dark Lord and know his plans for you. I cannot risk a stray Death Eater attempting to... ingratiate himself to the Dark Lord at your...our costs." Seeing her expression of defeat he added, "It also thwarts our training plans."

He drew the curtains and opened the window shortly but closed it when Draco coughed. Ginny's hope to catch a glimpse of sun was quickly dampened with a glance at the grey sky. A yellowish stripe of smoke drifted rapidly towards the west where it faded into menacing clouds hanging low. The grey garden lay deserted.

Draco enquired about their progress. "You might find it stimulating to hear that Miss Weasley's performance in Occlumency exceeds yours," Severus noted with clear disapproval for Draco's own abilities.

The elder boy cringed and wondered how Ginny could have become such an adept Occlumens. With a huff, she remarked that it had hardly been a project of itself. "With the lot of brothers I have to cope with, I grasped every straw I could reach. It is immensely helpful to know the twins' plans or Charlie's beforehand. I had my hands up if they tried to plant some slimy goo on my hair, but held them to my stomach or eyes before they even aimed there.

"Once they transfigured Ron's teddy bear. It had eight extra long spider legs grabbing his arms and face. Ron was horrified, screaming like a madman. Don't laugh, he was barely five years old and the spider's arms were twice as long as his own ones. After this accidental success Fred and George applied their magic more and more purposefully. Do you think I wanted the same? I quickly learnt to interpret the special glimmer in their eyes after mischief, and I bored into them to find out what was not safe to touch. When they planned to put an engorged spider in my bed, I kept my door closed. You get the idea. It worked on Ron as well, but he isn't that much of a threat. In fact, he became the key target of their experiments when I proved too hard to trick. And it's convenient with parents at times." The thought alone made her eyes tear up.

"I unconsciously learnt Legilimency before I even went to Hogwarts. People get a certain special glimmer in their eyes when they intend to trick you."

She hesitated a while but then summoned up her courage. "It took me the best of three years to find it in your eyes, sir. And only when you are absolutely not aware of it, but... well... it has worked on rare occasions," she added with a smirk. "I recall that I noticed in third year how you had set us a trap with the frog brains for the muscle twitching potion."

Severus was caught by surprise, which he covered with a hasty reply. His voice became harsher than he had wanted. "I certainly don't have a need to set up traps to catch anyone unprepared."

"I'm sorry, sir. Of course, sir." She would swallow a lot in the coming days just to keep him in an agreeable mood.

"I should revise your credit for this task. You were *toknow* the ingredients."

Draco had moved to the window and opened it again. Ginny realised that the sound of the stiff, cold wind blowing around the house had changed and saw that the yellowish smoke was not passing over them anymore.

Returning to their places Draco tried to mediate, "At least she proved to be attentive enough to get the information out of you! "

"This is hardly an achievement in Potions, which was the subject of the class," the professor growled.

Inwardly, Severus was impressed at her bold speech. She had matured. Yes, she had better not repeat this behaviour in front of the Dark Lord...or himself. He wasn't used to being read. Not even once! Neither was he accustomed to praise Gryffindor students, even if he had decided that the hostilities between Hogwarts houses did not apply in Spinner's End.

"Anyway," Ginny finished, "Moody thinks that understanding the concepts of Legilimency helps also warding against them: Occluding one's mind."

Severus confirmed this in his usual lecturing voice: "A Legilimens aims at breaking the conscious mind, provoking it to deliver what it wants to keep secret, luring it into a direction it does not want to go. Forcing a foreign mind to do so normally demands more willpower from the witch or wizard than forcing their own mind not to stray. Your training of maybe seven years, unstructured as it was, clearly shows. We will systematically work on your Occlumency today and tomorrow. But don't have delusions; the Dark Lord is hardly as forgiving as I was today."

When Draco left for his room and later the potions lab they continued. In the evening, Ginny was reliably able to replace the emotion-loaded breaking-up scene with an innocent scene of her early crush: Harry entering the kitchen, and her bowl of porridge flying off the table with a clatter. Harry talking to her dad, and her own look being transfixed on his face until her brothers began teasing her; the embarrassment that the honey for her roll had decorated her plate and the table around it while she had stared. An underlying emotion in both of these issues was similar enough to replace one with the other; an odd embarrassment about her feelings, although she could not quite pinpoint them in the recent case.

Their research for the Horcruxes was more difficult to cover up. For their investigations on the Crockford family, Ginny found a few pictures where she had been interested in her own genealogy: her father coddling her on their old, battered couch, showing her a family tree of the Weasleys. Then he had tickled her slightly and placed a kiss on her forehead. The sensation let loose an elementary joy unknown to Severus. From her body features and the ease with which she fitted into her father's embrace, Severus assumed she had been no older than seven-years-old. Her view then swayed over to the dinner table, which had been set for nine persons. Together with the pictures, a feel of affection and pride flooded to Severus at this scene of happy family life. Next he saw Ron and Ginny sitting at either side of their mother, turning pages of a book of the Prewett family. They laughed at the fashions and hairstyles that their ancestors wore and happily compared their noses and eyes with the features of today's family members. Ron was then seen showing the same book to Harry and Hermione.

Ginny added two scenes of Harry first facing the Black family tree and then with what looked like the Potter family. He looked desperate in the latter. There was also a scene featuring Hermione checking the Crouches or the Crockfords and them all admiring family trees of teachers and frowning at the long but thin tree of the Malfoys. In the end, it appeared as if they had just been generally interested in wizard families, maybe emphasising the Potters. The focus was drawn away from the Crockfords.

"This should prove a good distraction from your actual research. You can pretend that you have spent much time on general wizard genealogy."

"Should I avoid showing number twelve, Grimmauld Place, sir? Regulus Black was a Death Eater and maybe even Lucius Malfoy or his wife might have given Voldemort a glim--"

In no time, Severus stood and looked fiercely down upon her. *Do not* use his name. Never again." The sudden mood change of the man made Ginny shrink back into her chair, shaking. She preferred to wait quietly, and indeed he eventually sat and continued. "To answer your question, try to avoid clear views of the house, but do not push him away too strongly or else he will know that he should recognise the place. But before anything else, get yourself used to the expression 'the Dark Lord'. When you need to address him, call him 'Master' or even 'my master'."

"The fear of the name increases the fear of the bearer." She knew she was reciting, but could not help it. How often had Harry...

"You are not Albus Dumbledore," her teacher spat. Softly he continued, "Death Eaters fear their master, Miss Weasley, and for very good reason."

After three more tiring hours, they stopped for the day.

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Severus went down to Draco in the lab. Ginny's wish to join them was rejected harshly. "It is none of your business what we are doing." He gave her one of the Potions books suggested for further reading for fifth years preparing for their O.W.L.s. "I take it they didn't hold these exams. Use the time to catch up." Lacking any other occupation, Ginny took parchment and quill and settled into the armchair. *Trust Snape to check your knowledge*, she thought and worked in concentration for over an hour. If she wanted his help she had to work up to his standards.

She checked the kitchen and was delighted how much of her shopping list Draco had found. They would have decent breakfasts from now on, as well as tasty lunches and dinners. Professor Snape could dearly use them.

Her mind replayed the day's events. They had worked well together. Of course the professor had used her abysmal performance as an excuse to terminate the day, but Ginny was just so glad he had invested time into her at all that she knew better than to complain.

With Moody they had trained in wandless magic with a heating charm, because it came in handy when one was lost outside. She was thus able to prepare tea and put together a tray of biscuits and crackers as well as fresh fruit.

"We can have tea whenever it suits you," she shouted down the stairs. The men came up several minutes later, approving of the refreshment.

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They had each returned to their own work, which in Ginny's case was setting up a list of questions and proposals she needed to discuss with her teacher *ex-teacher*. The men occupied the table again, silently preparing some schemes of which Ginny was not aware.

The house was quiet except for the occasional sound from outside: a car or a rickety bike clattering along the cobbled street or a group of children kicking a ball. Hardly any birds had sung that summer or autumn. Many of their nests had drowned in the permanent rain and mist. They had not succeeded in keeping their eggs warm or their young dry.

Suddenly, Severus drew in his breath with a sharp hiss and clasped his left forearm with his right hand. He was unexpectedly being summoned. Reluctantly, he went to his bedroom and returned with the thick dark Death Eater robe over his arm. "I have no indication of what this is about. Don't wait for me tonight."

Draco nodded and made no move to accompany him. Ginny went white as the wall. Her book hit the floor. "Sir... " She didn't know how to continue. This just could not be happening. She didn't breathe for a while and then gasped helplessly for air. When Severus had put on the robe, he saw her pacing agitatedly and ruffling her hair uttering nonsense. Then she seemed to gather her thoughts without reaching a conclusion.

Her unexpectedly strong reaction to his departure made Severus hesitate. Something was up here. "Miss Weasley, stop tearing out your hair!"

"But Sir! Do not leave me here with..."

Draco almost sank into his hard chair. Flushing slightly, he slowly said, "Miss Weasley, I assure you..."

It didn't have the desired effect, although the effect it had was rather impressive. The girl approached him in sheer fury. "Stop it, Malfoy. Since when did I become Miss Weasley to you?! Last time I met you alone, except for your cronies, that is, I was the Weasel-slut that needed a bit of... entertainment!" Draco's face and ears went beet red.

Severus blanched. In a voice as soft as it was menacing, he asked, "Is there something I was not aware of? You had better hurry up with an explanation, Mr Malfoy!"

It had been weeks since Draco had been addressed that harshly. Not that he didn't deserve it. Starting in a low tone, his voice became even quieter with each word when he explained, "Yes, sir. It happened a year ago, sir. I... I... made an... an inappropriate advance towards Miss Weasley, sir." He sighed when it was out, too frightened to look up.

Ginny huffed.

"I do not have time for this now," Severus spat, clutching his arm in pain. With a flick he sent a powerful Leg Locker Curse towards the boy. Then he grabbed Draco's wand and placed it out of the boy's reach. "You will sit there until I return. Miss Weasley can hand you your wand in case of an emergency. I assume this is agreeable to you, Miss Weasley." She nodded, and he hurriedly left the house.

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The silence lay heavily between them. Ginny saw no point in starting a discussion. She took up her Potions text again, making sure she arranged herself comfortably in the armchair for the sole reason that Malfoy noticed it.

Eventually, Draco who had been sitting awkwardly on the chair at the table when the curse had hit him asked quietly, "I cannot sit any more, I'll fall soon. Could I aim for the settee instead? Please."

Ginny nodded and observed Draco reaching down to control and dampen his fall. He crawled with closed legs and bent knees towards the sofa. Thanks to his training, his arms were strong enough to heave him up after a few futile attempts. He worked around for a while more until he sat there, his legs reaching over half the length of the furniture. As far as his hand reached, he rubbed the inside of his knees and ankles. His legs were locked so tightly that his laborious move had left the joints hurting.

"I'd look for a skin ointment, but I don't see how we could apply it." Ginny offered.

"Thanks for the thought then," Draco answered in true relief that they were on speaking terms again. "I'm really sorry for harassing you, Miss Weasley. It should not have happened. I was under enormous pressure and in a foul mood."

Ginny looked up from her book but didn't show any signs how she took in his words. He would have to provide more to her! And he did. "We are in a totally different situation now. There are no rivaling houses in this place, and we must cooperate." When she still didn't react, Draco added, "Please, could you accept my apology?"

"We could start building up grounds for trust," she finally offered. "Tell me how you ended up in this place."

Letting out his breath in relief, Draco provided her with a short report on receiving his assignment and then on the months after the attack on Hogwarts. When he told her about his tasks concerning Order members and his attack on Headmistress McGonagall, her eyes flickered dangerously. He did not go into the details of the tasks for himself or his mentor about killing young Muggle-born magical children. He just told her that the demands had been hard for him and that Severus had helped him.

Draco summarised. "First, he was always close, although I didn't know it or want him. Then he ensured I was patched up again, and we came to live here together. Finally, we discussed very personal matters, and I understood more about his work. He wanted it to happen, of course. I accepted his conditions." Draco didn't elaborate the terms, but Ginny nodded.

"Now I am under probation for our master as something like Severus' apprentice," Draco concluded. "I cannot operate independently, and I cannot betray him or the... the cause."

It was time for dinner, but neither of them were very hungry. Ginny went to the kitchen to see what she could make. She returned to Draco with cutting board, knife, bowl and four onions and reached for the dust-bin. With a grin, she ordered: "peel and cut into quarter inch cubes." He took up his work with a smirk.

On a hunch, Ginny brought the meat she was cutting over as well so that they could see each other and talk. She also brought them water and apple juice. Side by side, they worked on dinner.

With the Leg-Locker Curse, Ginny didn't have to fear him at all, but he truly wished this had not been necessary. "Living up to Slytherin standards isn't easy," he started. "Do you have any idea how many families even in my own house I was almost forbidden to look at or talk to?"

Ginny was taken aback. "There is no such thing in Gryffindor. I don't even know from what family background the younger years are."

"I noticed that right away. Your brother with Potter and Granger or Longbottom with Granger even weirder to Slytherin eyes."

"Huh, how's that?"

"The Longbottoms are a rich, respected family. Your family is pure-blood, but... you realise what I was taught to think of you. Not that I was allowed to converse freely with Longbottom, but had his parents been healthy, they would have held some respect, and he along with them." He set down his knife and looked at her. "You know, I came to think that much of the taunting Slytherins put on other houses, especially on Gryffindor, was actually due to the pressure that we experience in our own walls. We see that you don't seem to have the same boundaries and enjoy a freedom we cannot have."

"We don't have any restrictions. People are respected for their performance in class and Quidditch. But that should be true for Slytherin as well."

"Yes, of course. I think this kept Severus alive, if only barely."

Ginny pondered over this. "Oh, yes, he is a half-blood, only a half-blood, then. Is this his childhood home?"

"Yes. He related to me how he used to have to scrub the floor. His father often set him to menial tasks in his holidays. He had to creep out at night to get to his school stuff and do his homework."

"Same as Harry; his uncle locked away his whole trunk first thing when they came home. They made him prepare meals, do the gardening and other chores. His cousin taunted him and bullied him all the time."

Draco raised an eye at that. "I had to work several hours every day on father's assignments. The only goal father set was to beat Granger. Miss Granger," he corrected himself. "It might have been all right if I had been lazy or if there had been a more objective goal, but for father the only point was that I had finished lower than a Mud...you know, a Muggle-born. I also had lectures in other subjects father considered valuable."

"My parents were still ambitious with Percy, checking on his achievements and so on. He and Bill are also very much the academic type, although, Bill is fun, too. With Fred and George they lost the battle early and so Ron and I had a rather peaceful life. So says Charlie, at least. You know, he is the second of us, between Bill and Percy, and more of an outdoor type."

"Quidditch and Magical Creatures?"

"Oh, any animal would do. You can't imagine what he kept bringing home before he started school. He had a Muggle friend in the village, Ralph." Draco's eyes went wide. "They were out all the time. Mum says she felt sorry for how often she had to Obliviate him because he had been in our house again. Probably Charlie is the only Weasley who really knows about Muggles. Ugh, don't tell my father..."

"Not much chance of that," Draco provided, but noticed his mistake immediately. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to bring that up now."

Ginny left for the kitchen. Draco had no way to reach her, and he didn't want to call for her.

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She returned with swollen, red eyes. "Let's not talk about it."

She took all their ingredients to the kitchen and resumed cooking. "Hmm, smells good. Where did you learn that?" she heard from the sitting room.

Returning with the cutlery and plates, she asked, "How many guesses do you need?"

"So it is true, you don't have an elf at all?"

"No, and not only because we can't afford one, Dad would never... although I believe Mum would not have minded, with all the clothes and the meals. But she never complained. Never...she employed us, though."

"Especially you, as the girl?"

"Not really. My luck was maybe that I was the youngest. She needed help when I was still too small. Anyway, do we wait or start?"

"Severus won't mind eating after us. And if he returns injured, we can help him." At Ginny's shocked face, Draco continued. "What do you think they look like if the Dark Lord has a bout of wrath? I've patched up my father a few times. Severus must have suffered a lot while he was a teacher. He didn't really bring enough information, did he?"

"Hope not."

They started eating in an awkward silence. Draco observed her carefully. She was deep in her thoughts, although they didn't seem to circulate around her own destiny. Eventually, Draco broke the silence again: "Have you been at Hogwarts since... you know?"

The castle had almost replaced Headquarters, but she would not tell him that. "A month ago. Hmm, we slept in Slytherin quarters, actually...including Hermione."

"Merlin's beard, the poor old man will be sick in his grave. Why was that?"

"As it happened, *someone* quite thoroughly destroyed the upper floors. Your place, on the contrary, is hardly touched."

They continued their amiable talk for a long time. At some points, Ginny found Draco's insistent questioning disturbing. At other points she would have liked to make him ask more. But she felt too glad to have heard a bit of his life, to have some clues as to why he had been that mean and wasn't anymore that she didn't mind. Living up to Slytherin requirements wasn't easy. Add the requirements set by Lucius Malfoy...a sheer impossibility.

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The door opened and a tired, exhausted Severus Snape returned home. He made for the bedroom.

Draco asked Ginny and she gave him his wand to free himself. He stretched to get into motion and then went over to Severus, who sat pensively on the edge of his bed, eyes unfocussed. They observed him silently for a while.

"Severus?" he prompted carefully.

"It is alright. Let me wash and change."

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The young people left him and prepared his dinner.

He reappeared quickly, physically unharmed, but hungry. Feeling ravenous, he helped himself and began to eat without a word. For the second helpings, he slowed down and relished the food. Still no word.

Desperately waiting for information, Ginny had to calm herself down several times. Her mind provided her with increasingly disturbing scenarios.

When he loaded his plate for the third time, Draco looked over to Ginny meaningfully. "Feel like filling us in now, Severus?"

"Shortly. You might update Miss Weasley about the group weddings."

"Weddings? We thought you knew the outcome of..."

"...of Friday's skirmish? Nothing much happened after we left. Miss Granger left unharmed, as did the other key actors."

Ginny relaxed. Remembering the professor's first sentence she looked at Draco apprehensively, and he explained. "There have been several huge weddings arranged all over summer. The last one was two months ago. Six pairs were wed on the same day. Some of them were children of the members of the Inner Circle, all of the grooms and some brides were promising Death Eaters, pure-bloods and half-bloods. These weddings come with the additional obligation of regular consummation and having children." Ginny shuddered and Draco went silent.

Curious now, Ginny asked about re-housing. Draco raised his eyes in question and she huffed. "I am a pure-blood, remember? Not exercising a tradition doesn't mean one would not know about it."

"I see. In these cases, re-housing was hardly necessary. All men were Slytherins and so were three of the young women. The other brides, two Ravenclaws and one Hufflepuff, have been accepted without. It would have been difficult to control anyway, since the Death Eaters cannot reach the Sorting Hat."

She nodded in relief. The re-housing was a painful and often disastrous pure-blood tradition for couples of mixed temperament. Typically, but not always, it was the young bride who was submitted to a series of mind altering potions and spells to render her character more compatible with the house of her pure-blood husband, a dangerous enterprise with strong-willed persons. Their minds were hard to submit. Increased doses of the potions broke them completely so that the woman was merely a shell without a will of steering her own life, which, after all, was convenient for some men. Depending on the family tradition, re-housing was demanded at marriage, after the heir was born, or even repetitively every three to five years.

For some years, Arthur Weasley had worked hard to have this procedure forbidden, to no avail. He had been shunned for refusing to fetch the Sorting Hat or supervise the procedure. According to him, the name was already misleading. The victim was not re-housed but only de-housed: the admission was terminated when the Sorting Hat was unable to assign a house or provided several, including the one of the spouse.

The tradition was centuries old. Many families who didn't dare to break it avoided trouble by not binding themselves out of their houses. It was an additional reason for the incest that led to stillbirths and Squibs and left many couples childless.

Death Eater or not, Ginny was relieved to hear that the disgusting mind changing had been avoided.

Finally, their teacher finished his plate and sat back, cradling his drink. Ginny moved to bring the dishes to the kitchen, but Severus sent them over with a flick of his wand.

"Thank you. I have to go anyway to get our desserts. Would you prefer it right now or in a little while?" she wondered, thinking of how full his stomach must be.

"I will first tell you what happened." With mixed feelings she sat back down, and Severus began. "These new couples have been the Dark Lord's pride, his investment into the future. He is most anxious to recruit more promising material." While it was easy to fill the lower ranks of his army, the strategists, the planners and commanders were missing. Or else they were imprisoned in Azkaban, like Lucius Malfoy.

Severus asked for the dessert then. Ginny provided a bowl of chocolate mousse with fresh pears. They all served themselves. Slowly, Severus emptied the first bowl, letting his tongue take in the taste and smooth texture of each spoonful. Taking his second helping, he continued.

The couples submitted themselves to produce three promising new Death Eaters within seven years. Since not all (Draco snorted) marriages had been love-based, they

would be released from the marriage when their last child entered Hogwarts. *Or whatever school young Slytherins would attend in the coming years* Severus mused. It was mainly for these couples that Severus and Draco provided lust potions. Ginny looked up in disgust.

To boost the morale, the Dark Lord had further ordered monthly festivities for the newly-weds. Seven couples from the last two ceremonies and two promising candidates for the next one had met for a Sunday brunch, three with the proud announcement of pregnancy.

Then there had been a disruption. The servants and guards had been incapacitated by so far unknown means, and the attendants of the party had not fared much better. Eight men and five women were arrested by Ministry Aurors or killed at their attempt to flee.

In the aftermath, one of the young widows had committed suicide. She had been pregnant and probably hadn't managed the shock together with her hormone turmoil.

They finished their dessert in silence. Even for Death Eaters, a wedding and the first years should be a glad affair, full of happiness, joy and laughter, thought Ginny. If not their whole lives, then at least the start should be merry. She was pulled into the present when her professor continued.

This night, the Dark Lord had personally submitted each and every member of the Inner Circle to questioning under Legilimency. He had demanded Severus to question the key ranks of the normal Death Eaters while at the same time pry open their minds to evaluate how trustworthy their statements were.

"When we were through, he has, of course, thoroughly gone through my results and my brains. I truly wonder where he takes his energy from in these mammoth sessions." Severus sat back, rubbing his face.

"He does not have to Occlude his mind in parallel," Draco offered. "Do you need a potion?"

"No, a shower and a square meal were just fine. Now all I require is a good night's rest." After a pause, he informed them, "With the mess of tracking down what has happened and who might have betrayed the party, we are to meet the Dark Lord on Wednesday night. He will search for an even more protected environment, I suppose."

Silently, Ginny and Draco made for the kitchen, and with Draco's magical help, they quickly cleaned the place.

With the determination to sleep soundly and be refreshed the next morning, Ginny went to the bed into which the men had once again transfigured the sofa *We have made good progress today and, unexpectedly, I have a day more to prepare myself*, she thought and felt her body relax. She cleared her mind, Occluding it as best as she could before she found sleep.

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For the whole night, Draco's mind would circle around pieces of information Ginny had delivered involuntarily and innocently. Valuable as the news was, he could not possibly inform his mentor about the issue. He scanned through the exact wording of the Unbreakable Vow to which he was liable. He was not to inform others about Severus, but the opposite...informing Severus about himself, or others...was not included. However, Draco would have to work on this later.

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Last Preparations

Chapter 3 of 35

Snape continues to train Ginny, but his caustic style is softened as he sees her remarkable progress. Ginny interacts more boldly with both men and gradually influences everyday life at Spinner's End, until at one point she goes too far.

Last Preparations

Monday morning, Ginny silently saw to a substantial breakfast, as it was usually one of her morning tasks, before she went to discuss the questions and proposals she had listed the day before. She had slept rather well, albeit not soundly, and was ready to use the time she had been granted. The one thought troubling her mind persistently was she had no means at all to inform her family or friends of her whereabouts and how she was faring. She would so have liked to assure them that she wasn't being mistreated.

She clung to the thought that they possibly had realised that it had been Professor Snape who had taken her away in the end. They had hexed the other Death Eater away, but not him.

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Legilimency was hard work for both of them, and his teaching style was just as caustic and icy as it had ever been. "If you only had the courtesy to concentrate on the task as much as on frying bacon and eggs, Miss Weasley! I am not willing to waste my time here."

She let the pictures of her father showing her his family tree flicker up, but it vanished when he probed harder. "Will you spare me the view of that bushy know-it-all perusing that ridiculous list of names?"

Ginny did her best to clear her mind again. She was now to explain a potion against corns on the foot from last school year. Why would she steep the whole herring scales in rattlesnake venom in this case rather than grind them as one does for wart ointments? While she concentrated on the difference, Snape moved and caught her eye.

"*Legilimens!*"

Sure enough, he soon found a new reason to comment on her performance. "Miss Weasley, spare me the pathetic wailing of the glorious boy over ending your relationship. Have the courtesy and appreciate my efforts here."

She had hardly recovered from the attack on her mind when he asked impatiently, "Found the answer for the herring scales by now?"

"Uh, sir, yes, sir. The most active substance, the grewinster, passes into the ointment with both methods. The wart ointment is to go deep and must not spread sideways into the unharmed skin. The frugulan in the ground herring scales directs the ointments perpendicularly into the skin. It does not pass into the rattlesnake venom, though. Therefore this ointment stays on the surface of the skin and makes for a softer transition zone at the border of the treated patch of skin."

Her ability to concentrate and her eloquence when presenting her potions skills were... acceptable, but he would not tell her so *She must not become overconfident*, he

explained his actions to himself. Instead, he barely nodded in acknowledgement and immediately attacked her again. "*Legilimens!*"

She was absolutely unprepared this time and presented any kind of picture he searched for. "And through again! I am sick of seeing your pathetic brother holding the locket like a Quidditch cup. He deserves neither of them."

Breathing heavily, she recollected her thoughts once again. She now avoided eye contact as much as possible. The problem was he demanded her to get up and walk around, or do push ups, or carry books elsewhere, or build a house from Draco's Exploding Snap cards, constantly checking her on the last two years of Potions lessons.

Inevitably, he eventually broke through again. "Your mind is as smooth and creamy as today's breakfast porridge."

After two hours, they made a tea break. Heavily drenched in sweat, Ginny was more than satisfied to see that her teacher's clothes were as soaked as her own were.

Nursing his tea, Severus observed the young girl. She had grown physically as well as mentally. Her body showed the female features of the N.E.W.T.s students. It had always amazed him how the girls he remembered as spindly first-years with thin, elf-like voices transformed into young women standing their ground: very young, in her case, but developing into a woman nevertheless. With the thin, sweaty shirt clinging to her body... "Will you change into the warmer shirt Draco provided before I have to brew you a flu potion?"

The rest of their tea break passed in a comfortable silence.

Severus had to check on Draco in the lab, leaving Ginny to herself for maybe an hour. Before he left downstairs, he remarked shortly, "Draco understands that you search for items the Dark Lord keeps well protected, but he need not know what these items are called or what their property is. I assume I am one of very few Death Eaters who know, and this is how it shall remain. The Order operates in a similar fashion." Ginny nodded. Besides the quartet, only Mad Eye Moody and Headmistress McGonagall knew about the Horcruxes; Remus Lupin had a rather good idea what kind of items they searched for since he had joined them at Godric's Hollow, but he didn't know they were Horcruxes.

She was to clean around the sitting room and bathroom and prepare lunch. "You are my captive and should work like a slave."

His words might have appeared insulting, and his voice had carried much of its harsh teaching vitriol, yet Ginny felt at ease with these tasks, and thus the remarks had not hurt. This was nothing different from what she was used to doing at home. In fact, the rooms were rather clean: the three of them hadn't produced anything like the normal chaos in The Burrow, and lunch for three is hardly worth mentioning when one is used to preparing it for nine plus random guests.

She went about on the ground floor freely. She rearranged a bit what she found uneconomic, like the use of the kitchen drawers or the place for shoes. With a shake of her head, she considered the patterns of the sofa: a menacingly shrill green base with gold and black ornaments. *Can give you the creeps*, she thought. The armchair had once been an agreeable shade of navy blue but sported an oddly whirling pattern in a rather aggressive shade of orange. The once cosy curtains held a light crème showing a pacifying pattern in burgundy and navy. They would give the room a homely touch if the fabric was not so bleached from the sunlight and covered in cobwebs and dust. She found a tablecloth in a sideboard. It would only demand some simple transfiguration (for which she lacked the wand), but then it could cover the wear and tear of the sofa. She would ponder more about it, if only to keep herself from drifting into darker images.

They enjoyed a hearty lunch for three, each following their own thoughts, not finding the silence any uncomfortable.

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Severus insisted that the afternoon begin with a session of Legilimency and Occlumency. This time, Draco was to entangle Ginny in a conversation or in simple activities while Severus would jump in to catch her mind.

Severus would have liked to distract her even more by demanding also Draco Legilimize her, but his skills were not so well developed that he would really represent a threat. On the other hand, a random success could provide him with information that was best hidden from him.

For the latter reason, Severus could not use Ginny to train Draco. She would, however...he had to grant her that...get deep into the boy's mind if she so chose.

It was exhausting work once again. Draco taught Ginny the theory of the first potions of the sixth year, constantly asking her and engaging her in a discussion. Severus interfered at random, addressing either of them with questions or giving further information or attacking either of their minds.

With satisfaction, Severus noticed that Draco's previously mediocre performance got a boost as he saw how well the girl withstood these attacks, and that she managed to answer Draco's questions or repeat concepts he had explained. One hardly got the impression she was doing anything else, although Occluding her mind should have taken all her energy.

Finally, their teacher called it a day. "Severus, should you warn Miss Weasley about the most potent Legilimenses among the Death Eaters?"

Severus regarded them both with a serious expression. "Yes and no. Yes, because indeed you must know that there will be others besides the Dark Lord himself attempting to intrude into your thoughts. This is what we've been training you for right now. No, because we can never know who else excels in a certain skill and who does not. It is dangerous to trust that somebody would be harmless. I will not give you a list of accomplished Legilimenses because it would inevitably be incomplete and thus dangerous. We can also assume that you would not recognise everybody." They both understood his arguments.

Lecturing again, he continued. "Remember to Occlude your minds every night. Do so repetitively also over the day. Make a habit to start and end each meal Occluding your mind. Occlude it on the way to the bathroom, and especially on your way out back into a group. It is in these transition moments where one hardly focuses on anything concrete that an unashamed Legilimens prefers to attack with force. He will get deep and learn much before being discovered and blocked. If he cannot risk discovery at all, the opposite is true: he lures his victim to concentrate on the matter he wishes to see and attacks then. He will have to attack more softly and with a sharp focus but will not have to scan through sundry thoughts before he finds what he looks for. Either method is equally dangerous for both of you in the company of Death Eaters," he finished. He noticed with satisfaction that the girl had identified her own actions in his explanations.

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They spent some time with individual occupations. Ginny found herself thinking about her family and friends, the Order and of course Wednesday night. She was more confident now that she stood a chance...if they proceeded with the training as they had that day, and if she could stand the procedure at all. Voldem...no, the Dark Lord. *Him*. "Sir," she asked and waited for the professor to look at her. "Would you mind terribly showing me a picture of the Dark Lord as he will look on Wednesday?"

Severus had already decided to let her in, only had all but forgotten about this, so his answer came immediately and quite amiably, surprising both youths. "No, of course not. I will think of some scenes that will help you. Give me a while."

While he never felt comfortable with the idea of someone intruding his mind, he did not fear she would misuse her allowance. He was an accomplished Occlumens who had to be taken by surprise to reveal anything. Potter had managed to do so; the Dark Lord luckily had not...or hardly ever...although he had explored Severus' mind most thoroughly and forcibly.

On occasions, Death Eaters used Legilimency to show each other what had happened, or, as it would be now, how a person looked like. Lucius' methods were by far the most distasteful. Even if he pretended that he wanted your co-operation, he thrust deeply and carelessly, never bothering if he hurt or destroyed anything left or right. He used Legilimency with the same disgusting ignorance he raped or took a prostitute, both situations he had forced the young Severus to watch.

Albus again had been caring, comforting. Not that he would have allowed any barriers, oh no! He had identified them immediately. Nevertheless, he had patiently coaxed Severus into opening them willingly, convincing the young man that it was what he really wanted: to be seen as a whole and be accepted, warts and all---his sins, scars and

regrets.

Ten minutes later, they faced each other at the table near the window, alone in the room. Severus waved the lamps to a higher shine, which he normally avoided for saving reasons, and when he faced her properly and showed his readiness, she cast the Legilimens on him. He felt the shy and tender sensation of her investigation. It was nothing like the Dark Lord's or Lucius' brutal assaults, the more or often less skilful attempts of other Death Eater colleagues, and not even Dumbledore's persistent prodding. She didn't go any deeper once she felt the slightest resistance. She felt her way along the barriers he built: she explored, scanned through the pictures he offered, and somehow filled the space he gave her with her warm presence. His own memories now felt as if there were a second being very close, radiating comforting warmth. He allowed her access to four selected occasions and sent a very soft 'stop' in the end. She left his mind immediately, and he almost felt sorry.

She looked shocked. "It's incredible that this... this creature is the same person as the handsome teenager Tom Riddle from the diary. Have you ever seen him at the age of sixteen, professor?" Severus tilted his head, no, before he realised what invitation would come now. She straightened up in her seat. "I'll show you then. Let me see... yes, this will do, and that. Now, if you would..." It wasn't a question, and Severus could not truly reject this, could he?

And so he was permitted, invited even to share a picture with her. For the first time, he tried to share someone's memory as gently as he possibly could, carefully paying attention to the tiniest signal to stop.

First he saw the sinks in a pupils' toilet. A female teenage voice was wailing nearby, frequently giving a gurgling sound. There was a book, the diary. It felt incredibly attractive; he could not remove his eyes from it. Neither did he want to. Looming in or above the book, there was the small ghost-like shape of a boy for whom he felt an intimate familiarity and trust. The elder boy with his old fashioned but immaculate haircut encouraged Severus with an elegant flourish to say, "Open up!" Severus felt waves of Ginny's warm pride that she would call this boy her friend. On the third attempt, the tab of the nearby sink glowed white and began to spin. The sink sank away to reveal a large pipe. "Now we go in there. You'll be so surprised, Ginny," the boy coaxed. *Oh yes, he would go there!* Tom showed him what none of his...that is her...brothers knew! When Severus felt an incredible curiosity and excitement, the picture faded away.

Next, Severus saw a stone wall, pillars and the book. Some cloudy substance emerged from the book, became taller than himself and more concrete and finally took the form of that same handsome teenager...Tom Riddle. His clothes were clean, and his tall and slender body was moving elegantly. Admirable, Severus was forced to think. Initially, he was transparent. He started talking, neutrally first but then increasingly harder, finally sneering, so that his harsh voice and the insults touched Severus' heart. Tom called Ginny pathetic, not worth giving a further thought, a mere waste of time. Severus felt himself firstly at a loss with that new attitude; then he began to plea and beg desperately. He sobbed, feeling more weak and desperate. Finally he collapsed, drained of all life-force, too weak to cry or think. As the boy became more and more solid he dominated the view, and the background of the room faded away. In the end, all vision went out of focus and finally dark.

Shaken from the experience, Ginny and Severus remained still. The sound of a question returned them to the here and now. Draco's voice nearly failed him as he asked, looking from one to the other, "What did he request you to do?"

"Open the way to the Chamber of Secrets," Ginny replied dully. "Probably it was similar every time I had to call the Basilisk, but he always made me forget those incidents. All but the last time, when he planned for me to die anyway." Draco's pale face relaxed gradually.

It took Severus a while to steady his breath and recollect himself. "He gained your trust, then he lured you, Miss Weasley?" he finally asked, working his muscles as if verifying that they were functional.

"He pretended to understand me so well. I have six elder brothers whom everybody knew already. No one made an effort to get to know me: I was 'just the next Weasley' for them." Severus tried not to react on the accusation, but he heard the sad triumph in her voice when she said, 'See?' and he nodded. Of course he had been thinking the same. "And there were the rich girls with fabulous brooms. Stylish new robes, beautiful quills and new books in fancy bags, while all my things were old and battered. Tom listened, he understood, he soothed me... only to shatter all my trust into pieces." She stopped herself before she came to the dormitory aspects of shampoo brands, soaps and underwear.

Being on speaking terms with Harry Potter had lifted her image a little, but she had hated using him. Him whom she had adored and wasn't actually able to speak to freely.

Severus sighed. "This is the way he works, even today."

They sat in silence for a while more. Severus did his best not to think how indifferent he had been to her. Another Weasley, yes, but a girl, and a strong one. No, not in those days. Back then she had been dreamy in classes, and they had not realised why that had been. Seduced by the Dark Lord at the age of eleven! "How have your experiences been attended to?"

"With a mug of hot chocolate."

Draco couldn't stop a huff. He did not dare to ask aloud, but his mind provided a picture of their late headmaster offering a lemon drop together with the chocolate drink/ve *no right to criticise him*, he reprimanded himself, but he had learned already that also Dumbledore had not been without failures.

Abruptly, Ginny stood up. "Enough of this. I've seen how he looks today, and I'm not to discuss the diary with him. It is one of the things I must not reveal to him lest he has an easy way to ridicule me and to really get at me," she declared with force. "Please try to probe also there tomorrow. I MUST NOT allow him to see me like this."

"We will work on it, Miss Weasley," he assured her with no edge in his voice. "It is late, and we are all exhausted. Let's skip tea and prepare an early dinner." His middle finger twitched in the direction of the kitchen.

Ginny perused the food, decided on pasta bolognese and set them all to work. "We'll make enough of the basic sauce, minced meat, onions and tomatoes to last for two days. We change the spices tomorrow, though."

It turned out that their professor wasn't ignorant of cooking. "It is close to Potions, after all," he commented. "But for every day, it just does not seem worth the effort." It was an idea that Ginny wholeheartedly opposed. "With the prospect of enjoying a good dinner together, it is fun to prepare the meal, especially if all join in."

Once again, Draco held his breath. The way she conversed with the ever-brooding stern head of Slytherin House would have cost her 50 points a day. But nothing happened; no reprimand came. There truly was a strange chemistry between them!

After an indeed enjoyable dinner, they let in fresh air in an attempt to replace a walk. Severus lit the fire against the disagreeable, cold and wet autumn air, and they took out their books once again.

Severus felt himself unable to focus on his reading. Experiencing how the feelings of an eleven-year-old girl had been shattered and crushed had touched him deeply. And the same young person would now have to face this monster again! From where did she take the strength? What made her go on at all? He had to admit he admired her composure.

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They started Tuesday similarly to Monday; only they did the shopping tour all together.

Ginny had insisted on getting at least the most elementary supplies. Her list was short. "I'm really sorry, but I will also need some hair conditioner," she told them. "And no, it won't do with a disentanglement charm. Only boys believe in those. The only alternatives would be a hair clipping charm or a pair of really good scissors. But I don't trust either of you with that. I'd end up looking worse than the old hag in the creepy picture on the fifth floor."

While Severus didn't really see the problem, he inwardly had to admit that she had not made much of a female fuss around her appearance so far. In fact, he could hardly think of any of her female friends, or any young woman he knew, who would have demanded less. Further, he took it as a good sign that she had a will, considering how

close she was to the all-deciding meeting. She would increase her chance to live if she looked agreeable, although she had to avoid drawing too much attraction from a certain type of men.

All in all, Severus was ready to spend a few pounds on items he would never permit himself. There was more. "You should have long, dark clothes for tomorrow night, a cloak or robe. We will ask Narcissa for help. Make sure that you have something reasonable for underneath," he reminded her.

He also noticed that the shopping list contained unspecific items like 'meat for 3 meals' and '2x vegetable, 2x salad'. His question was easily answered. "I don't know what they have in this Muggle shop, nor do I know Muggle prices. We'll have to check over there."

As she bent to lace her shoes, Draco murmured towards Severus, "Care to bet how long we will be shopping today?"

On their way to the shop, they held Ginny in the middle. She had received her wand (for emergencies only!) and felt much better for it. It would have been even better with a few rays of sunshine, but the Dementors saw to it that the weather would not endanger their young.

In the shop, they sent Draco for the general stuff while Severus stayed on guard close to Ginny when she went for clothes. A few critical looks were enough for her to get whatever she needed. He did not check the details except that he noticed there were no laces and frills in the shelves and hangers where she had searched.

Ginny was efficient with the food shopping as well, and even the avaricious Severus was satisfied with the bill. They found themselves on their way back much earlier than Draco had anticipated, although Ginny was very quiet, as if preoccupied with something. Severus observed her apprehensively for signs that her composure might falter. However, when around half the way her face cleared a bit, he hoped it was nothing.

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Back inside, the men engaged themselves with security. Several wards had to be thoroughly erected, and meticulous precautions had to be taken.

Ginny dropped her bag and rushed to fetch the tablecloth from the sofa before anyone saw her. With a swish of her wand and a *Magnificato!* she had transformed the fabric into the right size. She slipped through her professor's grasp...he had to steer around her bag...went over to the window and held the sofa-wrapper-to-be next to the curtains. Tracing their pattern with her wand she uttered "*Duplo Ornamento Originalis*," then pointed her wand at the former tablecloth where she performed the partner spell "*Repro Ornamento!*"

Around the time of the third spell, Severus had caught up with her and found himself holding her tightly. "Miss Weasley, no! Do not do anything foolish now," he said in a reassuring, soothing voice. "Don't give up. You are not lost yet. We will find a way." He was murmuring softly into her hair wrapping both arms around her, enveloping her with his warmth and concern.

After the first moment of panic, he assessed the situation. He quickly let go of her and looked at the fabric, which was now a light crème colour showing the same happy pattern in brilliant burgundy and navy as the boosted up curtains. To his imagination two of the blue elements all of a sudden resembled eyes while a curved red line looked like a mouth. The face was regarding him with a twisted smile, happily mocking his emotional reaction!

His eyes moved to Ginny with the most menacing glare, "What is the meaning of this? How can you risk your life, our lives, for something as futile as this?" He turned and left the room without a further glance at her. He slammed the door of his bedroom closed.

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Severus paced agitatedly for some time and then sat on the bed, head in hands to calm down.

This had been totally unexpected. Firstly, she had not made any foolish attempt to free herself, kill herself, or whatever it was he had feared. Certainly she should have checked if they were indeed alone. It was foolish to go so close to the window towards the backyard before they had verified it was empty. He would have to remind her of this. No, tell her for the first time how very different his house-safety was empty and occupied.

Secondly, what had he been thinking of, embracing her? He had never yet embraced anyone like this! Why would he? Who would want it?

His heart had been racing; he had been so afraid she might kill herself, make an attempt to flee or just wildly hex everything she could reach. No, the last one had not been in his original thought! He would gladly let her hex whatever she wanted if it allowed her mind to focus, if it kept her alive, safe, unharmed... and close to him. No, nonsense: she should be away from people such as himself.

He wanted to know she was safe, and he found he liked her being close.

Where had he found this voice from, these words that were so alien to him? Tender, caring this was not Severus Snape. He was not the caring type, now, was he?

She was a sixteen-year-old girl, a friend of Harry Potter. She happened to have ended up in his house by sheer luck. Bad luck. And she would leave the house the first chance she had. Not a foolish one, but a realistic one. She would return to her family and friends, who would welcome her with open arms and with all their warmth.

Severus found he could not fully enjoy this thought.

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In the sitting room, Ginny was reflecting on the same situation while she draped the beautiful fabric around the old sofa.

Instead of being unceremoniously disarmed as she had expected, she had found herself in the arms of her professor. Strong arms, holding her almost desperately. The gesture had been most welcome: she longed for a touch, for a personal encouragement, but it was certainly not what one expected from Professor Snape.

She could still feel where his strong arms had touched her. All around her he had reached, warm and gentle. The whole wizard world would deny Severus Snape would even be able to behave like that. How his heart had pounded against her ribs!

His voice! What a strange idea that the strict professor could speak in such manners. Comforting. Reassuring. Caring. It had had that sound the day before, too.

In his (more or less) neutral lecturing mode, it usually rolled smoothly and, while he used to speak softly, it had always carried easily through the classroom. She was glad that the icy, sharp, menacing variant of his voice had more often hit Colin or another of her classmates than herself.

There were more variants of his voice, one for berating students whose potion had gone wrong or whose defensive block had failed, one for the clear and strict commands after an exploding cauldron or a misdirected curse had caused mayhem in his classroom.

Now she knew of yet another nuance of his voice: soothing and gentle, but equally able to creep under her skin, especially from this close, as if his lips had brushed her ear.

It was a voice and gesture fitting to feelings most people refused to bring in association with Severus Snape. They saw the persona he had decided to show to the world. Yes, he certainly wanted to show this persona and nothing else, but that didn't mean other sides of him would not exist.

It was similar with all her brothers. One style was typical for Percy, another for Charlie. Fred and George were generally considered to be totally alike and never, ever like Percy. If Ron did something out of his persona, he was behaving "like Bill." What nonsense! Certainly they all had their main trail of characteristics, but everyone had the whole bonanza of behaviours available. It was just the question how often one would let which part rule and maybe how at ease one was with a given behaviour.

For Severus Snape, the assortment of feelings would be equally rich. He certainly felt pain and grief as everybody did. Considering what he was forced to do or watch, he would know much more about grief than your average wizard. That he didn't want to show it to the world didn't mean he could not feel it.

The same was true with positive feelings. Of course he had a heart, a capability for feelings of caring, joy, comforting. Somewhere...

He clearly showed a lot of pride. Demonstrating feelings of the softer kind, be it caring or grief, did not go well together with pride and dignity. Yet today he had done so.

In the last two years, Ginevra Weasley had observed people better than before and looked for the small signs of these softer feelings in her teachers as well. She had not found any with Professor Snape. *Maybe I have been expecting too obvious signs? How has he treated me these two days?* Wondering a little longer she found that even Severus Snape reacted on people, only not on the most standard ways. His look would linger just a fraction of a second longer on you than necessary before it was swallowed by a sneer. He would make a step shorter than his normal stride, to give you more room or time. His snide remark would, analysed carefully, not be an insult at all. Had he not complimented her on the bacon and eggs and the porridge for breakfast?

Ginny would not assume that her stern professor was ready to admit such feelings or such deeds. This wasn't the point, either: the sole point was that he was capable of them.

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When the door to Severus' room had slammed closed, Draco had gone to the kitchen to handle their shopping.

During the months living with his former Head of House, Draco had learned more about the man than in the six years at school. And yet, an outburst like this had not been in the palette of emotions he had ever shown before.

After stowing the salad and tomatoes in the cupboard, Draco cast a Keep-Fresh over them and considered their near future while he busied himself with tea.

The fates didn't mean well with any captives the Death Eaters made. Every time one of them was tortured or killed, it had affected Draco and Severus, but this time it would be much worse. Ginny Weasley had lived here with them. Not only waited for her doom, but intensively interacted with them. With Severus mainly and in ways that Draco had not believed possible. Truth be told, she had brought this 'female touch' into the house his mother had considered missing. With incredible ease, she had imprinted herself on all rooms here.

Our rooms? What about our souls, then?

Meals were enjoyable now that the food looked and tasted inviting. Every dish motivated him to take second helpings even beyond what hunger demanded. Evening readings were nicer in company, and she had managed to create an atmosphere by simply drawing the curtains closed, serving them all a drink with a nice gesture, arranging fruit or crackers invitingly. Or she simply scented the air with a shy smile.

Although Ginny Weasley had never entered the Potions lab, even this place had benefited from the generally lifted mood. Once, Draco had happened to look at Severus when they heard Ginny announce dinner. The expression on his face had been... more than relaxed. Anticipating? Happy? Maybe these words did not quite fit, but something positive it had been.

Draco reached for the tea and the kettle.

Today, Ginny's unexpected spell work had of course taken Severus by surprise. Normally he would have disarmed and berated a student. Instead he had displayed fear for her person and for her mental wellbeing. Even under the given circumstances, he had reacted more personally than Draco would ever have imagined possible.

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The sofa looked friendly and inviting against the dark wall of books. Ginny was satisfied with the result, but her insides churned when she remembered how Professor Snape had reacted.

It was impossible to work on her own with the list of thoughts she should or should not reveal to the Dark Lord. She needed help but didn't hear anything from her professor's room for a very long time. Resolutely she stood and then faltered. Apprehensively she went over to his door, hesitated a moment and rapped softly.

A tentative rap woke Severus out of his reverie. No, he could not face her. What must she be thinking?

After another series of raps, a little longer, but not louder, he heard her ask tentatively, "Professor?"

Following a third rap and his growl, the door opened slowly for a few inches. "I need to apologise, Professor. I had been carried away with this idea, ignoring that there is too much at stake." Again, her voice was as tentative as the raps.

Grunting lightly, he answered, "Indeed, Miss Weasley."

"I know that I'm depending on your support, Professor. Could we... Would you..."

"Full sentences usually help in communication."

"Y-yes, sir. Would you please help me prepare for meeting the Dark Lord, sir?"

"We can continue in a few minutes."

"Thank you so much, Professor."

He gathered himself. They had to continue; they had to prepare her for the meeting. She would not be safe, and he could not bear the idea that it would have been his fault: that he could have done more and possibly saved her but failed.

Severus made his way to the bathroom. Avoiding a glance into the mirror, he splashed a gush of ice-cold water onto his face *Concentrate on what you must do!*

When he reappeared in the sitting room, Draco was bringing tea and grapes from the kitchen towards the table between sofa and armchair. Severus looked around, trying in vain to avoid recognition. The crème coloured sofa did make a difference to the room. Some of its ever-present suppressing gloom was lifted, and the ceiling felt higher. There was more space, more air to breathe, even now that there was this tension between them. *What nonsense! The dimensions of the room have not changed!*

Over their second cup of tea, Draco exerted himself in small talk about the shopping centre, which was so different from the small shops in Diagon Alley. "I've never been to a place like it," Ginny cottoned on. "The light is aggressive, and the music isn't much better than Mum's favourites, but I'll admit they had a good selection."

"Where do wizards actually go shopping for groceries?" Draco wondered not for the first time since he lived at Spinner's End. Ginny looked up in utter irritation. Sheepishly he explained, "I'm not used to the whole idea. The elves did all that in Malfoy Manor or wherever I was."

"Do you really have no idea?"

Draco cleared his throat and blushed when he continued, "Father took me for wine *degustations*." The word sounded very French, "that's wine-tasting, and into cheese caves in France, and we have orchards of our own. Elves handle those, and the fruits end up in bowls on the table or in cakes. That's all I needed to know."

"Really, Draco, you're so spoiled!"

Draco relaxed. *Yes, she had taken up the talk.* "Until recently, yes. So, where? Or how?"

He wanted to do small talk, did he? Or, maybe Ginny thought, *he was seriously considering a life outside of the safe haven of Malfoy Manor?* As their hostilities had ceased, she decided to provide a proper explanation. "Mum has a subscription for the every day stuff. You know, bread, milk, cheese, basic vegetables and the like. The shelves are charmed to refill to a defined level. All she needs to do is check the state of the supplies, what we have to eat before it gets stale, sour or dry. The money is withdrawn from the vault directly. At times, Mum reduced the list of these things, because Charlie was hungry all the time and helped himself out of her control. Later on it was Ron. With the refill charm, this got terribly expensive. Even today we don't have biscuits or chocolate regularly."

"And if you want them?"

"Why, Mum places an additional order on the order board at the wall. Her wand contact serves as a confirmation. I had to write orders sometimes, but my wand is not registered, and she would never let hers lie around. Well, she tries not to. Fred and George have tricked her on a few occasions with one of their fake wands. Not only did she hate it when her wand turned into a wobbling rubber chicken, she also knew how ridiculous their orders could be. Once we ate carrot and beetroot salad for two weeks. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. They had had the idea that our hair would need a colour boost!"

"It certainly does not."

Ginny let go a breath she didn't know she was holding. "Thank you, Professor. Or should I be offended?"

"You may chose freely," he offered, glancing around the curtain of black hair with a daring expression.

Did he tease her? She would pretend so. "I'm not ready to be offended," she declared, "and, just so you know, I don't mind the colour of my hair any more. A pity it clashes with Gryffindor red. But honestly, that can become too heavy, especially together with gold."

"Amazing to hear it from a Gryffindor."

"Why ever not?" she wondered. Another look like that. Maybe this was his way of apologising? Offering a ceasefire, even? She could do that, too, she decided and asked, "Does that mean your favourite colour is green, sir, the sole reason being that it is Slytherin's colour?"

Draco held his breath. Never had he heard anyone daring to ask the Head of Slytherin House something as personal as that. With the tense atmosphere of ten minutes ago, this could cause another outburst. Instead, Severus commented dryly, "It is expected. I have never bothered with colours myself, as you should have noticed, although I do have a green and silver-grey scarf for Quidditch matches." He looked up at her, and she showed a small smile for him. Draco preferred not to check his mentor's face. If indeed it had an amiable look, this would change immediately when he felt observed, a risk Draco would not take now.

The peace having been reinstalled, they proceeded well for the rest of the day. Snape worked her hard once again, but she parried well enough, she thought. He also gave her general hints on how these gatherings usually were conducted. He spoke in a neutral voice, showing no feelings in either way. When he descended into the lab, Ginny took up her Potions text again. He also showed her a shelf of Muggle literature. She needed to take her mind off the coming event, and the house did not offer anything else than books.

In the evening, Ginny allowed one more Legilimency on herself to give her teacher the images of all the memories they then Obliviated. She felt a little befuddled after that operation, but since even the memory of the preparation had been removed, she recovered soon without realising what had happened.

They would sleep in on Wednesday and have an extended late breakfast so that the day's wait would not appear too long. Draco had owed his mother for the robes, and she had promised to join them and bring all the food along. "There's no risk that she would offer you a red robe!" Draco grinned.

When they retired, Ginny took a Dreamless Sleep potion to make sure that she rested properly. Severus had been impressed enough that she had not needed it the other nights, but this night he would have insisted. Ginny, however, had not refused it.

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Twisted Truth

Chapter 4 of 35

Ginny is brought forward to the Dark Lord. The event manifests itself to Harry as a nightmare.

Twisted Truth

The sun stood high when Ginny stirred and stretched in her bed. The first thing she noticed was her former professor sitting in the armchair, cradling a cup of tea in his hands and looking at her. "Good morning. You look rested."

With her still heavy eyelids, she was tempted to simply shrug, but it didn't feel right towards him. So she straightened and said, "I slept... not well enough, but long enough. Thank you for letting me lie in, sir." Her voice was sincere, her eyes meeting his directly. While she didn't dare to have hope for her future, the man had indeed made these days easier for her and deserved thanks.

Her eyes asked for a confirmation Severus could not provide. He turned away since he could not face her. "It is of no matter," he said, hoping she would take it. In reality, it mattered a lot! For him, the night had not passed well at all. He had been awake, unable to think of anything but the treatment she was to face. Severus had relived the cruelties he had seen and especially those he had caused. His few moments of sleep had been filled with horrors all the same; his mind had made him watch her being misused, or even torture her himself, until he had given up sleep altogether and had descended into his lab for hours.

For an hour now, he had merely sat there and observed her sleep. He had watched over her drug-induced and very temporary peace of mind.

Severus Snape had been present at more interrogations, tortures and murders by the hands of his former master and his Death Eaters than he was willing to count. Ever since the second rise of the Dark Lord, since he once again answered his former master's calls, he had felt not only disgust for his own deeds, not only shame, but an utter helplessness. The few deeds he was able to prevent, the few lives he might save, were nothing to the dozen that met their end with Severus watching and even participating.

The more he was confronted with this utter helplessness, the more he had closed his heart against the pain, against the hollowness that came from his lack of power to overcome evil.

This time, it would be worse, so much worse. The girl, or young woman, had sat at his table, had lived, slept and sometimes even smiled in his rooms. She had willingly shared her knowledge with him, but during the process, he had learned to see so much more than facts. Her generally positive attitude towards life startled him, especially after her encounter with Tom Riddle. The love she felt for her family and friends was a concept alien to Severus. Her family life had been lead by a balance between giving and receiving, all Weasleys taking comfort in being together. The scenes he had witnessed had often been filled with feelings so warm that he had no words for them.

She had worked on herself for hours a day. Whenever she had asked for advice, Severus had given it to his best knowledge. He had given more than the bare minimum required to protect the Order and his own activities. He had tried to prepare her for... what? For an easier death? Had he only prepared her for selling herself as expensively as possible?

NO! She should live! With his entire mind, he wished her to live. Even if he did not see the way now, he was determined to risk a lot and to take any burden to have her live.

These were the most positive thoughts his mind had provided. The desperate moments had been clouded by what would happen if Severus failed, if she was to die. Nothing would be the same after that. Oh, yes, the automaton called Severus Snape would continue to support the Order, to keep an eye on Draco and to thwart the plans of the Dark Lord. But even more than before, he would crave death, silence and nothingness. Every square foot in his pitiful home would mourn her. The sofa would cry out Severus' inability and his cruelty to the heavens to hear, and for him to hear them, to torment him day and night.

While she was in the bathroom, he Banished his cold tea and Transfigured the bed into the sofa, willing himself to think practically again. He was arranging the new wrap carefully when she emerged. They both stalled. What to say? He cleared his throat. "How stable are these Transformations you put on the cloth?"

A mixture of surprise and delight flashed over her face, but she answered matter-of-factly. "The resizing is permanent. The pattern copy lasts a week before the colours fade rapidly. Mum uses ColourFix Potion to stabilise them. The cloth needs to steep... ah, but you would know. Mum repeats...repeated...the process every four months, if she had the time and the potion."

"I have never much cared for these household potions."

She bit her lips in embarrassment before she hesitantly revealed, "Mum found this particular procedure in one of those Lockhart books. Merlin knows from whom he has stolen redecoration potions."

Severus growled, "I refuse to use anything from this source on an item in my house." He eyed the throw again and then looked back at her. "I will check for another book."

He likes it, Ginny noticed, and her heart made a jump. *He isn't angry anymore*. It wasn't the fact as such that warmed her heart since her doom was hanging like a sword in the air. But Draco had pointed out that Severus Snape would not have invested several hours every day if he hadn't seen a chance for success. He wanted her to be comfortable because it would help her through the night. If he saw a chance there should be one, she decided.

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Narcissa Malfoy arrived with a look of apprehension on her face. The elf she had in tow quickly busied herself in the kitchen. "Severus, Draco, nice to see you. And...?" Her voice didn't sound as if she truly wanted to know.

"Ginevra Weasley, Madam," Ginny said in an indifferent voice. The face of the woman in front of her contorted instantly, but then she seemed to remember something and plastered a non-committal but tired smile onto her face. Ginny was not sure where Draco's mother stood. She had forgotten to ask. Probably she should be grateful to get clothes and even be addressed personally. Compared to their short meeting at the Quidditch World Cup, the witch had not aged, but had actually wasted away.

It soon appeared that Mrs Malfoy had similar problems with this situation. She knew her son to depend on this dark, mysterious man, and both men treated this unworthy twit with a strange respect. She settled on being civil, but she was considerably more reserved than her son.

Ginny tried the three robes the woman provided. Draco flinched slightly when he saw them. They were certainly the worst his mother owned, if she had ever worn them herself at all. But Ginny wasn't supposed to show off. They quickly decided on a navy blue skirt with already shiny press folds and a night blue robe, where the second clasp had been mended on haphazardly. With a flourish of her wand, Narcissa removed about two inches in length as well as an inch in width from both pieces. "Modest, but clean," she confirmed. Ginny would wear her white Muggle shirt underneath.

Once settled for lunch, Narcissa looked around, blinking in irritation. "Severus, have you changed something in the house? It looks different today than last time I visited. Brighter?"

"The colour scheme has been changed recently, Narcissa."

Her face relaxed as she acknowledged him. "A pleasant choice, my compliments!"

Severus nodded in acknowledgement while Draco could not avoid an amused glance in Ginny's direction.

After two more polite exchanges that Severus kept purposefully short, they remained quiet for the rest of lunch. Soon thereafter, Narcissa left them with a doubtful glance back at the girl.

The afternoon passed, and the dreaded event drew nearer. Ginny forced down some fruits and savoury biscuits with her tea because she was going to serve the meals for hours and then would still need her strength during the interrogation. She could not know when she would get food again. *Maybe I won't need food after...* she could not help thinking. Encouraged by both men, she helped herself to more tea. She swallowed down the sweetened, warm drink as if she could drown her fate.

Observing her surreptitiously, Severus alternately engaged her in not-too-meaningless tasks and left her the space she needed. He would have liked to allow her a stiff walk in fresh air, but opening the windows at times with a strong westerly wind had to do. He successfully avoided being asked for a potion. Any manipulation of her body or mind would inevitably weaken her and grant the Dark Lord access. He had dreaded her asking...which, thankfully, she did not.

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It was time to go. The men put on their in their heavy cloaks, and they all left for the forest. Once outside the depressing housing area, Ginny inhaled deeply. They took a detour and walked at a brisk pace to an Apparition point unknown even to Severus' visitors. He held Ginny with both hands, and they Disapparated. Their Dark Marks would guide them to the unknown destination.

Used to Side-Along-Apparition with her family, Ginny recovered quickly from the irritating displacement. Cold, damp air surrounded her. Her eyes strained to see details in the dim light. What was this place? A cave? A cellar? A dungeon?

Through a corridor of sorts, they reached a large room where the tables had been set in U-shape for a banquet. The place in the centre of the head table was decorated as the Dark Lord's seat. At the door, two young Death Eaters held guard. They quickly made Draco move to the right...to the lower places.

Severus was greeted with a deep bow. He was accompanied to the places of honour. "Sir, our master wishes..."

Before the sentence was finished, Ginny was pushed roughly backwards to the neighbouring room. "You'll be called," they barked at her.

And so she waited.

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Severus and Draco looked around to register as many details as possible. Severus checked who was placed where, who was missing or surprisingly present. This information was inaccessible for Draco, and so he investigated the walls. Could they hide doors, traps or other surprises? It was hard to say since the paltry light from torches lit the walls punctually only. Additionally, candles were floating over the tables, illuminating them well enough, but not reaching the walls. For someone standing inside the U of tables, it would be impossible to gauge the actual size of the room. The walls might as well open and allow any creature in.

The Dark Lord called for Severus. Draco positioned himself in a corner to keep an eye on the door where Ginny was. It would not help much if she was relocated, but he felt slightly better this way. Soon he was ushered to the right because more Death Eaters Apparated in. Almost all had the silvery masking spells on their faces, and Draco didn't recognise them.

Two masked men came out of the room where Severus had gone. The tall one surveyed the scene, and possibly his eyes rested just a little longer on Draco than on anything or anyone else. Only when he took the seat at the right of their master, Draco was confident that this was his mentor. Yet, he could not be sure. He had not followed the other person, and now it was too late.

Their master entered when everyone was seated. Draco was unable to say from where he had appeared. The man next to Draco jumped and fidgeted. They all stood up, bowed deep and greeted their master. He spread out his long, thin arms in a gesture of an embrace. "My dear and most faithful servants, take your seats. I wish for you to enjoy the evening, to look ahead and not back."

The tiniest of murmurs could be heard among the youngest Death Eaters. He addressed them directly with the most soothing and gentle voice. "Yes, I know, it is hard, and believe me, I'm moaning with you."

At the sound of the voice, a flash went off in Severus' mind, showing him the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle soothing a distressed girl. A wild rush of disgust threatened to consume him. He gripped his tights in a desperate fight against the urge to jump up and squeeze the man's throat. *The revolting snake-in-the-grass does not give a damn about anyone's life. It makes me sick, but they are too pathetic to notice it.* He stopped his silent tirade when another thought came up. *So was I for too many years.*

"Think of your future," the high-pitched voice interrupted Severus' musing. "Remember that you can form it. You can make our future great! Let's enjoy this meal together like a big family." Upon his wink, the young guards opened the door. Two elves and one by one three captives started serving. A much louder murmur than before arose when, as the last, Ginny Weasley entered, carrying a platter of herring aspics.

She did as they had been instructed: serve as quickly as possible, don't look left or right. It certainly suited her own needs not to look at these faces. Yet, she realised eventually that she could not look at people properly. Everybody showed stiff, uncharacteristically plain, ageless, metallic features that hardly moved with their words or the chewing movements they must make. She figured that she did not see faces but a silvery, glooming masking spell, but she had little time to wonder about it.

Soon all participants were eating and drinking. The elves were shunted into the empty room and forced to rest, which filled them with agony. Now it was up to the two Ministry clerks and Ginny alone to serve the 150 people. Lacking their wand, they had to do it the Muggle way. They ran around, sweating and panting. Wine here, rice there, 'I have ordered a beer', 'can't you hurry with the fish?' She brought food in and carried plates full of bones or empty gravy boats out. She painfully concentrated on looking at the wall rather than towards the people as she passed, but they asked questions when she filled their glasses. They expected answers, and they expected her to look into their eyes. If she appeared preoccupied, the neighbour would ask another question.

Whenever turning around at a corner, she Occluded her mind. She was incredibly glad for the training she had received. As the time passed, she could find patterns in how people behaved. Some would repeatedly set up a ridiculous request; others were a little less nasty. Three of the younger men were certainly better behaved than their peers, but which of them, if any, would be Draco, she could not tell. She could not afford the time to search for him.

In a short moment, when the Dark Lord had turned to talk to the woman at his left, Ginny saw a mask flicker and recognised Severus Snape sitting to the right of him. She memorised the fact but could hardly risk a glance at him. He was repeatedly talking to their master, but in her constant rush she had no time to consider it.

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Eventually, they had cleaned the tables from all plates and dessert dishes. More than only the lower ranks had consumed enough alcohol to free their tongues. At the lower end, some people burped freely, but such behaviour was not heard closer to the Dark Lord. There were fewer requests from the tables, and often one of the three servants merely took a moment for himself somewhere at the entrance.

They should not have appeared lazy! As soon as he noticed, the Dark Lord demanded that the first of the two Ministry clerks be presented. He was to go to the centre of the room, facing the table head.

The Dark Lord hurled question after question at the man about his private life as well as the Ministry, composing the most preposterous accusation to make him lose his composure. He applied Legilimency and the Cruciatus Curse in rapid succession. With each lash, the man divulged something more about the structure of the Ministry or another detail of his life. At times he fidgeted, and sure enough, the high-pitched voice interrupted his talk, hissing, "Liar!" It might have been possible that he was a very talented Occlumens, but Ginny's experience with the Ministry of Magic told her otherwise. This man was only a secretary, who would not even have access to the hottest information. He neither lied well nor did he know much.

If she was not busy, Ginny could not help watching the clerk scream, slither around on the floor and tremble in the aftermath of the curses, mostly the Cruciatus Curse. In between curses, two formidable Death Eaters forced him upright with his eyes towards the Dark Lord to facilitate Legilimency. He was often bombarded with totally different topics than before to break his concentration. He gave up a few more details with each assault.

In an effort to keep herself sane, Ginny cut out the noise and let her eye travel over the assembled Death Eaters. Three young women in the middle ranks had serious troubles watching and listening. Eventually one of the men next to them stood and looked up to the Dark Lord in question. He got an impatient wink and left with two of these women. The third woman, however, remained and froze in panic. She forced herself under control, and her neighbour hurriedly ordered a Firewhiskey for her. Another man left with two other women, one of which was clearly pregnant. When Ginny brought the drink, the remaining woman uttered a thank you. It was the first nice word Ginny had received all evening. "Get a grip on yourself, darling. Quickly now!" her husband or friend commanded anxiously.

Already before her interrogation, the girl from the Ministry was reduced to a sobbing rag somewhere in a corner. She had been sick all over her robe and was unable to stand or even hold her head up. Thus it was Ginny alone serving, which presented a rather welcome occupation. Ginny averted her eyes from the scene in the centre of the room and concentrated on serving drinks: beer here, wine there, cider over here. And more frequently now: whiskey. She dearly wished she could avert her ears as well as she managed with her eyes, but the worst screams penetrated her concentration.

Eventually, the Dark Lord was finished with the Ministry clerk. "Out with him!"

Suddenly, Ginny felt cold sweat run down her back. She busied herself with an order while the man was carried and kicked into the empty room and the young girl was put forward. She didn't show the least bit of resistance, hung apathetically between the guards, and let everything just happen. She had given up all resistance immediately so that inflicting more pain could not reduce her any more. Everyone rapidly lost interest in watching her. She had nothing to tell on her own, and the Legilimency didn't seem to provide anything useful either. The Dark Lord waved dismissively. "Pathetic performance...her whole life has been pathetic. Crabbe, finish her off!" He leisurely indicated the formless mass on the floor.

A young, stout man that could well be Vincent Crabbe went forward. With a rapid gesture he cast the *Avada Kedavra*. The green flash hardly caused a shiver through her body. Her death became evident only since her weeping stopped.

That was it; now it is my turn.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've saved the best for the end," the Dark Lord announced. "There is still one last piece of entertainment for the evening. And I expect a bit of a better show from her, I dare say. If she is anything close to her... boyfriend? Yes, my friends, we will see the performance of none other than Harry Potter's girl. Give a big hand for Miss Ginevra Weasley!"

Years later, Ginny could still recall this interrogation, if not all the questions and answers, then the sensation, her effort and concentration. She was asked, and she answered as she had trained. He assaulted her mind and her body in turns. She presented what she had prepared. In between, she was in incredible pain, stinging, cutting, or thrumming pain, but she did not allow herself to lose control. At times, she turned her back to the caster, which didn't really ease the pain but directed it to lower parts of the body, allowing her to breathe. As they had discussed, she tried to keep her eyes closed or averted from everybody but the Dark Lord himself.

Keeping her face neutral and her mind Occluded took all the concentration she could muster. Thus, whenever a curse hit her body, she could not help screaming, and she found herself lying on the floor several times. The two men stood close and waited in case she would remain crouched on the floor. She forced her weakening body to obediently stand close enough and to turn her eyes to the Dark Lord on her own accord rather than be suspended between the two bullies.

The Dark Lord searched through her mind, asking for her family life, her friends and of course her boyfriend, the Chosen One. At times he called her a liar as he shot another Cruciatus or a Burning Curse at her.

"Why did you visit Godric's Hollow of all places?"

"Harry wanted to look for his parents' house or that of his grandparents. He searched for traces of the family he never knew. The Order found it safe to let us visit there." She had not finished the sentence when she felt him searching for matching pictures and called forth the scenes they had identified.

The Dark Lord cackled, amused, as he saw the family tree of the Prewetts. "Potter must consider you a good catch, then?"

"Harry has no need to..."

"Liar!" he spat and hurled a curse at her that stung like thousands of needles.

He made her feel excited or anxious, frantic or truly relaxed. Later she learned that he had enhanced each sensation also physically through curses on her nervous system. When a given mood was dominating her, he struck into her mind, searched for matching scenes and would have ventured uncaringly left and right had she not presented him with harmless, but matching, scenes of her childhood or school life. She avoided revealing anything from the last months before she had her mind a little bit under control and could present selected pictures.

At last, the Dark Lord stopped. His sharp voice penetrated the thrumming in her ears as he addressed the audience. "Well, I say, this was indeed a better performance than the last two." She felt too weak to shut out the whistling, the cheering shouts and the clapping from the group. The room went silent, and she dared a glance up to see the Dark Lord lifting his hand before her head fell heavily down on its own accord again, sending a stab of pain through her neck. In an amiable, conversational tone, he turned to her one last time. "Thank you so much, Miss Weasley. I would say, take a seat, but it seems we don't have a seat for the likes of you here."

She stayed where and how she was: in a half-sitting, half-kneeling position in the centre of the floor. It served her well, as it naturally directed her gaze to the floor. She panted heavily and started counting her limbs.

The Dark Lord leaned back in his chair and regarded her apprehensively before he turned to his right. "Quite a personality, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus placed a smirk onto his face. Not many would actually see it, but their master would. "I have known her since she was eleven. This was no surprise. I have experienced her demeanour for several days now." Would their master react as he hoped?

"And so you will for a while still. I think she should return with you tonight." He furrowed his brows after that sentence.

"As you wish, my Lord. Do you believe Potter will go search for her, my Lord?"

"You have seen what I have seen, have you not? He is rather pathetic in his devotion, isn't he? And out of six brothers, there will be one trying. She isn't providing much information, but she has entertaining qualities."

"Indeed." Severus Occluded his mind as he turned his gaze back to his master. If they did not switch the topic rapidly, he would burst.

"We will wait for Potter and the Weasley clan for another ten days. You will host her, if you don't mind."

"I am glad to serve you, my Lord." He put his right hand over his stomach-region and executed a slight bow.

"You are always good with words, but today you sound even more believable than normally, Severus. Bring her forth with the two of you on Sunday. She can serve us again. But for now," he raised his voice and commanded with force, "get her out of my sight!"

With incredible effort, she was getting onto her knees on her own accord. Draco scanned the room: who would take her up? The two women approaching her didn't seem to be any danger for her, and he remained seated. It would not do for him to draw attention to himself. He was, after all, still on probation. Ginny hung heavily between the two witches, but her legs made walking movements, and she lifted her chin. She managed to demonstrate an amount of dignity Draco had not expected after her treatment.

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It was a silent trio that Apparated to the first houses after the forest and slowly proceeded to Spinner's End. Severus surreptitiously held her body under a Levitation Charm, which made the three look like a harmless group of late-night strollers.

Once again, the men offered water and applied some ointments on Ginny. Her external wounds that she had hardly noticed so far healed rapidly. Draco uttered a surprise as he regarded her wrist. Two pairs of eyes settled on him, and he explained, "This was a fresh wound, and it was magically closed."

Severus regarded the arm with a frown and confirmed, "Someone must have sent a healing spell at you to stop the blood loss. We will treat the scar later."

They all felt better with every piece of skin they returned to normal. Severus tried his best neither to lose his nerves, nor to openly praise her incredible willpower. Inwardly, he could not help admiring the young woman. She was important to him, not only as a symbol of what was right, but for himself, someone he could relate to, admire, respect.

After a while, she stood up and walked around as if to demonstrate she could. Severus could not help sending her a knowing look: stiff movements betrayed her, and when her glass slipped from her trembling hand, she twitched at the noise rather than realising it was broken. "*Evanesco, Reparo!* You should relax, Miss Weasley." When she insisted on having a bath, Severus was rather reluctant. "You may shower, of course. I will fill the tub a little, and you should sit down. But I cannot permit you a full bath; it is too straining." He cast a warming spell on the floor and the tub for her comfort.

Ginny felt a lot better afterwards and was eager to drink a whole jug of lukewarm pumpkin juice. She only stirred in the offered porridge but had a biscuit.

She wanted to talk, it appeared. Severus had very often felt that urge when he had returned, but while he had found himself reporting news to Albus Dumbledore, she had nothing to tell that he would not know. She tried not to jump back and forth in time, and yet her report would not have made much sense to someone from outside. Serving people whose faces she could not see, but knew to be her enemies had been so unsettling that she had nearly forgotten what was to come. Quite a few Death Eaters had

attempted to put her under Legilimency while she had brought them a drink. She had re-enforced her shield whenever she had approached the tables. "I can't say if they penetrated my shield, but I'm certain they found nothing we wish concealed."

While the other two had been interrogated, she had worked against her increasing trepidation by recalling the statements she was to present.

Already while the first clerk was tortured, trembling hands had betrayed more than one Death Eater.

When she came to her own interrogation, however, words left her. She fell silent for a while before she asked, "How have you managed that for years, sir?"

"I never said it was easy. You did well tonight. I would not have imagined that." *Damn it*, now he had revealed more than he had wanted to. "More juice? Tea?" he added rapidly.

"Yes, please, I'm so thirsty." She hardly realised his compliment.

Severus explained that the Cruciatus left everyone dried out. Besides that, she had been running for hours with her servicing duties.

After another two glasses full, she leaned back and wondered, "Do you think Harry saw me?"

Severus selected his words carefully. "The Dark Lord has taken care not to reveal much to Mr Potter lately. In this case, however, he could have wanted him to watch. He left you alive as bait."

The girl blanched. "Goodness, Harry must not come. He will only be captured. If only he understood. He is having a hard time with me, sir." She hesitated when Severus raised an eyebrow. "But, sir, haven't you seen this?"

"I have. And I have seen more than the Dark Lord has. We removed a bit from your memory yesterday. Things you were afraid you might reveal."

"What?" She jumped slightly and leaned forward. Her weakened body hardly managed a strong tone, but she looked very disturbed, indeed.

"We agreed on this procedure, but to complete the matters, I had to Obliviate this moment as well." Severus saw how her brain worked. After a while, she leaned back, and her face relaxed. Yes, she accepted the concept as such. "One memory we had to remove was how you and Mr Potter broke up. He is not blindly in love as you thought tonight." She frowned. "You thought so because we wanted the Dark Lord to think so. I propose you do not ask for the other tiny details we removed. You are not stripped of your past."

"Uh, I'll have to think about this. It is hard not to remember the end of a story, sir."

He nodded. "You should go to sleep now. I would give you a potion, but my experience speaks against it. Your brain needs time to process the events. You will have a fitful sleep. I will give you something in the morning, and for tomorrow night you can have a Dreamless Sleep Potion. Make the best out of the night, now."

At his doorframe he hesitated. "Come and wake me any time." Ginny nodded with the tiniest smile.

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Ron awoke with a start. On the other side of the room, Harry had let out a cry and was now sitting upright in his bed. His eyes were wide open but apparently not seeing.

"Harry?" Ron prodded cautiously but received no reply. Ron crossed over to the other bed. Harry was not lucid. His forehead was covered in beads of sweat. His hands were shaking. A nightmare!

They all suffered from nightmares since Ginny was gone and had sometimes awoken with a shriek. But this case looked differently. Harry was sneering, laughing, and yet trembling. He didn't have control over his body. He gestured wildly with his hands, and he clutched his scar repeatedly. He appeared as if possessed. Voldemort!

Hadn't Voldemort cut off his connection with Harry?

With the next distorted sneer, Harry said, "...A big hand for Miss Ginevra Weasley," as if in appraisal.

For an instant, Ron was petrified. He shook himself out of it and rapped hard on the wall behind Harry's bed while his other hand took hold of Harry's shoulder.

Harry was still sitting bolt upright, swaying lightly for lack of body control. With his body and both his hands, Ron kept him in balance, careful not to be hit by Harry's hands. He rapped at the wall whenever he could spare a hand.

"What is it?" came a sleepy answer.

"It's Harry! Come over, quickly." Together with Hermione, Ron stuffed Harry's and his own pillow in place to support Harry's rigid upper body. They leaned him to the wall, but his arms and hands worked against their effort. "Should we wake him?"

Hermione bit her lip, and her eyes showed how torn she was. "If we want to know what happens, we must not wake him. Poor Harry." It sounded so cruel, given the state Harry was in. But he would not want it otherwise, and everyone in the Order was desperate for knowledge about its youngest member. Or member-to-be.

The nightmare had lasted for almost an hour when Harry finally sank into the cushions, shaking worse than before, but slowly gaining consciousness. "Harry. Wake up now; it is over. Harry!"

"Ginny!" he exclaimed with widened eyes.

It still took a while for Harry to wake up fully. "He has interrogated Ginny."

"Tell us!" Ron demanded.

"No! Firstly, Harry, how do you feel?" That was Hermione, of course. "We need to know it all, Harry. But you must feel ready to tell us. Is now the best time, or later? Do you want anything, tea?"

"I... I need a moment. Call them into the kitchen. Tea is fine, too." He clutched his scar again and fell back into the cushions. In a bright moment, he told them, "She is still alive." Then he inched under the cover, turned to stare at the wall and ignored them.

Ron felt more able to breathe, and Hermione's tense features relaxed. She placed her hand on Harry's shoulder, steadfastly ignoring how he tensed under her caress. "All right then. Ron, you see that he is properly dressed. Warm, I mean. Including slippers or socks! The kitchen floor is chilly. Don't rush him. We need to wait for everybody anyway." And off she went, leaving Harry in Ron's care. That was his Hermione, ever considerate.

The last to arrive in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place were Tonks and Remus Lupin. They had fetched a Pensieve from the Ministry and explained, "We must be able to replay it to detect details."

Waiting for what seemed hours, Harry was more than ready to start. He had already assured the Weasleys that Ginny had come out alive, but he didn't want to relive the details more often than necessary. The Pensieve was a good idea.

Headmistress McGonagall opened the late-night meeting. "We are all here," she noted, satisfied. With a flick of her wand, she distributed small sheets of parchments and set a pot with quills and a few bottles of ink on the table. "Everybody, please refrain from interrupting. Take notes instead. Please start, Harry."

With a nod, Harry began. "There was a big meeting in a room with U-shaped tables. Me...that is Voldemort, in the centre of the head table. I interrogate... no, a young woman is interrogated, but she disappoints me... him."

He stopped his ramble and regrouped before he continued. "She has worked in the Ministry, but she doesn't know anything important. He's angry since she wasted his time. He makes Crabbe junior kill the woman. Now it is Ginny's turn. He presents her like..." Harry breathed deep before he felt ready to finish the sentence with a pained voice, "like a film star in an American TV show." There was irritation in many eyes, but Hermione's head bobbed in acknowledgement, her eyes never leaving his.

As Harry went on, Voldemort's anticipation and hatred fought a battle against his own fear and disgust, threatening to strangle him at times or then again cause his chest to burst. To get it over with and maintain a minimum of objectivity, Harry stared out of the dark window for most of his report without focussing his eyes. He told them how his friend was being asked and tortured and what Voldemort had seen in her mind.

Harry didn't dare to look at any Weasley when he finished. "In the end, he lets her return with Snape, who starts asking something. I was... cut off... at this moment. Snape sat directly to his right, by the way." Still caught in his memory, Harry hardly noticed how the last remark garnered a few hisses.

Eventually, Harry refocused on the here and now and served himself to more tea. Several people had parchments with notes. Molly Weasley's face was white as a sheet, Arthur's and Charlie's deeply pained. Remus and Moody had several notes and were finishing their last one, both trying hard for a professional attitude, which Ron had lost already. Hermione was scribbling wildly and must have been rubbing her eyes repeatedly.

Moody was the first to gain speech. He was visibly moved more than he wished and had to clear his throat. "There are a few people in this room who should not have heard all details. I would like to go even deeper into some of them. How do we proceed?"

McGonagall concurred. "I felt the same. Let's start with the non-critical things then. How did Ginny look. Is she harmed?"

"Is THAT what you call non-critical?" an infuriated Molly Weasley shouted. Arthur took hold of his wife, comforting her as much as he searched for comfort himself.

"No, Molly. Not for her and not for her family or for all her friends. This is why we start with Ginny's well being," McGonagall clarified and turned to Harry. "What did she look like?"

Harry recalled the beginning. "When he started, she was sweaty and exhausted, but not in pain and not injured yet. Composed, and I would say... prepared. In the end, she crouched on the floor, panting heavily, bleeding from an arm, drained, yet not in any state like other victims of his torture. He must've wanted her to stay alive. She worked her head and feet, but I didn't see her getting up."

Before everybody bombarded Harry with their questions, Moody fetched the Pensieve. "You should funnel everything in here now before we go on." He instructed Harry how to go ahead, and ten minutes later they were satisfied with the operation.

Harry still recalled the view but could consider it without the disturbing joy he had sensed from Voldemort. He let out a breath. "How do we get her out of Snape's clutches?" he asked no one in particular. The mix of several answers flooded his brain and made him hold his hands over his ears to shut out the noise.

McGonagall called for silence. "Alastor, Ron, Hermione, Harry and I will be the ones to analyse this memory in detail in the morning. We have confidential knowledge," she declared. With a far softer voice, she added, "Molly, I fully understand you want to see her again. You and Arthur can watch selected parts, but the whole scene should best be kept closed." The old Auror nodded with satisfaction and snatched the Pensieve as he left the house.

Harry nearly collapsed under the flood of questions the Weasleys had on Ginny herself. When there was a tiny break, Hermione ushered them to their rooms, but none got any more sleep that night.

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Ginny had a hard night after her encounter with Voldemort. She didn't sleep for a decent time in a row. Every so often, she woke up with a start, sometimes from her own cry, sometimes from a dream, where she had once again looked into these cold, red eyes. At other times, she didn't really know why she was sitting upright in her bed, shivering. Her clothes and hair were soaked in sweat.

Twice, Severus went over with warm, sweetened tea that she drank greedily. On other occasions, he would just sit on her bed, wipe the sweat on her forehead with a cool, damp towel and let the warmth of his hand on her shoulder pacify her. He never spoke a word and retreated when she felt comforted, as if he could somehow recognise this point.

Ginny checked the clock: 5 a.m. She put down her tea. "Thank you so much, sir. I will manage for the rest of the night. I'm fine if you close the door. Put a Silencing Charm, if you need, and have a few hours of rest yourself."

"I will do no such thing, Miss Weasley. But if you agree, I will now stay put unless you call for me."

Early Thursday morning, Severus silently crept out of his bed, checked the sleeping form on the converted sofa and proceeded down to his lab.

Ginny didn't stir until Draco clattered with the breakfast dishes. Did he have to be so noisy? The smell of coffee and fried eggs filled the room pleasantly. Aching all over, she took her time to get ready. Her head was still thrumming when she sat down, and although she handled her cutlery with utmost care, every sharp noise made her twitch. She gratefully realised how carefully the men avoided clattering with the dishes.

After taking their breakfast together, Severus provided her with a potion against the physical exhaustion. Her stiff muscles relaxed, and walking and using her arms was easier. She stretched at her professor's advice before they shortly summarised the events of the night. Her part had gone well, very well. They decided to take a day's pause in training Ginny. Her predicament was much the same, and she still needed support, but the men had to take up most of their normal training schedule for every nosy comrade to see.

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The men went outside and boosted the protection spells around the house. For once being let out, Ginny watched them apprehensively. "Dad and my eldest brothers do the same. They have a set of spells, some of which you use, too. Some are different. How often do you repeat this?"

"Weekly."

"Dad and Bill did it every other week when I was small. In the recent years, Dad insisted on repeating the spells weekly."

Severus nodded in agreement, turned and voiced provocatively towards Draco, "More wizards live in 'inadequate housing'."

However, he provoked the girl rather than the boy. "What's that supposed to mean? The Burrow was a great place to live! We might have a ghoul, and there are gnomes in the garden..." Severus flinched at that, "... and Dad and Mum sometimes don't make ends meet, but its home!" she insisted, silently adding, *and I'd like to see it again.*

Severus quitted the unspoken words with another nod and a sigh before he gestured them inside and explained. "Mr Malfoy here was of the opinion that I am wasting my time. I should replace the Muggle walls with magical stones."

"Instead of eating or of dressing? Mum has checked the prices...no way!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Alternatively, he proposed that I sell the place and buy myself a manor with two or three elves. Was it so?" Ginny had nothing but a snort for that.

They only had a lentil soup for lunch. While the men ravenously ate third helpings, she remarked, "I see the protection spells affect your hunger just like Charlie's and Dad's. They always return famished. When George helped Dad the first time, he wasn't half that exhausted, but they had to respell already after five days. Mum was furious." She swallowed once as she recalled why and since when Fred or George had to do it: Percy wasn't visiting them.

"Furious?" Draco wondered innocently.

The amount of ignorance infuriated the girl. "The spells are exhausting, and Dad had given all he had. There is a reason he does it on Sundays when he has time and he's relaxed. With the four floors of The Burrow, it takes tolls."

"Oh, four floors." Draco gave in. "The most negative point I see in this exercise is that we are relaxed and safe on Fridays, which leads us to the worst of all training sessions...second wand." Despite Ginny's confused look, he did not elaborate.

In the late afternoon, Draco and Severus made for the forest to train what they called chasing. As Ginny took in their Muggle jogging outfits, she could hardly suppress a grin. They had matching pants and jackets of a shiny glossing material, and Draco's trainers even sported two golden stars. Her former professor wore a suit with mainly grey and black, although he had not been able to get around some green insertions. His lean, muscular body showed much better in this sort of outfit, and she wondered idly what made him hide it behind layers and layers of stiff, formal Victorian clothes and billowing robes. His long, muscular legs showing, he really didn't impersonate a bat or the Head of Slytherin House.

She would be imprisoned alone in the house but was allowed to have her wand. "I'll do a bit more foolish wand-waving on the armchair, if you agree on that."

"Certainly, Miss Weasley." Snape reached out to fetch three tomes from the Potions shelf. "You might check these books and look for a potion to stabilise the spells. Otherwise, feel free to peruse this shelf as well, but *do not* touch any of the books over here." The books in the shelf he indicated rattled indignantly or sighed as if in disappointment. "The Restricted Section at Hogwarts exists and is restricted for a reason! The training material for Gringotts Curse-Breakers cannot compete with what these have in stock, and I prefer to find you with your heart on the left side and your head on your neck when we return. I trust you feel the same. Anything amiss and you get a Sleeping Draught plus a Full Body Bind next time!"

"I would not dare, Professor," Ginny provided with a smile. One of Bill's mock-treasure-chests had once chased her all around The Burrow, but she would not have assumed he remembered her panic. The experience was enough to imagine what the library of a Death Eater might have in store. Besides, there were more things to do than read.

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Trying to remember what Parvati had told her about the Indian kitchen, Ginny prepared an abundance of hot meat curry, lots of rice and fried vegetable. It maybe did not taste genuinely Indian, but it was just what men needed after the spell work on the house and their chase.

As soon as they returned, Ginny eagerly asked more about this chase game of theirs. It was Draco's task to chase his mentor and in full run transfigure objects to make him trip, force him to change path or simply hit him. Their teacher, on the other hand, had set himself the goal not only to avoid being injured or distracted, but also cast objects out of his way and regularly emit protection domes. Further, he was to keep them out of sight from Muggles, although in their newly acquired light jogging dress, they were usually greeted most friendly by Muggles who considered them fellow runners.

"What do they run for? Is there a war among Muggles as well?" Ginny wondered and took in Draco's explanation with irritation. "They run for fun or to keep themselves healthy? Weird!" The boy concurred.

"Over the weeks, our physical performance has profited at least as much from the chasing as our spell work," Severus commented. "The little wood appears smaller every day, and we already insert laps through the allotments."

Once again realising how little she knew about Muggle life, Ginny asked, "What is an allotment?"

"There is an area with small pieces of garden land. Muggle families can rent a patch, an allotment, to grow their own vegetable and fruit, should they wish to but don't have a garden behind their house." For a second, their teacher's eyes went distant as if the idea had called back a memory.

Ginny nodded. As he went to have a shower, she took up her book, but had switched to another one when he returned.

Over dinner, they discussed Mr Ollivander's remarks about siblings in relation with two wands. "It's a disaster," Draco started. "We cannot seem to get this right, although our ancestors must have been able to handle several wands rather naturally." The men did not manage even a handful of spells with the new wand before they felt the urge to run for their old wand again. "I have never been drowning, but the description fits to how I feel every time I dash to the other end of the room for my wand," Draco said. "However, what our problem has to do with siblings, as Mr Ollivander insisted, is clearly beyond me."

With concern, Severus observed his involuntary housemate's restless search for a distraction. She purposefully avoided any time for contemplation, fearing perhaps it would bring up thoughts related to the Dark Lord...be it the meeting the day before or the meeting following on Sunday. After a dinner with the maximum amount of useless chat he could possibly endure, however, Severus needed to discuss Wednesday's events with Draco. As she realised the men's intent, Ginny fell uneasy again and escaped into the bathroom. Sighing surreptitiously, Severus acknowledged her need to get some distance and, lacking an alternative, offered her to retreat into his bedroom. He provided her with the two promised ointments: one was to be massaged in against muscle aches and strained nerves or inner organs, and one would pacify her irritated skin. It should be applied in a thick layer and let dry. He had a Dreamless Sleep Potion at the ready as well.

Thankful for the offer, Ginny anyhow wondered how to occupy her mind. The last thing she wanted was having no external stimulation. As this household held nothing else, she shortly went to peruse the bookshelf. She haphazardly grabbed a Muggle book with a colourful cover and was about to take her leave when her professor stood next to her. "What is it you selected?"

She frowned as she saw two men's names on the book. Which would be the title, which the author? Suppressing a shrug, she simply showed him the cover page. Her professor considered her a long time. Ginny felt he saw exactly how little she knew about this book or Muggle literature in general. "Are you familiar with this book, Miss Weasley? Do you at least know the author?"

When she shrugged, he advised, "While normally I would say it is a good choice, I recommend dropping it for tonight." He snapped with his bare finger, and two books from the lowest shelf flew into his hand. "These books provide more distraction with less effort."

Not caring much, Ginny took them together with her Potions text, excused herself and closed the door.

Severus added a light voice-muffling spell on the door. She could hear their voices but would not be forced to understand the words. The result reminded her strongly of evenings in her early childhood, when she had sometimes lain awake in her chamber. The voices of her parents and eldest brothers had reached her via the staircase in a similarly comforting way.

Outside in the sitting room, Draco enquired as to what her first choice had been.

"In the first chapter a young, poor woman of unknown origin dies after giving birth to a boy. The boy ends up in an orphanage where he shows a surprising strength to survive."

Draco jerked his head in consternation. "Do the Muggles know that much?"

"No, the book is far older. Yet, it is a coincidence I could not recommend for her right now. I will not deny you the pleasure to read it...after we have finished here."

Ginny applied and massaged in the oily cream. With its help, her body was able to recuperate. Was the ointment denied and the torture repeated, the organs would start sending inexplicable signals to the brain. The victim would gradually be caught in his or her own wondrous world and hardly able to react reasonably on information from outside. With a shudder Ginny remembered Neville's parents.

It was with hesitation that she installed herself on the bed of Severus Snape. There was, however, no other place to do so, and she sat there a little stiffly first.

Unable to concentrate on her reading on temporary mood altering potions, a topic typical for the O.W.L.s, she took a look at one of the colourful Muggle books she had received: The Hill of the Red Fox, an adventure on the Scottish island of Skye. A children's book? Yes, well, her professor would have been a child, she supposed, although she was unable to picture him as one. She perused the first page that held scribbled comments that adults would not understand a boy's need to read. The discussion between mother and aunt of the hero were a bit heavy for Ginny's liking. She would gladly watch her mother quarrel... *no!*

Quickly she took up the second book. The dark-haired, thin man on the back cover looked serious and a little worn but not unkind. She read he had been sick ever since his childhood but had come up with this wonderful and thrilling book. On the front cover a boy hid behind a barrel that served rum to a set of rough seafarers. They were aboard a ship sailing to a Treasure Island if the title was an indication. Skipping many pages of introduction to the author, his other works, the book as seen by various critics and whatever else it was, she finally found herself in the Admiral Benbow Inn somewhere near Bristol, reading about a one-legged, seafaring man.

She was well into the second chapter when she rather suddenly felt her nerves and tensions relaxing. Her shoulders and knees relaxed as the ointment kicked in. The sensation let her calm down so much that she fell asleep, unaware of how she had assumed a lying position.

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The same day, the group led by McGonagall investigated the memory repeatedly. They felt uneasy that they hardened against the pain she had experienced, but even after the fourth time, they felt none the wiser. Ron ran his hand through his hair. "She tells a lot. But then again... I don't know. I cannot... Something does not feel right."

"Profound research and formulated so eloquently, Mr Weasley," Moody commented dryly while his magical eye swirled around to make sure that there wasn't anyone untoward listening.

Offended, Ron returned, "Can you put your finger on it then? *What* is it that is so weird with her story?" When he didn't get an answer, he leaned back and would have crossed his arms in satisfaction had it not been so grave a situation. Instead he covered his face with his flat hands, saying, "This is no good. We do not get anywhere, and she is out there with ..."

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On Friday morning, Harry, Ron and Hermione trained outdoors with the old Auror counselling and correcting them. It felt good to be more active after the paralyzing days following Ginny's capture. However, they were easily distracted and in miserable shape.

Harry decided to pass an opening between abandoned buildings alone, securing his back against Mad Eye's rattling Chain Spell. He was promptly hit by a Bludger from the left. "You are three; take advantage of that. Stay together, and agree how to cover all directions." They regrouped and repeated the drill, painfully noticing that the fourth member was missing.

Three hours later, when the first helping hands and curious eyes arrived, the trio trotted back into headquarters, thoroughly beaten and severely discouraged.

Remus went over to Moody, asking what was going on with them. "Un-concentrated is what they are," he snarled, "and easily distracted."

Remus argued that Harry's last nightmare would of course rattle them, but Moody could not concur. "Potter needs to train: constant vigilance, determination, skill. Since he is operating better in a group, I take the others along, but he is the key person. He must learn to focus and not to stray. Time works against us."

"I've been wondering the same when I observe Ginny Weasley in Harry's nightmare. Why on earth have they been spending their time on ancestry?"

Moody turned his normal eye on his face while the other swirled around. "Explain!"

As Remus elaborated his thoughts, both the old man's eyes stared at him. A few sentences into his talk, Remus was interrupted sharply. "Save it, Lupin. We must contact the headmistress."

The trio was having their subdued lunch in the large kitchen when Moody declared, "We need another meeting...Lupin and the core team. Potter, you ask Minerva, in case she has a visitor." They looked up in surprise, although Harry was glad that Remus would now be more involved.

Harry rushed to the hearth, knelt down and tossed a handful of Floo powder in. "Headmistress McGonagall's office!"

Soon he caught a glimpse of the empty office of the Headmistress. Many of Dumbledore's aged, huge quartos had been replaced with considerably smaller books with light covers. There were examples of beautifully transfigured objects on the shelf opposite the hearth in which Harry's head dwelled. The most striking difference to Dumbledore's times was, of course, that Fawkes was gone. His perch held now a peacefully self-transforming object that reminded Harry of several hard lessons in Transformation. It was right now a glass bowl, and he assumed a wonderful rose would be the next step. How he had sweated last year to achieve this particular step while Hermione had produced rose after rose with light snips of her wand and a satisfied expression on her face! He turned left to find an ordinary desk. Their former Head of House would certainly have had her own massive desk transported into her new office, but her private quarters had been close to her Gryffindors, that is high up in the tower that was no more. Her furniture had either been damaged or destroyed, Harry assumed.

A coat-hanger of sorts stood close to the exit, sporting Professor McGonagall's tartan shawl and a cloak with matching lining.

The door to her office opened, and she entered together with Rufus Scrimgeour. She immediately drew her wand at the sight of a face in her fireplace. "Mr Potter?"

Drat, the Minister. This must have been why Moody had not contacted her himself. Harry gathered his thoughts. The man was not to know details, and he was already gloating at McGonagall's jumpy reaction. "Good evening, Professor, Minister. Uh, I see you are busy. I'm sorry to disturb. Can I contact you later or maybe tomorrow?"

She looked at him intently, and he simply looked back. "I'm sure the Minister and I will have finished in an hour or so." Harry was relieved that she had understood the message. With a short, "I will contact you, Mr Potter," he was dismissed. He nodded and took a last look up. The object had passed through the stages required for N.E.W.T.s and was currently a match. Harry withdrew slowly to get a last glimpse of the now shiny steel pin.

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In the evening, Remus went over to his late friend's son. "Harry, do you have a moment?"

"Sure, what is it?" Remus' disturbed gaze took the boy by surprise. What had wound him up so? Was he to hear what had motivated Moody to take him into confidence?

"About family. I'm... *concerned* to learn that it still pains you so deeply not to know more about your father's family." His voice sounded more annoyed or even angry than concerned, though.

A little disappointed at the irrelevance of this topic, Harry replied, "Remus, no. What gave you the idea?"

"You four have spent a shocking lot of time checking family trees of all things. I failed to realise it before I saw the snippets of Ginny's report. Please, Harry, do not make it an obsession. They were good people, but searching through your family tree like that will not give you any satisfaction. Did not Dumbledore give you a rather concrete task?" He paused to verify that Harry understood, but the boy's jaw was clenched and his stare hard. Remus took a deep breath. "Look, Harry, when this is over, we can have a chat about your grandparents, search the archives for great achievements of their parents if you want. Right now we are at war. Concentrate on..."

"I'm not sure I'm following you, Remus," Harry interrupted him in a sharp tone, annoyed at being chastised for no reason.

"You're not any better or worse, even if the Weasleys can trace their family back and you can not."

"What? I never thought you'd accuse them of such a thing," Harry said, "and I see no reason for this discussion." He stomped off towards his room, frustrated and angry.

Remus sighed. He should have listened to Mad Eye and left the topic for the next day.

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Ginny woke up with a start in the middle of the night. She was in her makeshift-bed. Her dreams had let her watch once again how the Ministry clerk had been interrogated and tormented mercilessly. Revisiting the scene had been just as bad as the first time. She was trembling all over.

Her legs and arms felt very strange. They were covered with a thick, but somewhat elastic, film...the skin ointment. She was sure she had never applied it, though. The jar with the remaining ointment was placed next to her bed, as was the Dreamless Sleep Potion. Grateful, she applied the ointment on her more private body parts and gulped the potion.

She snuggled back under her cover and was just thinking how nice the men had been, helping her without waking her, when the potion kicked in.

The sun shone into the room when she opened her eyes the next time. It was Friday already and, judging from the sun, about time to get up and shower off the strangely viscose layer of ointment. At least physically she felt very much regenerated.

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For her own safety, the men didn't allow Ginny access to the lab. It would only harm her to know too much. Maybe it would even require Obliviating her. She picked up her book from the evening before and was soon drawn into the story in very much the same way she remembered from her early childhood.

For lunch, Severus appeared with a flat basin full of the derivative of Lockhart's KeepColour Potion Ginny had found the day before. Until evening she had not only steeped the new sofa cover and the cleaned curtains in the basin and washed the liquid over the armchair sporting the new pattern as well, but she had also finished a chapter in her Potions texts for additional reading for O.W.L.s. Best of all: she had not had time to worry. She was very satisfied with herself.

Meanwhile, the men had once again resumed the dreaded training with their second wands...to no avail, Ginny noticed with a frown. She had herself snatched a wand of some of her brother's more times than she could remember.

Over dinner Ginny asked for the explanation Ollivander had given them. Remembering details of their approach and their struggles, it made sense to her. "Can we try once again? I have an idea."

In a mood of graciousness, Draco agreed to follow her instructions. He was to keep his primary wand in the wand pocket of his robe. "Do a simple hover spell with the new wand." It worked satisfactorily.

"Now take the main wand and do something of sixth year or what you've recently learned." Of course that went fine.

"Okay, wand two again, Transfigure this match into a needle. Ah, well, we've seen better needles, try again, Draco ... good! Now do something else, something simple, from first year. Now switch back to your old wand for a sixth-year charm."

Soon, Ginny instructed both men to try first- and second-year spells with their second wands, but never more than three in a row and never depositing the first wand some place off as they had tried before. "The first wand must not get jealous. It isn't jealous if it senses that the second wand is used for simple spells only and that you go for the old wand when you're at your limits." After several fallbacks and corrections, they got the hang of it.

"How did you know that?"

"Treat them like siblings, Ollivander had said. I was thinking how Mum and Dad handled us at home. For example, for going to bed: Dad read a story to Percy and the twins while Mum spent much more time with Ron and me; she undressed us, helped in the bathroom and finally sang for us. Uh, well, she tried. Later, when Percy could read, Ron sometimes was with the story, if it was a simple one. He was also supposed to put on his pyjamas by himself...although I learned that the same year. If the twins wanted a gruesome story, Ron got his own one or a song together with me. I still loved the singing when Ron expected demanding stories that I didn't understand or like. After we younger ones were tucked in, they still checked on Percy, Charlie and Bill. You see, they cared for each of us in the way we needed it and felt comfortable. Bill certainly wasn't jealous of a song!"

Draco shook his head. "Our wands must feel comfortable, Severus!"

"Yes," Ginny insisted. "You see, the older wand does not mind sharing as long as it isn't abandoned or mocked. I assume you can proceed to third and fourth year soon. But don't train these with your first wand, it would feel miffed."

"Ginny, stop lecturing on the emotional life of my wand, please," Draco drawled.

She chose to ignore his remark, warmed by his using her first name. "Once you master all spells with both wands, they care more for equal shares. Like older kids do. I mean, I want some time with my mother and father, but I can accept that the others want their shares, too. I believe they now consider me an equal...or they bloody well better had. My guess is as time goes on, you can also leave one wand at home for a day without insulting it." She had talked rapidly and finished the last part in even more of a hurry, to not be overcome by the longing for her family. Now that she was finished, it hit her hard, and both men felt uncomfortable and insecure about how to treat her.

Before retiring, they made a plan how to train the next day. "A pity really that we need not invite Ollivander again!" Draco said.

Severus agreed. "I will order him here for tomorrow's dinner in any case to show him our success."

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Saturday morning, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Alastor Moody and Remus Lupin met Professor McGonagall in her office. Moody wanted Remus to tell them how he had perceived the scenes about ancestry.

More carefully this time, Remus related how surprised he was at Harry's obsession with his family. "You have checked the Potters and the Lundells, your grandmother's family. Ginny seems very comfortable with her own family, proud even. She almost pities you, although I never have had the impression that the Weasleys...or the Prewetts...have stressed the point of pure-blood lines."

"She messed up my investigation on the Crockford family into a silly excursion to ancestry!" Hermione huffed, more than a little upset. "She got it all wrong. This was not at all what we were doing."

Ron nodded, looking concerned. His sister was stuck in company of Snape. Was it a wonder she was confused? It was a relief she wasn't more disturbed than that.

Remus looked from one to the other. "What were you looking for then? You checked the Malfoys, which is to be expected, close friend that he is," Remus remarked with a sneer and continued about his observations and conclusions. "Since you have once been fooled by a Crouch, I understand why you checked on them. They are a well-known, old pure-blood family. That was maybe where you came across the Crockfords. You met her as one of the first witches when you entered the wizard world, didn't you? Probably that is why you remembered her name. Then you checked a bit on your Head of House and on the Dumbledores. All quite understandable, but..." He hesitated, unsure how to say what needed to be said without offending the boy. He settled on, "Harry, this is not at all related to this war."

"Not related? We were *explicitly* looking for the Crockfords," Ron interjected. "They are more important for us than any of the others are. Hermione researched them through generations." He went over to lay an arm over the girl's shoulder. "She's done highly important research for this war. Don't you understand this?"

"No."

Harry considered once again that he wished they would tell Remus all about the Horcruxes. This misunderstanding was leading them nowhere.

Remus continued thoughtfully. "It's convenient though. From the information Voldemort has now, he would not guess you were looking for the Crockfords in particular. He considers it a childish pastime. I'm sorry, Hermione, if it doesn't give you justice, but I for one do not want *him* to admire your wits!"

"Exactly," growled Moody.

In the silence following this statement, Remus quietly added, "I'm sorry, Harry, for accusing you of wasting time." He waited for the boy to acknowledge him, and after some deliberation, Harry nodded. They could need another thinker, and though he loathed admitting it, sometimes he could need a shoulder.

"Harry, could I ask you a personal question?" McGonagall asked tentatively.

Surprised, Harry looked at her. She wasn't one to interfere in such matters as long as they were kept personal. "Yes, of course, Pro... Headmistress."

"What was your... personal relation to Ginny Weasley when she was captured?"

"Uh, well. ... Oh, but, Professor, you are right!" he exclaimed. "We had... agreed to terminate any... uh, romance. But Voldemort is made to believe I'm totally smitten by her. Which, err, was true at some point," he admitted, chagrined.

"How could she have misunderstood all of that? She isn't daft," Ron commented.

"And she wasn't. Not in this case," Harry interjected. "You see, actually Ginny... she, uh," he continued softly, "she ended it. I was overprotective, she said, and she would not need yet another brother. She initiated the break-up, not me. She would not misunderstand *that* now, would she?" he asked into the room.

"No, but..."

"This is the proof," Moody snarled. "She purposefully misled Voldemort."

"Oh, but how would she do that?" Hermione noted dismissively. "The art of Occlumency is highly advanced magic that requires systematic training over..." Ron kicked her lightly to stop the recitation.

Moody outdid himself with a little speech when he reminded them, "Miss Weasley has a remarkable mental awareness. She can pry into other minds, and she can protect her own from being stolen. Her Occlumency skills are amazingly strong for someone her age. I wished all Aurors... She must have Occluded or removed memories so that she could satisfy Voldemort's curiosity without harming the work of the Order."

They cross-checked it all once again. What did Remus understand of their activities? Not much. The criteria why and how they were looking for objects was totally lost on him. To Harry's relief, he was now fully introduced into the concept of Voldemort's Horcruxes. He quickly noticed that they had far more knowledge about them than Ginny had revealed to Voldemort. "How is this possible? Did he not get through her mind?"

"Impossible," Hermione chimed in, but was once again interrupted by the Auror.

"He might not have tried with all force, which means she did not raise his suspicion. She was undoubtedly hiding key information from him and revealed trivialities. She even twisted facts beyond recognition. I'm more than impressed."

Hermione bit her lower lips in thought. She had not imagined it possible that the cheery girl that preferred a broomstick to a good book any time would excel in such a skill.

"She did prepare herself for her O.W.L.s, Hermione," Harry reminded her. "Exams she never had the chance to take," he added.

Still puzzled by the notion that her younger friend would have such control over her mind, Hermione distributed six sheets of parchment and took a quill. She drew a middle line top-down. The left column got the title '*She tells*', the right one '*We know*'. She looked up to find everybody just watching her. "Go ahead. Do the same!"

Once again they went through the memory, each of them filling the left column. Then all but Remus filled their right column. On Hermione's order, they circulated the parchments anti-clockwise, and each went through their neighbour's observations.

Gradually, the parchments filled, but after three steps, none of them had anything more to add.

"Could she have managed that all by herself?" McGonagall wondered. True Gryffindor that she was, the whole idea of Legilimency was appalling to her. Even if Albus had pointed out the use of this art, she could not but consider it grey and tinted...Slytherin, in one word. Like Moody. Had it not been for Harry, she would never have agreed to his training them all.

"It is not possible. She must have had a guide and a counterpart," Moody said. His natural eye considered Hermione as he continued, "Muggle boxers would say *sparring partner* and a tough one at that."

"Yeah, well, we know a tough trainer of Occlumency," Harry provided, adding, "a true master of bullying and manipulating. I should have insisted she stay at headquarters." Before admonishing words of Hermione or the Headmistress could reach him, he was out of her office. Ginny in the hands of Snape...it was the worst he could imagine...topped with the fact that they had no idea where he might keep her and that they would have no chance to get her out. Harry knew full well that they had promised each other not to take hazardous rescue actions, but it could not ease his pain.

Frustrated, Hermione murmured, "Not only a brother, but a second mother." She addressed them all, saying, "Ginny was in Professor Snape's custody. He must have helped her. She is back with him now. We... uh, I guess we should be glad for that," she ended hesitantly.

"I'm supposed to be glad that my sister is stuck with Snape!?" With this, the next young man stomped off. Remus followed, hoping to catch up with Harry.

Professor McGonagall regarded her top student. "Albus has insisted we trust Severus Snape. I do not know what to think now."

"Try to think like a Slytherin, Headmistress," Moody growled, bowed and left.

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For three more days, they perused the memory, the adults never neglecting the clearing work at Hogwarts. They couldn't agree on a conclusion. They looked for tiny indicators where the gathering had been, and they tried to identify the people present. They wondered about Snape and what role Draco Malfoy took, but neither of them could be seen in detail. Worst of all, they found no indicator whatsoever where to search for Ginny.

McGonagall knew roughly about Snape's childhood, and she even located Slughorn to ask for his possible whereabouts. Wherever it was he lived, the place was removed from all filings, and most likely it was unplotable, too. The peaceful years he had spent as a Hogwarts teacher, he had hardly left the castle over night. For the few occasions someone remembered, he had either attended seminars, or they hadn't known where he had been.

The Order would continue observing the same places and people they already checked. They had no better idea. Molly had, of course, noticed Ginny's blue skirt, but no one could place it. Hermione and Harry declared the new t-shirt could easily be a standard model from a cheap Muggle chain. "It could have been bought anywhere, really."

The Aurors in the Order, Hermione, Harry, and even all Weasleys had to agree that, frustrating and cruel as it was, Ginny had to be... left, dropped. Abandoned and forsaken.

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Now, here's a little check on you: Do you know the book Severus withholds from Ginny?

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My warmest thanks go to the team of betas that has been supporting me greatly, Pennfana, Sirsevchick, Lumière and Soul Bound. Over all four chapters they've spent hours in making the sentences flow and keeping the characters in line. They improved the language to sound genuine English, and finally they added or moved my commas in place.

What is still sounding odd is all my own doing.

Facing Destiny

Chapter 5 of 35

After Ginny has served the Death Eaters a second time, the Dark Lord sets her two options how to end her life. Draco risks his own life as he contacts their master and suggests a third option.

Facing Destiny

Severus and Draco trained Ginny in very much the same way they had for the meeting on Wednesday. They could not do more for her. Preoccupied with concern for her, Severus had only a minimum of a nod left for Draco, even if the boy was doing much better at Occlumency today than ever before.

Sunday afternoon, the three Apparated again to wherever the Dark Mark would send them. They arrived at a house of light build. *The summer residence of a Death Eater*, thought Ginny. As she had expected, she saw only silvery schemes of the faces present.

Again Severus and Draco looked around to take in as many details as possible.

Severus went around once and realised that he was able to read all name tags. For Draco many of them would appear empty. Members of the Inner Circle were present as well as a selected group of others. The people were placed similarly to where they had been Wednesday, although several members of the Inner Circle were missing. Maybe he would learn of their whereabouts today.

The house had only one floor. Elves using the servants' entry Apparated and Disapparated repeatedly, bringing food, which indicated that the kitchens were elsewhere. This was not a good sign. Severus had never bothered if elves had the capacity for Side-Along-Apparition, but today he dearly hoped they had not. He did not like the idea of letting Miss Weasley out of sight; he did not like it at all. "If you are sent away, try to give me a sign."

The Dark Lord appeared with a flash of light. Everybody rushed to his or her place and bowed deeply towards the place of honour. With an elegant flourish, he permitted them to sit down.

"Severus, my loyal follower."

Smoothly, Severus greeted his former master. "My Lord, I'm glad to see you well."

"Quite well, indeed. I dare say the same of you, too."

"I have no reason to feel otherwise, my Lord." *Liar*, he chastised himself, *and it isn't kissing the hem of his robe alone that makes you feel nauseous.*

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Ginny was the only captive waiting in the room next door. She would serve the party first with the aid of two elves to get started, then alone. While everyone had to have his or her wishes fulfilled, she was supposed to attend them in the hierarchical order indicated by their physical distance to the Dark Lord.

The high-pitched voice penetrated the wall easily as he said, "My faithful servants, take your seats." Scrapping of heavy chairs on the stone floor erupted and then ebbed. The doors opened.

The assembled Death Eaters were not a patient lot. As last time, Ginny had trouble coping with the speed of the small enslaved creatures. She rushed around as quickly as possible, avoiding gazes and ignoring remarks. Since the room was circular, her initial strategy failed, and she rapidly decided on re-Occluding her mind at each bouquet of

flowers and most certainly when entering it.

When the elves had Disappeared, Ginny had to continue her task alone: serving sixty people, Occluding her mind, answering in friendly ways, running to the next thirsty guest, removing plates, bringing fresh ones and replacing knives that had been dropped possibly on purpose. Soon her temples and neck itched from hair that clung to her sweat.

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Severus observed his young charge as much as he dared. She was working harder this time and had not a second of rest. *Did she drink enough to get her through the meal? What are her prospects after tonight?* He found he had after all not prepared her well enough, not for this day and certainly not for whatever was to come.

"You have been lucky to catch this charming girl, Severus." The Dark Lord interrupted his musing in a tone of amiable conversation.

"Yes, my Lord," he replied automatically before he considered the words.

"You do find her charming, then?" The Dark Lord's tone was probing.

Severus stiffened for a moment. Where would this discussion lead to? He regrouped and forced himself to consider her appearance from any bystander's view.

"Charming? My Lord," he sneered, "I have little experience in this field, but I believe that among the girls back at school, probably few would consider her *charming*."

"Ah, but she isn't a wallflower, either."

"Indeed not. This shade of red does not exactly go unnoticed." Severus snorted.

His master was not finished yet, a fact that drew attention from their left and right side. "How does life with a servant appeal to you then?"

Swiftly Severus took up the present tense. "She frees us from most of our daily duties in the house, my Lord. I dare say she serves us well."

"Hey, Severus," a rather provocative voice asked from the other side of the Dark Lord, "what about the night time service?"

All along the high half of the table, people awaited his answer in utter silence. Far too many stared at Severus directly. Those who had endured him as their teacher and Head of House would never have dared to do so if they were able to see through the concealment spell on the majority of the faces as easily as he did. Its asymmetry was so easy to forget. While they couldn't see his glare, their expectant or provocative sneers were plainly visible for Severus himself. He swallowed down his disgust. "Her performance is satisfying, thank you." Severus placed the hint of a smile on his masked face. Let them think what they pleased.

And so they did. "Have you heard that, guys? Severus gave her an appraisal." "A Gryffindor works to his satisfaction!" "Amazing." "Never happened in his classes, I heard." By now, all other discussion had ceased. Severus felt the eyes of everybody upon him, which he could shake off, and on the girl, which he could not bear. Not for the first time, Severus was disgusted at the level small talk in a male-dominated group could get. Some of them were married, and their wives were even present. Would the women talk similarly among themselves?

The taunting continued. "She must be really good, Severus; will we get a go on her later?"

"I doubt it," he opined in firm voice, trying to terminate the discussion. While his appearance gave nothing away, he fumed inside. Every female captive was reduced to fair game, and some didn't stop even at their fellow Death Eaters' spouses.

The next question came from the other side. "Do you share her with Draco, or do you keep her for yourself?"

Severus tried to ignore the question, but it came up again, and also his master seemed to wait for a reply. "Mr Malfoy has a full training plan for the days, and he is still growing. I pay attention that he eats well during the day and gets to rest at night." Severus got more annoyed with each question but could not have them win any ground. He saw Draco reach down to retrieve whatever it was he had dropped, his face beet-red. The boy took his time before he resurfaced.

Ginny did not have the time to focus on all the questions, but could not miss the general topic. She had hardly looked at the honour places. The Dark Lord's high-pitched voice had penetrated her ear several times, but she was simply too concentrated on not slipping to pay any attention to that.

Draco was amazed at Severus' smooth answers. He could learn a lot more from his mentor than how to block spells. He quickly pulled his head between his shoulders and went back to his cake, Occluding his mind again. Hopefully nobody had stolen into his mind and seen what else it was he had learned. He continued keeping an eye on everyone without offering his eyes to them. It was mainly the group of middle-aged men who contributed to the current conversation. They had already exchanged the coffee for other drinks, wine for some, but whisky and brandy was common, too.

The first young couples, like the Flints, excused themselves. The Dark Lord was generous with expecting wives and, in this case, also with their husbands. Draco noticed that these women were appalled at the discussion and obviously didn't want their husbands to engage in it. Wasn't it even so that many women found themselves utterly unattractive in the second half of pregnancy?

His view went over to his old school acquaintances, Crabbe and Goyle. They were as greedy as ever, although they went for salad and sandwiches these days rather than for cake. Still, a sleeping draught in food would trap them as easily now as it had in second year. How their Head of House had berated them! Not for the first time, though, Draco found that they displayed more body control, did not move as ungracefully and appeared more athletic than a year ago. Goyle eyed some of the girls, although Draco got the impression he wasn't fixed on any of them. Once he was, he'd better stop laughing too loud at discussions like the current one.

When everybody...save Crabbe...had finished their food, they were ordered to stand, and a wave of the Dark Lord's wand replaced the longish table with a set of smaller ones. The assembly was now divided into groups. Draco found himself in the lowest ranks...amongst the young, unmarried and not too well respected.

The older men on the other side of the room frequented the toilets in shorter intervals. Their cheeks and noses were reddish, their eyes dilated. "Hey, you, we are going to run out of wine over here!"

Ginny rushed along with a carafe of red wine when a hand shot up to stop her. "Don't ignore me here, pretty girl." The hand moved up and down her thigh, shifting to the inner side of it. "We should get along very well together ... ouch!" A sharp red flash had hit the man, who dropped his hand immediately and turned around.

"Do not touch her, Avery," came the sharp voice of Severus Snape. Most of the assembled looked over to him in astonishment and appraisal.

The Dark Lord regarded him apprehensively. "Protective, Severus?" He did not need to speak the word: Severus felt his presence in his mind all the same. "Attached, maybe?"

Damn, this should not have happened, Severus berated himself. "My Lord, she is to serve us." He conjured an innocent picture of the girl cleaning the floor. "I'm not known to run after children," he snarled.

The Dark Lord chuckled. "Indeed, this would be a new development for you."

The party continued, and thankfully the topic of Miss Weasley was dropped once again. Severus did not hear what the missing Death Eaters were doing. The Dark Lord had only answered that they were 'on duty' in a tone that did not encourage further questions.

Eventually he stood to face them all. All groups hastily finished their conversation and paid him their attention. "There is a full moon in exactly two weeks. Fenrir has

informed me he could use a strong woman for... ah... his men before their Transformation. If Miss Weasley is still with us in a week...that is, if Mr Potter fails to retrieve his love..." he clarified, "Fenrir may have her." A murmur went through the room. With disgust, Draco noticed the disappointment in Gregory Goyle's face.

Addressing Ginny, his voice taking a velvety, coaxing tone, their master continued, "What do you think, Miss Weasley? Does a life in the forest...with plenty of fresh air...appeal to you? No? Don't worry. It would not be for long, but I certainly want to give you the opportunity for an adventure." His voice was so soft in its mock sympathy that it caused a shiver down Draco's spine.

Ginny's eyes had gone wide, and she was pressing her back to the wall, hands shaking. Draco saw how Severus tried to look into her eyes, if only she would turn to him. Thankfully, her sudden lack of control was gone quickly. She concentrated on a point on the floor and knew better than to answer.

"Or maybe not," the Dark Lord continued. "In this case, we have another option for you. Our Muggle rabble-rousers are planning a major activity around the same time. They are always very agitated afterwards and eager to carouse. I'm sure they will have a use for you. Think about it, Miss Weasley. We'll meet you on Friday morning to hear your decision and give you our best wishes for the future." With these words, she was dismissed, and many resumed their discussions around the table.

Draco's brain was racing, and he nearly snapped at his neighbour. He recollected the whole evening, scanned through the discussion again *There must be a way...* he thought desperately.

The room emptied slowly. Severus came over. "We should go." With gritted teeth, he continued, "She is permitted to leave with us, and she is more than ready to do so." He jerked his head to where Ginny leaned into a corner, not daring to look anywhere. She had almost been fainting at these prospects.

"You go then. I wanted to talk to," he paused, "Goyle and Parkinson still. I won't be long. She is better off with only one of us, anyhow." Severus silently agreed and prepared for their departure.

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They sat in the little house and did not know what to talk about.

Ginny had not eaten since lunch, but she could not touch any food now either. Not even tea made it down her throat. She alternately paced the room in agitation and sat down in despair.

Severus had no idea how to help her. So far they had always had the hope a mystical path would open up before them. Time was running short, and there wasn't anything they could do. The secret door had not opened.

A distraction? It had worked right after she had been captured, but now? "Would you want to talk?"

"I don't know."

This is not a no, he thought. "What was hardest for you to tolerate today?"

She took her time and said, "His speech today was worse than the torture last time."

"How so?"

"It was his voice...when he mocked me. *Adventure!* He suddenly reminded me of Tom Riddle. I did not get that impression on Wednesday."

"Was this why you nearly lost control?" She nodded, close to tears, and Severus felt obliged to add, "I see. I had not realised it until now. I'm glad the Dark Lord did not notice it either."

"A close shave, then."

"Yes. He might have used Legilimency on you if he had. I tried to catch your eyes to signal you." Severus stopped talking, although he would have liked to point out a few more things. She was in no state to accept them, and he knew that she should do the talking, not him.

"I was paralysed, I guess," Ginny said. She sat down and unconsciously worked her tired feet.

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Draco crossed over to Pansy Parkinson and Ariana Atcluft, a seventh-year Slytherin...or rather one who should have passed her N.E.W.T.s eight months ago. Both young women were dressed in very female, revealing, if not provocative, attire. They were looking over to the bachelors in their early twenties, but to their dismay, Crabbe and Goyle were about to join them as well as Malfoy.

Draco was painfully reminded that he had lost his status as a prime person to know. His position in Slytherin House had been ensured by his family's clever manoeuvres between the Dark Lord and the Ministry. When his father had showed his choices openly in the Department of Mysteries and had landed himself in Azkaban, he had completely destroyed the latter. Yet, Parkinson had worshipped him even then.

His own failure during the last school year...maybe his last ever year at a school...had completely alienated him with his peers. Today, Draco Malfoy was more or less *persona non grata*, not someone whose friendship they sought. He wasn't wedding material, which was what these girls were after. As expected, his welcome was frosty, very frosty indeed. "Malfoy, eaten well today? Better get back to your babysitter and get a full night's rest," Pansy said before she turned away. Ariana had not even spared a glance at him.

At some point in the last months, he had wondered that maybe he should not have been that arrogant towards Pansy. Had she ever seen *him* or only his money and position? As it was, he would never know.

Should he not have treated Crabbe and Goyle just as badly as he had? He was not expected to seek a relationship of equals with them. Their families ranked low among the Death Eaters, and they would never make it to the strategic positions close to or inside the Inner Circle. Instead, the two were now under a tough regime, including much physical training, which was even conducted by Muggles. However, Draco had to admit that he had relished the power he had exercised over them. He had purposefully copied his father.

Tonight, Draco was not seeking recognition. All he wanted was to position himself so that he could observe the Dark Lord out of the corner of his eye. He needed time to think and preferred not being talked to. The two girls were likely to fulfil his wish.

Their master finished a talk with the host of the day. He made to leave, didn't he? No, luckily someone had an issue to discuss with him, Draco noticed with relief. As he was getting distracted by the discussions with the other four youths around him ("Poor Belinda, she was so happy." ... "Party at Flint's, are you going?" ... "...rough training with Macnair last night..." ... "...gorgeous wedding dress..."), he slowly proceeded towards the exit of the room, rehearsing his speech.

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Severus' brains did not provide him with anything adequate to say. Even the trick of imagining Albus Dumbledore's words did not help tonight. He decided to consider her physical needs. The acid smell of her cold sweat stung in his nose. While at times he was disgusted by his own body juices, he could not bring himself to send her to the bathroom or cast a cleansing spell, as he always did on himself as soon as the house was safe. She was a nervous wreck. Valerian tincture? No! She had also been

running for hours; therefore her feet must be hurting, and she would be parched. Water? Orange juice? Better, but not good enough. Something warm that would address her nerves as well! "Would you care for a cup of tea now?"

"I don't know, maybe. Thank you though." She moved uneasily on the sofa and continued talking. "His voice was such a shock the moment I heard it. I'm over that now. I am not over his words, my prospects." With that she stood and paced the room again.

Severus made tea and brought it over to the small table. Remembering that she had not eaten, he provided milk, honey, sugar and lemon snitches. A nourishing draught would be in order, but she might recognise that too easily.

To occupy himself, he Transfigured the sofa into the bed. The spell was rote now. *Four more times*. He felt dizzy. The sofa would never look the same anymore. Not with the new design, but not with the old throw either. He clenched his eyes closed, but pictures of the young girl were haunting him: Ginevra Weasley's body dishonoured, mutilated and forgotten, either deep inside a forest or somewhere on Muggle asphalt. He had to rush to the bathroom to empty his stomach.

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The last group of members of the Inner Circle made their goodbyes to the host and the Dark Lord. Draco inched closer to their master when these were out of earshot. With his best boy voice, he approached him and bowed. "My Lord?"

The surprise on the Dark Lord's face softened his reptilian features for a short moment, before his face turned as ice-cold as ever. "Malfoy? What would be your request?" his voice prompted, and he mock-bowed.

Cold sweat ran over Draco's back. This did not bode well. "My Lord, I'm in no position to request or even ask for a favour for myself."

"Indeed, you are far from that. Yet, you are accosting me," the Dark Lord stated. He gestured to the antechamber where the food had been prepared. They entered the room that now lay abandoned. The tall man pointed his wand over Draco's head and, with two flicks of his wand, sealed the door silently and cast a Privacy Spell. Nobody could enter; nobody could hear them. Draco swallowed hard.

"*Crucio!*"

The pain was bearable compared to Draco's earlier experiences with this curse. He kept his composure, didn't waver, set up a devoted look. The pain stopped eventually. "What was this for, Malfoy?"

"I deserved it for speaking out of turn, my Lord."

"You did."

"Thank you, my Lord." He bowed deep. It was expected to be grateful for whatever the Dark Lord gave a person.

"Now let me hear why you felt this need to violate protocol."

"My Lord, I believe I might have an answer to one of your questions."

"I do not recall asking you anything, Malfoy! *Crucio!*" This time, Draco had more difficulties standing still. His arms were shaking, and his knees almost gave way, but that would not do. He had to stand through it. When the pain ceased, he was confronted with the same question again. "What was it for this time, Malfoy?"

"My audacity to believe I would have an answer, my Lord?"

"Something like that, yes. Do you still believe you have higher wisdoms you need to share?"

Draco needed to make his point clear, at least indicate the direction, give a key word, before his nerves and the curses failed his voice and concentration. "My Lord, while I don't deserve it, I *am* closer to Severus Snape than anyone else. Thus..."

Their master looked up sharply. "Severus? This could prove interesting. I'll give you..." he conjured an hourglass "...three minutes. Begin!"

Draco bowed in a gesture of thanks. Averting his eyes, speaking to a point on the Dark Lord's chest, he started. "My Lord, when Severus Snape and I returned to you after... after I failed with my mission, you wanted to reward him, but he could not name a favour he would ask you for. You wanted us all to think about it. I believe I have found a reward that would indeed please him while it does not thwart any of your plans. Actually, it could promote your long-term plans in... interesting ways." He looked up.

His little speech caught the Dark Lord's attention. "Go ahead."

"My Lord, Severus Snape is a lonely man. In the years he has maintained his position as a spy under Dumbledore, he has sacrificed his life for the cause. He could not make full use of his remarkable magical talents, neither pursue a career as a Potions master nor develop his skills in the Dark Arts. In his little private time, he could not possibly have approached a woman of his liking while pretending to worship the... late Headmaster."

The Dark Lord showed no reaction.

"Apart from this, his birth limits his options below what he deserves." They both knew that most pure-blood families in the Inner Circle had vows against what they consider staining their blood with a half-blood. Draco, too, had that restriction upon himself. Only the oldest male Malfoy alive would be able to moderate it. "He might have accepted his predicaments, but over the years, they have made him bitter."

Draco took a deep breath. With the next sentence, he would either sentence himself to death or... The Dark Lord's expression moved from mildly interested to neutral. Of course, he had not heard anything new so far, but the hourglass lay forgotten, which was a positive sign. "Now, I believe Severus is a little... impressed by Ginevra Weasley, a pure-blood who is not in the position to refuse whatever you assign to her. I would not say attracted to her, but he is certainly not indifferent."

The Dark Lord's face still revealed nothing, but his voice had an unmistakable edge when he asked, "Do you propose, Mr Malfoy, that I should pair off Severus Snape and this Weasley girl? Leave her alive?"

"Alive, yes, but out of her family's reach. She would be forced into matrimony with a man whom they've been considering a mean, heartless bat of the dungeons. Now he is also a traitor and a murderer. The thought would leave her family and Potter devastated. Such proceedings would cause as much uproar in the Order as her immediate death."

His master scratched his chin as he considered this. "Possibly more, considering her continuous suffering. If I submit them to the same rules as the others, she could never flee and return to them." He had lifted his head and gazed unseeingly out of the window. Turning swiftly to Draco, he asked, "What of these long-term advantages?"

"Children, my Lord. The hereditary factors of Severus Snape should not be lost. Poor as her family is, she's a pure-blood. She can ennoble whatever his genetic make-up is supposed to lack from the pure-blood point of view." Considering his master's own status, Draco carefully crafted his words to hint that he did not fully approve of such an attitude. He was nevertheless bound to heed the traditions, as his master knew well.

"Me, for one, I would allow their common children marry into the Malfoy family. Being three-quarters wizard and showing no Mudblood travesty in their line, they stand

chances to wed noble Slytherin offspring, even where Severus Snape does not." Draco paused for effect. "And, of course, those who might end up in Gryffindor house can be your first foot into this domain."

A "Hmm" accompanied a short deliberation before the cold reptilian man asked, "What makes you believe that she could indeed be an adequate wife for him, be ready to mother his children?"

"Several aspects, my Lord. Firstly, she stays alive. She might worship him already for that." Draco smirked. "For as long as she is needed." He felt colour rise up his neck at the betrayal and fidgeted. He swallowed hard.

"Secondly," he rushed on, stilling his hands in an innocent move, "she is from a simple family. She did not shrink back from the looks of his house as most of us would... did. Yes, myself included. She does not recoil from the hard work of a big, elf-less household since it is all she knows. Thirdly, she has the genes and the attitude to multiply. Six brothers, my Lord. Her mother, a Prewett, had two brothers...only two because their mother was killed young. Pregnant with her fourth child, I might add. Similarly on the Weasley side."

"This covers the mother and housewife aspects. What about the... wife?"

"You've seen Severus today, my Lord."

"It was true then?" This time the doubt was on their master's face as well as in his voice.

Draco's expression hardened. "Severus Snape..." Draco plunged in to get this over with. "It possibly can become true." When their master demanded proof, Draco had to be careful. Slytherin or not, he was not to peep or sneak on his mentor, and he said as much. "Severus would never reveal anything. I could give you two pictures though. If you would..." He Occluded his mind with all force he could muster. When he felt the familiar sensation of Legilimency, he presented the scenes he had selected.

First he showed his master the crammed potions lab at Spinner's End.

Severus, his brows wrinkled, grinding two beaks of a marsh harrier. Somewhere a door creaks open and Ginny's voice announces, "Dinner is ready in ten minutes or whenever it suits you." Severus' grim expression lightens up, the furrows in his face smoothen and his eyes show a tiny sparkle. He exhales deeply, his shoulders relax.

For the next scene Draco said, "The following happened when we returned from the training."

Wiping sweat out of their faces, Draco and Severus enter the house. Ginny approaches and places a rug on the floor, directing them to deposit their murky trainers there...not anywhere else. Severus hesitates just a moment, his anger rising, before he swallows, arches his eyebrow and complies.

Her voice follows him on his way to the bathroom. "There is a basket for your clothes in the corner." He turns as she is wrinkling her nose just a bit, and he regards her a long time, not showing any reaction. "I moved the towels to the left, so you can reach them from within the bath before you drip water on the floor." Severus murmurs something incomprehensible as he closes the bathroom door.

Draco looked at his master again, pretending he did not notice the tiny itch in his eyes, the sign that their connection still existed.

"Most interesting, Malfoy," the Dark Lord confirmed, "She is not... revolted by him, then?"

"I haven't seen signs of it, no. My guess is a schoolgirl crush. Or maybe it's only the sheer relief she ended up with someone she believes she knows. Naturally she asked us for advice for last Wednesday, and she took every bit in from him eagerly. While Severus' search through her mind wasn't anything enjoyable for either side, he showed an unexpected tolerance. He might have worked himself into her good books."

Draco and the Dark Lord agreed that there was no reason for Severus to have administered a mind altering spell or to have drugged or charmed her to his favours. Severus was not the type to force himself on a woman. Also in the future, he would be appalled at something as primitive as a love potion to bind her to him. "I dare say it would not satisfy him," Draco added with a feeling that for once was genuine.

The Dark Lord started pacing the little room. After two rounds, he could not restrict his long strides to the confining place any more. He dropped the wards, and they both returned to the main room that lay now deserted. Draco released a breath he had not noticed he was holding.

After pacing three times across the large room, his master addressed Draco again. His eyes cold as ever, he had a most calculating expression in his face. "Up to now I can see how Severus, myself and the Weasley girl could profit from your proposal. Tell me, Malfoy, why would *you* go out of your way and suggest this? What is *your* personal interest in the matter?"

Slytherins that they were, purely altruistic motivations wouldn't count. Everyone always pursued his own interest. Draco forced himself into a smile while his brains were working on full power. He would have to present something convincing quickly. "Even years after the war, young Death Eaters with potential are essential in stabilising our success. It stabilises me, too...especially if... you permit me to make it known that I have proposed their union." He paused. "Then, my Lord, I would prefer a daughter of mine become a Snape to losing her to a... Goyle."

"For the present..." he plastered the hint of a grin on his face "...I might not be too welcome in the wedding preparation or the honeymoon, my Lord. I was hoping I could return to Malfoy Manor more often, if not permanently. Escape cutting onions or dish washing at the very least. Comforting my mother, taking care of our affairs when I'm not in your service, my Lord."

"What will be Severus' reaction if I send Miss Weasley to the werewolves, Mr Malfoy?"

A tricky one, but if Draco had prepared himself for anything, it was this question. "He teaches me not to attach myself to any woman. He certainly does not allow himself to be head over heels in love...to be infatuated with anyone, forgetting everything around him. He is impressed, maybe captivated by her, and this can be exploited. Or dropped," Draco added with a shrug of indifference that felt like the worst betrayal.

"He lets her run free in the house?"

"She cannot leave the ground floor. She has no wand either. She commutes freely from sitting room to kitchen, bathroom and his bedroom, though. She is supposed to cook, wash and clean, my Lord. I've occasionally seen her with a book on medicinal potions, taking notes." The remark was well selected. Binding Severus Snape to a dimwit would not do.

"Remind me, Malfoy, what do we know about the characters and intellect of the Weasleys?"

"She and her brothers are Gryffindors, like her parents. I know that there have been Slytherins on the Prewett side and that the other houses are mixed in as well. Two of her brothers were remarkably successful at Hogwarts, Bill, the eldest, gaining an apprenticeship and employment at Gringotts, and Percy, the only one who has left the clan."

"Old Crouch's doormat?" Their master's voice had taken a dangerous tone.

Cold sweat covered Draco's back when he continued. "Yes, my Lord. All the others show a lot more... ah... character. One was a famous Quidditch Seeker and is now an intrepid Dragon Keeper. Her twin brothers, two years ahead of me, never made their N.E.W.T.s. They fought for months against Umbridge and left school with a most dramatic exit. Today they run their own business and are very creative."

"Against *dear* Dolores? Understandable from the point of view of a Gryffindor, I suppose. What about the young lady herself?"

Draco regrouped. His little mistake in mentioning Percy Weasley had been dangerous enough. Slowly he began, carefully avoiding sounding like a salesman. "Severus treats her well enough for a Gryffindor, so she cannot be daft or an irritation to him. She trained Defence with Potter and his trio in their club. From what we saw the last months, she is level with us, which means more than one year ahead of her age in Defence. Then she is a very talented flyer, a clever Quidditch Chaser and passable Seeker. She has a temper, a stubbornness, I might say, which she will need with Severus. He even seems to enjoy it, especially when the result is a wonderful dinner." Had this gone well enough? "Yet, she is modest and knows when to be silent, too. Severus very clearly appreciates her demeanour." Yes, that was worth mentioning.

The Dark Lord mused, pacing again, his face unreadable. After minutes of deliberation, he spoke. "Miss Weasley is not an ideal mother for my new generation of Death Eaters. She is very young, too. Yet, the fact that she, as a pure-blood with a pride for her ancestry, managed to warm up Severus Snape at all, qualifies her beyond my wildest hopes. She is the best we could find for Severus. He has put on a pound or two already. Furthermore, I grant her that she certainly complements what Severus lacks in the knowledge about the family life a child or a husband seem to benefit from. I would not know myself, but did not the oh-so-great Albus always say I don't understand love? If anyone should, then it is she." He looked into his servant's eyes, who rapidly let the scene of small talk about the Weasley bedtime ceremony float through his mind, with Severus' puzzled but intrigued look.

The Dark Lord shook his head but then looked up. "Indeed. So be it: I will interrogate Severus tomorrow. If he truly wants her, can see her as the mother of his children as well as his life companion as we always demand," he made a pause to emphasise the point, "then Miss Weasley has a third option."

Draco nodded and was about to bow when he hesitated shortly. "My Lord, Severus has a complicated potions project ongoing that was carefully timed around today's dinner. Ingredients have to be added regularly all day. I'm not familiar with the brew. I understood some were rare species."

"Tuesday for lunch then, if this is easier to arrange." Silently Draco bowed to the decision.

With the words, "It is late, Malfoy. I remember that Severus wants you to get a full night's sleep," he was dismissed and hurried out. The night breeze passed through his robes and dried his sweat, freezing him to the bone. Was it because the tension was finally released? The aftermath of the Cruciatus? Draco did not care; he was cold, tired and soaked and only wanted home.

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When she sat down on the bed yet another time, she looked more defeated than ever. She fell back and closed her eyes.

Severus saw with relief that she had found sleep, although it was a restless one. She was shivering with agitation and maybe cold. After washing her face and neck and covering her with a light blanket, he added logs to the fire. He warmed the tea, but there was nothing more he could do. He watched her wrap the blanket tightly as if it gave her moral support. What made him react so strongly to the idea of her death? In the two weeks she had been here, their communication or interaction had had nothing artificial. She had fit in and taken the role assigned, filled it with life and... Yes, she had made a difference.

Before long, she cried out and was wide-awake again. She folded and unfolded her arms, casting the blanket aside; she clasped and unclasped her hands. Her view was unfocussed, her whole body tense. Taking the offered tea, she shortly stopped fidgeting, but the few sips she took did not have much effect.

Severus felt lost. He did not know what to do, how to offer even the slightest bit of comfort. If he touched her, would she flinch back? If he did not touch her, would she believe him cold? She would be right then, would she not? Yet, to this young woman he wanted to give comfort, warmth. *How does one do this?* he wondered. Assuming he knew the theory, could he actually do it? Severus sat down beside her, one hand taking hers. "Ginevra, do not lose yourself in despair."

She turned to meet his gaze and held it for a while. Holding out her tea for her, he said, "You have been strong. I am amazed how strong. You came in here with a lot of power already, and you have accomplished so much in these few days."

She huffed weakly and regarded her hands fidgeting in her lap. "And what has it helped? Nothing at all. I'm to be sold as a whore and won't live to see next Sunday. I know this is a war and sacrifices have to be made, but if it has to be me, why can it not be in a battle and be over quickly?"

"You should not be sacrificed at all!" Severus exclaimed a little too hard. "No, Ginevra." He moved his hand up to lift her chin. Softly he continued, "Whatever I must do..."

Ginny started, saying, "You must not risk..." when Draco entered with an unreadable expression on his face.

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I wish to thank my faithful betas, Sirsevchick, Pennfana, Lumière and Soul Bound for their valuable contributions as well as for their patience with my non-native English.

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The third Option

Chapter 6 of 35

Ginny and Severus hear and discuss the third option.

The Third Option

Severus dropped his hand and looked up at the newcomer. *How dare he enter here with this satisfied expression on his face? Is there even the hint of a smirk in his eyes?* he wondered. He turned to see that the distressed girl only vaguely recognised Draco when he dropped heavily into the armchair. *She is still looking at me, too weak and unfocussed to act. She expects me to tell the boy off.*

"Your demeanour is unacceptable," Severus started, but Draco lifted a hand to stall him.

He topped their teacups although his hand was shaking. After his second cup, he looked up at them. "I've pointed out a few things to the Dark Lord."

"Pointed out what?" Severus' voice had a threatening tone.

"How truly you have spoken today, Severus. How well you two get along." The pair on the sofa did not react to Draco's explanation.

"We had a very good discussion, indeed," Draco continued with a sneer, but still they did not take in what he was saying. Tired and hurting, Draco was not in a mood to make intelligent conversation. He had been carefully weighing his every word for the last hour on their behalf already. Now he expected some kind of recognition. "Want to hear?" he finally asked in provocation.

"Not now, Draco." Severus warded him off.

Draco became angry at their indifference. "Listen, he WAS interested in your relationship!"

"What relationship? Whose?" Ginny asked tiredly, finally looking up at him. She closed her eyes and leaned back, too preoccupied to really care.

"The one you have with Severus! He has of course noticed how Severus praised you, and how he went to your defence today." This brought her attention back, and she asked bluntly what Draco had told him. "I mainly confirmed what has been said before," Draco drawled. Goodness, the way they acted he wanted nothing else than get into bed.

Absent-mindedly, Ginny murmured, "Performance at night."

She jumped to her feet, her neck turning scarlet. "You WHAT? You described me as the professor's whore? You made the Dark Lord believe he would harm a woman, maybe every woman that enters his house?"

Draco's head had jerked back from the blow. When she took a breath, he tried to interject, but she would not listen. "Is that how you see him? Is that how you thank your mentor?" she shouted on, hands trembling too much to stay in her hips.

"No!" Draco got up and shouted back at her now. "Damn it, I'm tired and hurting, will you at least listen now? I'm not demanding much, really. You can save your thanks for ten weeks from now if you want!"

"I'm not going to make it for ten more days, Draco Malfoy!"

Draco's patience left him. He headed for the concealed door that led up to his room, his every muscle hardening as he whipped his wand to open it. He pressed out a last remark and slammed the door shut, causing some of the books to complain about his rudeness.

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Their emotion-loaded exchange had been too loud for Severus' strained nerves. He preferred sharp retorts that achieved their purpose best if spoken softly and was never receptive to a row like that. Now that it was silent, he stood and warmed the tea. He forced a cup of the sweetened drink into Ginny's hands, holding them for a moment to make sure she would not drop it. "Let him go, Ginevra. We can sort that out later." They both sat down on the bed again. "You should drink some more tea before you try to get some rest."

"I cannot believe he did this to you!" She was so upset that she spilled some tea anyhow. "Ungrateful git! Where would he be without you? How can he tell such stories about you?"

"Do not concern yourself with my reputation. It will not get deeper than Dumbledore's murderer." His voice was as emotionless as his words. "Or higher, for some."

"But, sir, you're nothing like *that*." Ginny provided with conviction. She turned to face him. "You've helped me so much. And anyway, you would never... not like them!" she breathed. They looked into each other's eyes finding despair, pain and grief, and maybe a little glint of something else, but it was too shy or well-concealed to come out.

Her eyes, brown with a few blue flecks, were open and clear right now, yet able to conceal what was behind them *Four more days*... His breath unstable, Severus broke the contact and looked onto his hands cradling the tea, as he searched for a diversion. "I wonder what has come over him, though." Discussing Draco seemed to be safer ground than anything else that came into his mind.

"Why didn't he join us at home immediately?" She was equally glad that the awkward scene was over.

"He went over to his old school colleagues, although none of them is interested in him. He might be lonely compared to his school days."

"He even put up with me," Ginny noted lightly but became serious as she continued. "What would he talk about, though? He could not trust any of them anyway. And honestly, Crabbe and Goyle are no loss!"

"Careful there. But no," Severus conceded, "they are no match for him intellectually and nowhere close to the Inner Circle, where a Malfoy can still take his place."

"Uh, I'm not sure I meant that. But, sir, he didn't talk about them. He said he has spoken to Vo... the Dark Lord." She frowned and asked, "Can he do that, just waltz over and talk to him?"

"Certainly not! He has one foot in his grave as it is and would risk his life in making the attempt alone."

"He said he pointed something out to the Dark Lord. He was exhausted and shaking. And drinking thirstily."

Severus considered this. Could the boy have addressed their master on his own accord? If so, he must have been very convincing. Otherwise, he would not have returned in one piece, at least not able to walk. "What was it he hissed at you before he left?"

"I said I will be dead in ten days, and he said..."

"...if you listened you would live in ten years." In no time, Severus was on his feet. "Can he have found a way?"

"By insulting you?" Ginny huffed and stayed seated.

"We need to talk to him. Tonight. Now." When she did not move, Severus took her hand and dragged her along, jabbing his wand as they went, causing the books to cower at the hinge of the opening door. He ignored them and all but pulled Ginny up the stairs.

Draco's door was closed and no sound was to be heard. They knocked without success. "Draco, open the door," Severus called several times into the silence. When he received no reply, he stopped, frustrated. Eventually he turned to the girl, saying softly, "Now that I think of it, he was bursting with news..."

"... and we ignored him. If you force the door open, he will not say a word." Upon his surprised nod, Ginny whispered, "He is used to many things, but not to being ignored. Then we need an incentive." She turned back towards the stairs and noticed that her arm did not come along. Realising that they were holding hands, she quickly opened hers, averting her glance.

Severus let go as if he had touched hot iron and watched her descend, his fingers tickling oddly. He found great interest in the scraps on the door when she returned.

Back upstairs, Ginny asked aloud, but nicely, "Draco, this is Ginny. I'm sorry I shouted at you. Would you care for another tea or orange juice?"

The bed inside creaked, and a grunting Draco opened the door. He stooped in the door frame and drank down the tea eagerly. As he swapped for the glass of juice, he said, "I'm better now, myself. Let's go back downstairs, time is pressing."

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Already before Draco finished, words had left Severus, and his stare was fixed onto the table. *The boy has addressed the Dark Lord on his own initiative, risking his own life to save hers. He has played matchmaker for the two of us? The impertinent brat! Has the daring and foolhardy plan actually worked, and will our master allow this? That is unexpected, incredible. It is as hilarious as it is frightening.*

There was hardly a chance to save her life, and Severus knew immediately that this plan, once conceived, would be the only key to it. Their master would not consider any fourth option. This was it: Greyback and his werewolves, a pack of Muggle hooligans or... him, Severus Snape.

"Listen now!" Draco caught Severus' attention. "The procedure goes like this: Tuesday for lunch, Severus needs to convince the Dark Lord that he is eager to have Ginny. Not only reluctantly agreeing to marry her, but found a family. A sufficiently happy one. This is important! He didn't cotton on for the prospect of merely leaving the Order in despair. This could be done with other means. He is obsessed with his next generation of Death Eaters. Salazar's Sea Serpent, he even accepted a Gryffindor, and a blood traitor at that!" Draco drawled sarcastically.

For the first time Severus turned to face the girl. She was more collected than before. She appeared to have weighed up her three possibilities already. As he turned, she looked at him apprehensively, but not shyly, expecting a reaction from him.

Severus took his time and let the prospects sink in before he said, "A marriage of convenience is one thing. We are in a war after all. But the obligation? Children? It is out of the question." Suddenly furious, he turned to the blond, causing a spring in the makeshift bed to squeak, and hissed, "What possessed you to even consider this, to risk the Dark Lord's wrath?"

Ginny's urgent move away from him and her little scream was quitted with another squeak from the old furniture.

Draco gave his answer with averted glance but in a firm voice. "Barbara Brisby and Serena Hutch."

Ginny looked from one man to the other, not understanding what was going on. She had heard the name Brisby before, but could not place it and knew nothing of a Barbara. The other woman was altogether foreign to her. Yet, two women. Severus sat stock still until Draco looked up into his cold and boring eyes. He held the gaze for longer than Ginny would have believed, not wavering, not backing down. There seemed to be no Legilimency.

Eventually, Ginny cleared her throat to interrupt them.

Her professor regrouped himself. "Ginevra is only sixteen, underage and still growing."

"Perhaps the Dark Lord would be willing to wait for a child... at least for a while," she tried.

Draco answered quietly, "The legal wedding age for witches used to be sixteen. My grandmothers wed on their sixteenth birthdays or Friday after. He might refer to the old times. He is the law. But he does realise that you are very young."

"A few months are a mere formality," Severus reasoned, "The war cannot end early enough, but eventually it will. If you are stuck with the child of a traitor, both your lives would be ruined."

A little too forcefully, Ginny pointed out, "Alternatively, my life's ruined next week." Not that the prospect of marriage was warming her soul, as it should if a woman was in love. However, this was life, and she wasn't ready to give it up too soon. "Besides, there are two of us for the child."

"One of whom is dead or sitting in Azkaban. The model father! Look." Severus exhaled. He paused before he went on, facing her directly now. Her eyes had a dangerous sparkle, and her jawline demonstrated determination. Severus swallowed what he had been about to say.

Ginny wasn't fool enough to think he would be overjoyed. It would take effort and time to fathom him out, but she had a few entry points. "Maybe if someone else petitioned...?"

"No!"

That has come a little rapidly, Ginny decided.

"You do not know them." Severus explained. "Ginevra, it is not that I would not be ready to do it."

She jumped to the edge of the bed, beaming. "You would consider it?"

"I recall telling you I would do anything, everything, if it helps you. But you'd be bound, don't you see? Having a child is a step we cannot undo."

"Even in the oddest of circumstances, childhood needs not be an ordeal. It is the parents who make it one. Old family wisdom."

Severus flinched, thinking, *Parents can make childhood an ordeal, oh yes.* "I am not a family person, not a social person, even. I do not know how to be..." He fought with the word, the whole concept. "... a husband, a father. I have been everybody's least favourite potions teacher for... goodness, for longer than you have lived."

"You'll manage, Severus. I'm positive," Draco provided, rushing on before he was interrupted. "Let me go through the rest. If Severus is willing... note, Severus, you must show more than grudgingly accepting her. You are to show you intend to get along with her. A common ground, respect, affection, a potential for love! This is what I promised, more or less. If you are willing, Friday will bring the decision. I believe the Dark Lord wants Ginny to decide in the end. Remember, Severus, that it is your reward. He is not interested in providing you with something or someone you would consider a burden. Not a shrew or a broodmare...sorry, Ginny, no offence."

Draco's eyes went unfocussed as he recalled the scene. "He talked frighteningly much about love and that Dumbledore told him he would never understand it." After a well-set pause, Draco reminded them with extra emphasis. "He wants this marriage to work. For the time being, at least, as in one of these many qualifying clauses. If I remember correctly, there is another group wedding Friday in nearly three weeks. Or two? You might just join them. But I don't know about that."

With that Draco turned towards the stairs, a jug of water in hand, moving with attention to every muscle. When he reached the door, wand drawn, a book bickered, "Mind your manners, young man. Don't you dare to shake us around again." He glared at it, turned back to the pair on the bed, his eyes showing as much of a smirk as he dared with his mentor. "He will want proof of your devotion. You better have something to show him. I could not provide much," he said and closed the door quietly.

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They looked at each other. What would happen next? What would have to happen? Ginny's mind raced. Marry the Potions master. Marry Professor Snape, or Severus Snape.

Severus' mind felt as empty as his stomach. His eyes searched around the room for something concrete and settled on the dishes. Instead of flicking his wand to send them off, he carefully collected the cups and carried them into the kitchen. It didn't take nearly as long as he had hoped. "Miss Weasley..."

"You already used my given name tonight. I liked it."

"Gi... Ginevra then?" He tilted his head in question. "Then..."

"S... Severus," she acknowledged. "It might take a while to get used to."

Severus nodded. Their discussion was stuck. Finally he provided, "You are tired. The day was long."

"But Draco said..."

"I am aware of that!" Severus spat. Shocked at his outburst, his fingers went to his temples. He stooped lightly and shook his head. Softly, he continued, "This is not going too well, Miss... Ginevra." He sighed. "I am not used to this."

"To friendship, Severus?"

"Not to love or any other relationship. I told you that already." He looked up and over to her. As he didn't seem able to move, she stepped slowly closer. She tried to find this little something in his eyes again, the one behind the fear and the pain. But it was too dark to look into his eyes now. They were so dark themselves, and now they lay deep in their sockets in the dim light from the street lantern. If he turned his face a bit to the right... her hand reached out for his chin, but it never arrived there.

Severus caught her by the wrist, and this time he shouted. "WHAT?"

"Ouch, let go," she squealed, stepping back.

"I apologise," he offered, retreating into himself again. "It's a reflex, maybe." He let go of her and dropped his hands altogether, his face unreadable.

Ginny took in his form. Even if he tried, his stance was not nearly as self-assured as her caustic Potions master used to be. "I wanted to tilt your head towards the light, to see your eyes," she explained neutrally.

"... and I hurt you." His head sank down, as in justification of how inadequate he was to be near to anybody.

Ginny wasn't to be discouraged. After all, she fought for her life here. Boldly she stepped forward to where she had been *not an inch further*, she reminded herself, *this is not a teenager nor a Gryffindor. He will not be very open for excuses.* "Try again?"

He had observed her step apprehensively, but she halted. Tense and strained as he was, he forced himself to nod. He watched her left hand approaching his face slowly but with determination. She set her fingers along his jaw with the tips very close to his ear. The heel of her hand cupped his chin. She pressed slightly to move his head. Now she saw his eyes better. The distress was still there, although it was maybe a different one. This time he was not so much fearing for her but wary and cautious in the face of a new situation, of requirements he wasn't sure he understood...much less could fulfil.

Her thumb stroked slowly up and down. The skin of an adult man. His beard had grown since the morning, and the sensors of her ring finger recognised the little scar she knew was there. She felt a shiver go through him and saw him close his eyes. He leaned slightly into her hand. Two feelings fought inside her. Fearful student Ginny wanted to run away and hide, while some other part of her, that she could not name, wanted her to stay, close her eyes, and just feel what would happen. *Running is futile in this small house*, she decided and closed her eyes.

He had wanted to look into her eyes, but with her hand on his cheek, he could not keep his eyes open. Her tender caress sent shivers up and down his spine. Ginevra's hands were long and not too slim. Hands that could deftly stir a stew as well as a cauldron or send hexes determinedly on their way. Hands used to all kinds of chores without getting blisters. Of course, her hands were not callous, but they exercised a steady, firm grip. *Endearing, captivating.* He took a deep breath.

Severus didn't dare open his eyes just yet. She had not moved. His right hand came up at her left elbow and inched along her inner arm to her shoulder. When it felt its way along her collarbone and then along her neck up to her cheek, he was delighted to feel her react to him, too.

Now he was ready to open his eyes. His left hand found Ginny's waist, and he pulled her a little closer. She reacted promptly and came closer than he had expected, but just a little, not in a demanding way, not frighteningly close. Her hands met in the nape of his neck, and although his right arm and hand were a bit trapped, he relaxed slightly in their embrace. Yet, he felt his arm in the way, effectively hindering whatever was supposed to come. Had it not always been so that a part of him had misbehaved, and all the rest had had to bear the consequences? Unceremoniously Ginny opened this side a bit, and he slid his right hand down and to her shoulder blade. *Problem solved*, his brain registered in relief.

They stood for a while, not touching tightly but sensing each other's body. Ginny felt his irregular, heavy, warm breath on her arms, and her hands noticed the tension in his neck and shoulders. She understood that he was insecure, did not know what he wanted or how to achieve it, didn't know what to do with his hands, how to hold his head. If she came closer he would recoil, she could feel it. *Make him relax!* She set her thumbs on both sides of his neck and massaged lightly, symmetrically up and down, small circles. Yes, his neck came up; he moved lightly against her fingers.

"Mm."

The sound coming from his own mouth shook him out of the trance. *What was that? What happened to him?*

"Relax, Severus. There is nothing to worry about."

"I'm at a loss." It was a first! *Who am I, and where is Severus Snape, the nightmare of all first years, Neville Longbottom's greatest fear?*

"Maybe we should sit down?" Ginny provided, letting her hands fall to his elbows. She steered him to the bed, next to herself, very close up, in fact. She frowned in thought.

"What is it?"

"Just thinking how to proceed. In such cases I go through my family and friends to get an idea *what they* would do. I was just considering Hermione..." he huffed, "...yes, indeed. She would give each of us a slip of parchment and a quill and have us make a list. What we understand, what we don't understand, what we want, what we fear... very systematic, boring. But for her it works."

"I'm not in the mood for bookkeeping tonight."

"No," Ginny agreed, "this is not a project on Transfiguration."

They found they were too tired and overwhelmed to think straight. The whole idea had to sink in first. They would talk again tomorrow.

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Severus turned and rolled around in his bed without getting to sleep. Annoyed, he finally donned some clothes and left the house. With long strides, he stalked around the house and, at the end of the street, proceeded towards the fallow rows of allotments.

Marry! I'm going to marry! Ginevra Weasley! I have promised Albus I would do anything, and, Merlin, I will.

He huffed and turned, passed his own house and continued along the neglected or even abandoned houses in his immediate neighbourhood.

I will have to abandon my life, my freedom, my... well, honestly, what is there worth to cry over? As the situation is, I have nothing valuable that I could lose. No job, no friends, not even a daily ritual.

My bed...yes, I will have to share my bed. At least she doesn't snore.

As he crossed an equally shabby street, his instincts had him double-check for anything suspicious, but there wasn't more than a mangy, hungry dog in the street. Severus glared at him, and putting his tail between his legs, the damn dog pushed off.

There is still the question if she wants me at all, if she can stand me. Right now, she will of course say yes. I did manage to be civil towards her, and she certainly showed some...what? Positive actions, call them affection? True or made-up, I cannot tell.

At the next junction, Severus turned before he reached the slightly more agreeable area where Spinner's End was home of those working class families who had come out of the depression and unemployment relatively unscathed. Further down still, Spinner's End led into a more busy road, but Severus didn't dare to go too far away from the house.

I'm supposed to be the loving husband.

Severus felt most uneasy about that. He hadn't had a woman in years, because the whole act had never proven to be too exciting. But then, when it came to sex, she would not be too experienced herself. *She might compare me with... Potter...oh joy.* Before him, there had been a Ravenclaw and the other Gryffindor, Thomas. These two had been inseparable for weeks, and a few times he had caught them in corners or secluded corridors. Snogging wildly...but always dressed. He could not claim the same for all his Slytherins.

There is more than sex in a marriage. We will live together. Well, we've done so for a week already. Granted, she has proven to be bearable company so far, even if she has rearranged and redecorated my house already. Reasonable changes, mind you!

She has changed my diet as well. Hmm, her cooking is fantastic! Mouth watering breakfasts; crisp salads, spicy soups and curries, delicious desserts! She can give the Hogwarts elves a run for their money. Well, they don't receive money.

Money! What will we live on? How much will she spend? She's a Weasley, she knows how to restrict herself...

Severus had little savings. Hogwarts was run by the Ministry, and the school board had not lifted the wages for a dozen years or so. Most teachers came from well-off pure-blood families and administered their business in parallel, or they had research projects, got paid for publications or patents. Lacking the chance or desire to spend money, Severus had never bothered much about it either. He had bought books, of course.

For as long as the war was on, he decided, he could ask the Dark Lord for support. There would be ways.

Severus had almost reached the allotments once again and turned with zest. He abruptly stopped his musing when a black cloak swished around a corner. Such a garment had no business in this Muggle area. Not altering his brisk walk, he returned home.

Inside, everything was quiet, and with relief Severus returned to bed.

What will happen after the war? She will be a widow without a job but with a child. A child will wish for more than food and clothes. It will want friends and toys. His child should have the chance to participate, not be shunned by all peers as he had been. Certainly the Weasley clan would be of some support...whoever had fathered the child of their daughter or sister...but they had little themselves. They appeared to give their children warmth and appreciation but not too much else, certainly not books or space for peaceful contemplation. How could a child sharing his disposition thrive in these conditions?

What would happen if he survived, if he really could prove his loyalties at the trial? She would not want to stay stuck with him, and he could not expect it. They would leave him, wishing to see nothing more than his monthly cheque. *Ginevra will still be less than 20 years old. She can have any young man she wants!* He thought sent a stab of agony through his system. *I'll fight for them. I'll not just let her go!*

Hours later, Severus was wide awake again. On a hunch he left his bed once again. It was two o'clock. He went over to the sitting room and approached the lean figure in the bed. He stood still for a while, watching her. Then he reached out to remove a strand of hair from her face to find her eyes open, watching him. His hand froze in mid air.

"Severus," she whispered. "Can't sleep either?"

"No." His hoarse voice was loud in the silence of the night. With a wave of his hand he made the sconces emit a dim light.

She patted the side of her bed, begged him to sit down. "I feel strange," she said, turning to lie on her back to face him.

He cleared his throat. "Of course you would. You've been going through so much." His eyes roamed over her face, her hair, her neck. A hand came out from somewhere in the bed cover, taking hold of his own. Her eyes fixed on his, she explored his lower arm, felt the muscles, scars, hair. She groped up his arm, under the sleeve of his shirt, sending shivers through him again.

He clenched his eyes shut and bit his lips to not shout out loud, but he could not prevent a groan. "Ginevra, what..."

"Severus," she said in lieu of an answer.

Slowly Ginny moved her hand down again, halting half the way down to his elbow, circling and probing; feeling the very masculine arm, each muscle, the tendons and veins. She passed along the inner side of his lower arm and finally let her fingers glide over each of his. With his shiver, she withdrew her hand, and it retreated under the cover again. "You'll catch a cold, Severus."

"Hmm."

"Go back to bed, Severus," she ordered in a motherly tone.

Severus stood up slowly. *I cannot sleep, thinking of you out here,* he thought.

"What?" Ginny propped herself up on her elbows. Her eyes were wide open. "What did you say?"

"I have not said anything," he answered, trying for harsh but failing.

"You most certainly have. You basically... you invited me," Ginny stuttered, feeling a hot blush on her face.

Severus turned abruptly. "My apologies." He turned to leave.

She jumped out of her bed. "Wait." He was not sure he wanted to, but her voice had halted him already. "If I take you up on the invitation..."

"Ginevra!"

"... we might both find some sleep?" she suggested, turned and took up her duvet. In a stern voice she added, "Only sleep, Severus!"

For a while she wasn't sure she'd ever get an answer. His features did not reveal anything. Her bare feet got cold, and she moved one up her calf. Suddenly, a small nod. He gestured her to enter his room.

They lay down awkwardly, taking more comfort from the presence of the other than from the rest of their sleeping arrangements. When her own cover slipped down for the third time, Ginny cautiously lifted his and slipped in next to Severus. He stiffened, and she forced herself to lie stock still and listen to his breathing. *Don't think of his strong arms now*, she berated herself.

The warmth of his body next to her let her relax and finally fall asleep.

Severus had more problems to calm down. Never had there been another person in this bed with him. Certainly not such a bold female one, whom he was compelled to watch again and again. She was not afraid of him, how strange. Certainly four years of potions under his vitriol had left their imprints on her. Not even the Slytherins were ever really comfortable with him. But she was sleeping not three inches away from him. This evening, he had let her closer than ever, had felt she deserved it. She had needed it, too, but had that ever been a criterion for him? Yes, she deserved the best, and the best was not what he could offer her.

For the second time, he moved an errand strand of her hair from his eyes. He left another one draped over his neck. He bent his knees towards hers. Then he forced himself to calm down, tried to hear her even breathing. *Yes, I will fight for her*, was his last coherent thought.

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In the wake of the curses, Draco's body didn't allow him a peaceful night. On the other hand, he had achieved what he considered one of his greatest deeds. Even if the pair downstairs could not see it, they were a promising match.

In the morning, it took him by surprise to find the girl's bed empty. He had never considered presenting them as lovers, or Severus as lusty. The idea was absurd, and the Dark Lord would not have believed it. Draco hadn't expected them to rush into...

With a whole pot of warm, sweet tea, he slowly heaved his body upstairs and back into his room. He would ask Severus for the potion against the physical exhaustion later.

When he returned downstairs more than an hour later, there was still no one to be seen or heard. He went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Finally he laid the table, taking care to be noisier than needed.

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Clanks of glasses and china woke her up. Soft, rhythmical sounds matched the small movement her right arm made. A new smell surrounded her: spicy, masculine. She had no pillow, and while her back was warmed comfortably, her left arm and front felt cold because they hardly had enough cover. An unclear motion let the regular sounds stop. A soft grunt...Professor Snape, Severus! His bed. His smell. She wanted to turn around to have a look at him, but propping herself on her right arm had not been her best idea.

Fully awake in an instant, the experienced spy shot up, sending Ginny unceremoniously to the floor. *'Expelliarmus!'*

Realising that there was no armed opponent in his room, he shook himself and knelt on his side of the bed. "Ginevra!" He reached out for her hand and pulled her back onto the bed. "My apologies," he began, but she shook her head and held a finger on her lips. She crawled back under the warm cover and opened it for him to lie down as well.

"No."

"Only five minutes for a softer wake up."

Severus bent down and reached out his hand as if to touch her, then shook his head, stopped abruptly and was gone.

"You owe me," she murmured.

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Severus inspected himself in the bathroom mirror. Synopsis: repulsive. Sallow skin with scars, thin pale mouth with yellowish teeth crammed into too small jaws. His menacing eyes together with a hooked nose long enough to serve three, gave him the air of a bird of prey.

His prey he had usually found easily at Hogwarts, mainly among the Gryffindors. He had not looked out for Weasleys and not particularly Ginevra Weasley. In Potions, she had been as annoying as the average student. Not more, but not less either. She had manoeuvred herself into half a dozen detentions during her four years of Potions under him. Not by blatant ignorance, like Creevey or Longbottom, and not for annoying him with the over-achievement Miss Granger presented. No, he had rather had to punish her for her dubious creativity outside the set tasks. Not quite as enthusiastic as her twin brothers, and forced to arrange herself with changing partners, she was still the type of an intrepid experimenter working in typical Gryffindor strategy: act first, think later. In his last year of teaching her Potions, she had been more attentive, had sometimes clung to his lips. Probably the danger of her actions had sunken in. Certainly her marks had profited from her change of mind. From their preparations over the last days, he could say that she had a reasonable knowledge of the fifth year of Potions lessons.

Severus remembered also that she had not approved equally of all potions in the curriculum. He distinctly remembered that several essays had disappointed him in their dismissive tone while a few others had almost been as elaborated as Granger's.

There had been nothing at all amiss with her performance in Defence. Her blocks were as wide or narrow as had been the task and always strong enough. She could put all her energy into her hexes, and he did not envy the receiver of them, even if it was only a Bat Bogey Hex. He would have loved to use her more on demonstrations in class, but was forced to favour Slytherins. For a few tricky blocks, he had picked her out. Had she ever understood this as the compliment he could not give her in any other ways?

Minerva had complained comparatively much about Weasleys in general, considering they were from her own house. Starting with Charlie and reaching climax with the clowns, Fred and George. Being Potter's friend, Ron Weasley was usually given more allowance than was good for him. Ginevra Weasley, on the other hand, had gone unnoticed for most of her first year, not raising the alarm she should have. After the revelation, everyone was more aware of her, yes, but her performance or behaviour in class had never provided a topic in the staff room. Severus could only assume she did well enough in all her subjects.

Last night she had taken him by surprise, although for once a mostly agreeable one. She had cajoled him, coaxed him, but stopped short at the point just before he would have rebuked her. She had managed to touch his face! She had wanted it, and he had let her...which of the two was the greater surprise? While Severus remembered her hand on his jaw, the same sensation washed through his whole body again. Pleasantly.

Later she had roamed his arm. It had even been his left one. She had not given a single thought to his Dark Mark. Then she had taken him on his invitation to share his bed, wherever this had come from. She had felt safe with him. Safe with Severus Snape? *Am I losing my touch?*

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Severus tried hard to keep the discussion over breakfast on a business level, asking what Draco had told the Dark Lord, what questions Severus would have to answer. He did not want to think about the answers themselves. There was still one day to ponder about that.

What would be expected of them? The men remembered that couples of the group wedding were granted a honeymoon of sorts. And a Love Potion Draco was so accustomed to prepare, Ludwig's Lust: an ages old recipe for men to keep them going to compensate the lack of Death Eater children.

"Severus, isn't there any fertility potion?" Ginny frowned.

"Think you need that?"

She blushed vigorously. "Not for me, thank you. But what about these other women? Or men!"

"There is no potion, but Muggles have their methods. They can enhance a woman's fertility, often up to quadruplets or more. But the magic lags behind."

Draco went white. "Do you happen to know if my mum used this?"

Severus was not sure about that. In a hollow voice Draco told Ginny about his only sister, who had been a Squib. Sadly, Severus commented, "Look around the Death Eaters. Your sister was by far not the only Squib born, and none was allowed to live." Watching the boy, he added softly, "I realise that this is no comfort."

Severus remembered too well why he had not had any contact with the Malfoys at the time. He had been in Hogwarts for his third year and under a strict regime. Dumbledore had not yet trusted him. He was the traitor given a very well-supervised second chance. Minerva had been so suspicious that Slughorn was still responsible for the first and seventh years: the small ones to save her precious and delicate Gryffindors from Severus' atrocious teaching style, and the graduating class for the sake of fairness. Officially, of course, the teaching staff wanted to see a support for the young inexperienced colleague and didn't want Severus to take over as the Head of House just yet. It had taken him two more years to reach the position he had then pursued for so many years.

He had gradually been allowed to seek contact with his former acquaintances. Once Dumbledore had trusted him, they had conceived a plan concerning how to maintain his contacts and his image amongst them. But their superficially happy family life had not appealed to Severus at all.

Severus was thrown back to their discussion when Ginny vehemently declared, "How could one kill one's child, just for that?" When the men turned their faces down to their plates without eating, she asked, trembling now, "Does the Dark Lord expect this?"

Draco answered, "Our family reputation among the Death Eaters or in society hardly left Father any option. Although I would ignore this unspoken law. Father, of course, never gave it a thought. He killed her on her fourth day."

Wearily, Severus looked over to Ginny who expected a clear statement from him. On matters far beyond anything he was comfortable with sharing. He had never talked to anyone other than Albus about the killing, the torturing, all the tormenting he was forced to do or watch. He'd rather leave this room. But the unspoken question was about his child that would also be her child. She had a right to get an answer.

He cleared his throat. "My tasks under the Dark Lord have forced me to do things I detest." He took another deep breath, and Ginny saw emotions in his face that were normally covered by a mask of indifference. "I have killed. Done it myself, or done nothing against it. You know that." She nodded and swallowed hard, but she kept her eyes on him, drew an answer out of him. "To... define conditions when I would be ready to kill my own child goes beyond anything I imagine I could stand."

Severus' face went neutral again, but he kept his eyes on her. Ginny felt the strongest urge to reassure him, but the least he needed now was for Draco to notice anything. She stretched out her leg and shortly stroked his foot under the table. A small flicker in his eye was all the answer she needed.

When Draco reached out for more tea, Ginny thought about the night before. She tenderly asked him how his talk with the Dark Lord had started. With careful prodding, they learned the details. Ginny was impressed at his steadiness on her behalf. Severus didn't really believe that Draco had acted purely altruistically. Draco huffed and tried to shirk away, but they pressed his answer to the Dark Lord out of him. Sheepishly he reported and ended with a careful grin.

"You have arranged the marriage of your daughter before she is born? Before you even know her mother?" Severus asked in mock-disgust, and they all snorted. They almost forced themselves to take it lightly, for every little bit of a joke or sarcasm released some tension in their nerves.

"I couldn't well tell him that I hope for a promotion within the Death Eaters!"

"No." The Dark Lord assumed this whenever he was addressed. Telling him outright would have put Draco into mortal peril and would have sabotaged his whole idea.

Severus insisted on seeing the scenes Draco had presented their master. Draco fidgeted and hesitated until Ginny went for the bathroom. She closed the door, and soon they heard water running.

Ginny could not read her professor's...her fiancé's?...expression when she returned later.

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Ginny fidgeted a lot the whole morning. She nervously went for the bathroom every now and then. Finally, she caught Severus on his own. "Could I have my wand for the next few days? Could you at least deposit it somewhere I can reach it, in the bathroom, preferably?" Severus didn't catch her problem. When some more hints were lost on him, too, she desperately shrugged. "All right then, may I go shopping for some of the Muggle things that women need every month?"

After a first moment of total silence, Severus reacted less embarrassed than she had expected. He took it from a more clinical side. Soon she found herself accompanying him to the shops, her wand provided for this outing.

He knew what to look for, and he described where in the shop she should go. On their way they both collected their knowledge. There would be two concepts, something called tampons for internal use and something resembling a nappy to put into the knickers. Without anyone to show her, she would be better off taking the external ones. It felt less strange to discuss this with him than Ginny would have imagined. But then she considered that he would have prepared potions for Madam Pomfrey and must have heard a lot what's going on in the hospital wing. Also being Head of Slytherin house meant dealing with girls.

She was on her own at the corresponding shelf but found two types of pads that seemed to serve her needs. Remembering one of Hermione's comments on how these Muggle pads tended to end up in the wrong place, she had taken two more pairs of knickers along. She used a cleansing spell along with her actions to press it all to her body.

Then she joined Severus in the food department. They had to restock on essentials as well as get fresh food for the coming days. Severus observed how she took her time to select the best fruits and freshest lettuces for salads. They ignored the deep frozen packages but went over to a counter to get fresh fish and to another counter for cheese. Next to cheddars, there were lots of Swiss, Dutch, and French cheeses, and they took four types, a small amount of each. Ginny noticed how all these concepts were alien for Severus, and she was not sure if he did it only for her or saw the point. He would at mealtimes, she decided.

Puddings? Ginny stopped at the shelf with ingredients for bakery. Luck was with her that there was a leaflet with recipes. On Severus' request she gladly collected everything she would need for a chocolate cake. "Can't promise I can match the... kitchen at school," she said, carefully selecting Muggle-proof vocabulary.

"I am not going to grade it," he assured her.

On their way home, Ginny asked what the place had been like in his youth. It felt safer to pull information out of him this way than directly addressing his family. He had quite a good memory of the places, the smaller houses, the little shops. They passed a playground. Two mothers were gathered at the sandpit that held three dirty but happy toddlers. Severus remembered that the place had often been full of glass and the swing broken. It was never a rich area. Many Muggles were unemployed.

"You used to play with the neighbour children? With Muggles?!" Despite the theoretical knowledge that he was not a pure-blood, Ginny had never imagined him acting as a

Muggle.

"I never played with them, or even close to them," he mused. "I caused all kinds of accidents and scared them. Parents did not want their precious children to play with me."

"Where is the local school? Harry showed us his Muggle schools."

"It used to be two streets up, where the bank is today. The architecture could compete with your average Muggle prison. It was as cold inside as it was outside."

"You even attended Muggle classes?" Ginny blurted out before thinking. She immediately felt she was stretching it too far now. And indeed, for a while it looked as if nothing would come. *At least not a row*, she thought and turned to face him for an apology. To receive an elaborated reply before she had started was a nice surprise.

Severus had inwardly grunted at her curiosity but then decided that, after all, these questions were innocent enough to grant her an answer. "My father insisted that I was 'normal'. The school was strict, and I learned well enough. Then the taunting from the playground or the football field caught me even there. With the accidents my repelling magic caused, they insisted that I leave." He looked over to her and was rewarded with a lopsided smile. With more musing, he continued, "I wonder if the situation today is any better for a magical child."

"Hermione didn't have many friends because of the cleverness, which she could not rein in. But she didn't have much of a problem with her magic. Harry was taunted because his cousin organised it, and his aunt never interfered. Some magic must have puzzled his teachers though. Colin was mostly fine at school. He was a bit of a joker, which covered it up. But Dennis and their sister had trouble once the family knew about magic. So I guess it is still very much the same." Ginny stopped, realising she was babbling. Severus said nothing. Not all of Potter's magic had indeed been his own, but it was better the girl would not know that.

At the fence, she asked carefully, "Severus, do you know anything about the Creeveys?" He swiftly pushed her into the house.

Inside, wards re-erected, they proceeded into the kitchen before she got her answer. "They are in mortal danger. If the Aurors or the Order fails families like the Creeveys, they are easy prey. Currently, I know nothing of concrete plans." He hesitated. "Ginevra, I truthfully told you all I know about their situation. But you'd better not ask too precise questions. What I think you should know, what I can tell you, I will."

Swallowing hard, she nodded. She handed over her wand and went to the bathroom with her shopping.

They made a fish soup for lunch. Lacking a recipe, they imagined the soups from Hogwarts and analysed them. Ginny mostly knew how to prepare the ingredients, and for the rest they made guesses. They had to substitute some herbs with what they had. Fresh bread and a salad with a sauce that Severus whipped until it was creamy completed the meal.

Only when she took up the soup tureen did it occur to her that Severus had spoken about the future as if it was agreed already that she would be... with him. Distributing the simple iron spoons and forks, she felt tension leave her limbs.

"What do we have today?" Draco asked, his nose taking in the aromas.

"Fish fantasy and green delight," Ginny answered not missing a beat. Severus garnered her quick response with an amused look. It had been a peaceful morning.

While Ginny removed the remainders of the meal, the two men went into the lab. Severus would have to deliver potions tomorrow, or Draco's delay would show.

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Two shabby and unkempt men arrived in the late afternoon, after they had had tea (and a chocolate cake that had tasted well enough but was of unstable shape). One tried to catch a glance of Ginny in the kitchen, but when Severus grunted, he quickly averted his look. Wordlessly, Severus ushered them down to the lab.

The men looked less concerned when they returned. Severus Obfuscated his owl Pöllö and made it follow the thinner one. Draco and Severus left the house to check the street. When they signalled that the coast was clear, the two strangers nodded at Ginny and left in a hurry.

Draco and Severus didn't provide any explanation. Their annoying secrecy reminded Ginny strongly of the Order, but for the time being it was best. And didn't she have secrets with Severus that Draco didn't share? The Horcruxes! Not even your average Order member knew about them. She felt better immediately. It was a way of protecting each other and not a question of superiority. Maybe she should ask again if she should be Obliviated from such events.

Pöllö arrived without any message while they had dinner. He briefly perched on Severus' backrest before he left for his nightly hunt. He wasn't used to treats, Ginny thought.

Very early, Draco excused himself. He took the two ointments along for soothing the remaining symptoms of the Cruciatus. When he opined he would not need a Dreamless sleep potion, Severus was content with this decision. Draco's mind had not been attacked, and he had known the curse already. It would not do to pamper themselves. On the other hand, each application of the curse damaged inner organs leading to chronic dysfunctions if not treated. That must not be risked.

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Alone again, they felt silent. Comfortably maybe, but would there not be issues to discuss?

"Are you settling in here?" Severus eventually started, leaning back in his armchair. "I might not realise what is amiss. Don't hesitate to ask. Like you did this morning."

Ginny considered this. He wasn't referring to exactly this moment. It was a statement she would have to remember for their common future. If there was such a thing. "I understand. I'm fine now. Winter coming, I would probably need..." she stopped, holding her breath.

Severus took up the thought easily. "Yes, warmer clothes. And some more anyway because washing is more cumbersome then. I would like you to join our forest exercise, too." He was thinking in the same categories.

"Severus..."

"Ginevra..."

They both started a sentence and they both stopped. He gestured for her to continue.

Sitting on the edge of the sofa, elbows on her knees she wondered what it had been, and how to express it best. Finally she said, "It's me who is in the predicament, but you are asked to change your life."

"The war puts us into predicaments. All of us. And we are all asked to contribute to solutions," Severus corrected, leaning forward himself now to meet her eyes. "If you believe yourself in eternal debt to me, it will not work. Not for you and neither for me."

"I'm asking myself, what this 'it' is. What can it be, what not?"

Severus considered her for long seconds before he replied. "We had several terms yesterday. Some were... daring concepts. Most were concepts I am not very familiar with. All of them, I'm afraid."

She took up the pot of tea. "Want more?"

Severus handed over his mug, saying, "There is already a concept I might fail to comply to. Did I?"

Ginny smiled. "I'm a big girl, I do know how to help myself to tea. And no, I didn't notice such a faux pas today or any time." Having filled his and her own mug, she sat straight. "Maybe some practical things first. If we're married," she swallowed, "would I for example have my wand back? Not to 'free' myself, not to hex ten Death Eaters into next year. But I need it for laundry and cooking...for daily life. Maybe also for defence when you're out. We were allowed Magic this summer. I feel terribly vulnerable without it. A normal wizard life is with wand."

"When we're married I see no reason why not. Mrs Bulstrode has a wand, as have Mrs Sands and Mr Goyle. At least these three are putting our lives at risk whenever they use it."

"Mandy Sands' mother? The whole family is...?" Not that the proud Slytherin girl had ever pretended to be anything else, but hearing it now outright, made Ginny's stomach contract.

"Indeed. You did not see Miss Sands yet, but possibly you will meet her. In this case," he raised his voice, "you will play every card in your sleeve. A Snape does not surrender to a Sands!"

"A Snape..."

"A Weasley-Snape will not either. Would you wish to keep your name?"

"What? Oh yes, this is a Muggle habit, isn't it? I would think there are enough Mrs Weasleys in Britain, thank you. One of them *es verry 'ard to please*."

"Fleur... Weasley?" he chuckled. "You will find that Mr Snape can be hard to please, too."

"I found that out some time ago," Ginny grinned. "It took me some time to please you with my Potions performance, if I recall correctly."

Reconsidering his statement, she blushed furiously. "Oh, you..."

Severus realised his pun a little late as well and stuttered, "I... I didn't... didn't mean..." His face turned a nice shade of red, too. He stood abruptly and left for the kitchen for more tea. Returning, he remembered just in time, to ask for Ginny's cup to top her tea. He sat down heavily. "Ginevra, what else should we talk about?"

"You tell me."

"The Dark Lord is inclined to take up the idea of me wedding you, stunning as it is. He is desperate to have high profile Death Eater progeny. I am ready to give him the indication that I wish to marry you, that I wish to found a family with you. Then you have the final choice, if I understand right. There will hardly be a hole you could slip through." After a pause he summarised, "You end up facing werewolves, a gang of Muggle hooligans or me. Aren't these options all equally horrible?"

"Severus!"

"With the Muggles, your life will be shortest. And your pain. They will undoubtedly rape you," Severus stopped, then added softly, "in rapid succession." Unsure how he could make his offer sound attractive, he went straight ahead. "A potion for fidelity could..." Severus had to breathe and close his eyes. "Kill you and the second assailant. Saving you some of the pain."

She took that in without any outward reaction.

Severus continued. "Werewolves next. My informants think Greyback is not honest with his plans. He will keep you for himself. He leads the pack in wolfish manners, and only the Alpha has a mate. However, his mate is not placed into the position of an Alpha female as would be nature's law for wolves. His partners tend to live for a short while, some weeks, maybe months. Bitten, but alive. If Lupin gets to hear about you, which I could arrange... they could come for you under great risks for the Order. I consider it unlikely that they would succeed. DO NOT put your hopes on this."

He again paused and noticed how Ginny shuddered. She refused to imagine what physical and mental damage she would get before Bill or Remus reached her.

"Then, me. Ugly, old bat of the dungeons doesn't cover it: I'm a Death Eater now. Face it, Ginevra, this means you cannot return home. Not in months, maybe the whole war." Severus was satisfied to see her despair. She needed to see clear on this. Yes, it pained him at the same time. "He will put the same charm on us as on the young couples: regular... consummation. Your family could not take you away from me and have you living. We would be bound to each other. You're stuck. I will try to get the small print of the charm, but the essentials are obvious."

"If we are bound, would we not both make an effort... to have it bearable? Or better?"

"Not all that is bearable for one is bearable for the other. I am a solitary man. This means more than just no roaring parties."

"Among your... er... current acquaintances there would not be many people I'd want to invite. I see your point though."

He huffed. "No one ever comes in here. Since I'm a respected person right now, they will invite us to advance in my wake. I expect the Sands or the Parkinsons, possibly others. The Notts are a little more bearable. The Malfoys and the Lestranges, of course."

"Care to cheer me up with any disgusting details?" she drawled, not quite meeting his eye.

Here, he looked almost amused. "Considering the incredible rumours I heard at Hogwarts, I need to set a few things right: no group sex, no cannibalism. Yes, there are some bachelors holding parties where innocent Muggles are manhandled, tortured, raped and killed. I am not part of this group, nor are those whose social events I might have to attend. These are pretty formal, quite aristocratic receptions. They consider themselves peers, which is to some extent boring. Intellectual discussions are rare, discussions on business opportunities bypass my possibilities, small talk and gossip is rarely my interest. I am not sure which of these hold an appeal for you. Our respective work for our master is mainly out of bounds, which hinders me from my actual work but for which we should be grateful in your case."

"Severus, if it keeps me alive and otherwise not too unhappy... " She suppressed a yawn.

"We are at the otherwise then? I truly hope to get some delay for... the child. Your birthday is when, August?" She nodded. "You will be of age then. Since we both are so desperate to have the child...or at least I am...it would not be wise to attempt a delay beyond that. I am sorry." He really looked it, another expression Ginny was not accustomed to see from him.

"My main concern then is about leaving you behind in whatever way, Ginevra. You have no education, no income, and you cannot expect to inherit anything you do not see around yourself." He made a vague gesture around. "You might be so lucky to even get this, when I am convicted."

"We've been there," Ginny interrupted with a tired voice. "And over the day I went further still. Maybe I should say it straight away?" Severus made an inviting gesture, and she spoke. "The name Snape is linked to various... unfavourable... public memories. For over sixteen years you were not quite the ah... best-liked teacher. You... killed Dumbledore..."

Furious now, Severus interrupted her. "Don't you dare hold me responsible for that! You are the one trying to..."

"SEVERUS, HOLD IT!!" She tried to get over his voice. Maybe it was the shock to be spoken to like that, but for a moment he stopped his tirade, and Ginny filled the gap. "Our children, Severus, they will suffer from prejudices when we are not there to defend them."

Although he had not yet thought of that, Severus agreed. He had had a hard enough time at school without such a burden. He sat back with a desperate expression on his face and waved for her to continue.

"I would never, Severus! But society need not follow the verdict of the trial. Not an easy family for a child."

When he did not answer that, Ginny continued, "Weasley wasn't a name to open any doors either. Still, I dare say we all seven stood through well enough. Family and friends help a lot, but it requires a true family, Severus."

Severus sighed. "Not my strengths."

Ginny stifled yet another yawn. "You talked about sacrifices to be made. I'd wish I could be more than a sacrifice to you." Her tired eyes went up to him.

Severus moved over to sit on the sofa. "Yes, if you choose me, we should work on this." She leaned on his shoulders, and he hesitantly brought his arm behind her back, not touching her though.

"Course I choose you, if you let me." The confirmation suddenly meant more to him than he liked to admit. They sat in silence.

"Bedtime, Ginevra. You are dead tired, go ahead."

With a "Mhmm" she left for the bathroom, while Severus handled the Transfiguration. It would be done more than three times, but not many more. Thereafter she would move to him if she wanted him. Otherwise he would never excuse himself for her death. *Severus Snape, you must encourage her, show her it is all right, that you are all right with the plan.*

Why had he not managed a little more physical contact yet? She was not repulsive, and she was not overwhelming him with physical proximity either. Rather shy compared to her interaction with Dean Thomas. He even found her attractive, if not intellectually, then emotionally. Physically, she was so young, what could be repulsing? It did not matter to Severus if a hand was slender or broad, lips full or thin. The question was what that hand did, what those lips said, and he could not see hers occupying themselves wrongly. Not with a wand, a knife or a pestle and not with words. He made a mental note to try harder.

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When Severus returned from the bathroom, Ginny stood at the window, fidgeting.

"What is it?"

"The same stars everywhere. I was just thinking of Mum and Dad."

He resolutely walked over and put his arm on the small of her back, pulling ever so slightly, before he had time for second thoughts. She turned to face him, grateful, but her eyes were red and full of tears. This was not his field of expertise. As a Head of House he had always frightened the Slytherin girls enough to not pester him in such a state. They had soon learned to go to the sixth- or seventh-year girls of their house instead, sometimes also to the head girl, although they tended to be from other houses. To not say anything wrong, he said nothing.

"I've never been away from each and every one of them for so long."

Taking strength from his warm hand on her back, Ginny quickly recovered, and a moment later she said resolutely, "I should stop this behaviour. It helps no one," and headed for her bed. "Good night, Severus."

"Sleep well, Ginevra." He managed to return her smile.

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When Severus had left to talk with his old master over lunch, Draco couldn't possibly leave Ginny alone. He had withdrawn himself for the last one-and-a-half days to give them space and hoped they figured something out. Ginny seemed already on an impressively good track with the solitary man. She would eventually conquer him. But he would have an eye on the two of them, hopefully being able to help them climb over the roughest cliffs on their path. After all it was him who pushed them on the road...good intentions or not.

"Have you been getting along these last days?" he opened a talk that Ginny was ready to take up.

Yes, she had spent agreeable hours with her... hmm, fiancé?... while they had concrete work to do. Even a few talks on general issues had gone well. "But he always gets caught in his concerns that one way or another he would be forced to leave me alone with a child and an unsecured future."

Draco considered this. "He has reason enough for that. But maybe he also hides other fears behind this one."

Seeing she didn't follow his thoughts, he explained. "It has taken me a month to get to where I am now with him. Without the pressure to, well, to share a bed with him. Severus has been a loner for decades, maybe all his life. And yet..." he paused, "...I'd never have imagined someone could change Severus' eating routines or redecorate his rooms and survive to tell the tale. There is potential that you can get along and make this arrangement work." He would have liked to say something concrete, but it was better she didn't know just *how* Severus' eyes sparkled when he thought of her, heard her calling. Overconfidence could ruin all.

Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, he started anew. "Last Sunday, I had very little time to prepare myself. I don't think I would have had the idea at hand, had I not seen a chance. You ARE good with the interpersonal stuff."

Ginny was not willing to agree openly. "The Dark Lord wants me to have only horrible choices. Thwarting his plans is our paramount goal," she said with feeling.

"Good, if you can see it this way. Actually, he would not mind your being somewhat content, or more. He counts on having a good mother for the little Snapes. Like for the other promising Death Eaters. But he shows bloody little understanding in what it takes to get there. Severus will have his duties as before. A minimum honeymoon if you're lucky. We're at war."

"Severus needs to be active. For his own good and for the cause." Ginny turned silent. It was one thing to discuss it with Draco but another to live it with Severus. He was so reserved, shy even. How could she get from touching his arm to sleeping with him in only two weeks?

Seducing Severus Snape? She had not heard of any girl having put this on her schedule! Some seventh years had dreamt of Remus, yes. Vector and Miller, the teacher for Muggle Studies, had been admired and then Lockhart of course... but Snape?

Besides the issue of him being who he was, she had been more modest than her reputation, she wouldn't possibly have the charms to seduce a grown man! Or the knowledge.

He would, of course, fulfil the requirements but to schedule as a get-it-over-with-task what nature has meant to be a pleasure sought freely?

Suddenly panicking, the darkest of thoughts stormed her mind. Will the Dark Lord and Severus agree today? Would he change his mind on Friday? Was there a point in all her pondering for months ahead? Wouldn't she be dead on Sunday? Suddenly Ginny's lungs didn't fill with air any more. She was shivering, the table got out of focus and then... Nothing.

Draco had been caught in his own thoughts when he noticed her hanging limp in the armchair, beads of cold sweat on her forehead and arms. Quickly, he rushed over, summoning a wet, cool towel to wipe her face. Her skin was cold, although her cheeks had a little more colour than normal. He picked her up and went to Severus' bedroom, noticing the upcoming problem too late. He doubled back to deposit her temporarily on the sofa, but finally he had manoeuvred her under the duvet without dropping her and had even removed her slippers and her outer clothes.

The room could not be heated, so he placed warming spells on her and on the duvet. They would hold a few minutes until a better solution was found. Not a fire, something radiating heat. Warm water keeps the temperature well, but... He searched around in the kitchen and bathroom for a suitable container. Quickly he checked the lab. With two unbreakable glasses, he headed up again, filled them with water so hot he could barely touch them. A thick fluffy towel (from the Malfoy household) around each, he placed them left and right of her slim body.

They had not had any opulent lunch, and now that he recalled it, Ginny had been too nervous to eat properly. This was not a base for a strong potion. Unsure about first aid, he opted for making a fruit tea. He added a good amount of honey to the tea and kept a glass of milk at the ready as well. All in all, he thought she was better off kept under than fidgeting, so he didn't wake her up but fetched a chair to sit close to her, reading and watching.

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This was how Severus found them an hour later. He approved of the warmth but whipped up a potion, similar but softer than a pepper-up, and diluted it with the warm, sweet tea. With the aid of swallowing spells they made the girl take in a satisfying amount before she stirred and slowly came to life again. "Severus."

Draco was glad she had turned to the man she was to live with, rather than to him. He left the room after pressing her hand encouragingly and nodding to Severus who had taken the place on the chair.

"Been brooding?" She nodded, ashamed to have broken down. He lifted her chin up and found a mix of hope and fear, despair even. "We had an almost amiable chat, and he appeared to be enjoying himself as a matchmaker. Especially for me." He snorted.

"We can get married?" She sounded genuinely glad, gladder than he could expect.

"If you really wish to."

"Oh, Severus," she exclaimed and rushed up to embrace him. "I've been so afraid he would not let me stay alive."

Awkwardly, Severus patted her bare back, glad that he could not see more of her. Her body was soft and warm now, and slowly his uneasiness melted. Strands of her hair tickled him slightly, and he brushed them away from his nose. The springy hair had a life of its own though, and he found himself handling the same strands again. Soon he was stroking it from her head down. Part of her hair had entangled and was wet from her sweat, sticking together and on her skin. He gently ran his fingers through it. Starting at her scalp, he soon noticed that around the nape of her neck he had produced a serious knot that could not be pushed down any more. Taking up the next strand, he started disentangling it from the shoulder downwards, then, stroke by stroke, working his way upwards. She held still and enjoyed his touch. Absent-mindedly, he worked his way through her hair. Ginny found comfort in his touch, followed his every move and relaxed further. Once he had the knack of it, his hands worked with security and gentle moves. She would have liked to stroke him on his back or neck, but didn't want to break his meditation-like state. Eventually, only the first strand was left. Severus frowned at the mess he had produced and carefully started from its bottom. "My apology for that," he noted without thinking.

"You're very good at disentangling hair. I like it."

He froze, all of a sudden fully aware of what he had been doing and of her so close to him. His grip loosened, and if it had been easily possible, he would have dropped his arms. But before he could pull away, Ginny reinforced the angle of her arms and started circling her fingers lightly. She gently stroked his back while her forearms held him tight.

Her light clothing put an end to her effort. "You are freezing. Do not catch a cold now," he warned her with an unsteady but generally soft voice.

"Hmm, pity!" she dared and let go.

He averted his eyes until she was dressed. Leaving for the sitting room, she reminded herself to be matter-of-fact around him. She cleared her throat and asked, "What are the Dark Lord's key interests with this arrangement?"

"He has tried matching me off before, to no avail. Each woman had backed off immediately."

"Barbara and ... what was her name?"

"Serena. Yes, mainly those two. Draco must have heard about Miss Hutch from his father. It was in the first war, before I dared go to... Her father moved her out of the country and got her a place as an apprentice at Durmstrang. I think she wed someone from there. Since she had no siblings and her father only a sister, the name Hutch isn't so well known to younger wizards any more."

Ginny didn't get any explanation for Barbara Brisby, and she didn't probe. "The Dark Lord, today..." she eventually prompted him.

"... was indeed keen on seeing a flourishing progeny of the Snapes. A large one."

"Oh dear. Quidditch isn't bad for a Sunday entertainment, but..."

Severus flinched. "I am not like your father, and I do not expect you to be or become like your mother."

It was the wrong thing to say, he realised when her blow hit him. "There is NOTHING wrong with my parents. They chose their way and are happy. They always made us happy, inwardly."

"Ginevra, I didn't mean it like that," he reasoned in a low voice to contrast hers. To catch her attention he took her elbows and moved them both onto the sofa. "While you had a hard stand at school...you have said so yourself...I believe your family gives you more than the Malfoys provide. Not to think of my own parents. Still, I do not feel like supplying Slytherin with a whole team."

"You could not, because half our children are Gryffindors, and I refuse to have twelve. Or thirteen considering the risk for a Ravenclaw stray. Or the chance." While he considered that, she took up their initial discussion. "What do you think the Dark Lord expects? All Slytherins?"

I truly hope he will not live to know, Severus thought, but replied neutrally, "He sees potential in both. Wormtail is not the prototype of a Gryffindor Death Eater."

"But I am?" she asked incredulously.

"No," he sneered, "but closer. He did point out again what Draco has told us: he is ready to put up with your... ah... dubious heritage to finally see my glorious one passed on. I'm as much a breeding stallion as you're a mare."

"Thanks a bunch, just the words of comfort I needed," she replied dryly, but at the same moment leaned closer, touching his arm that had fallen down behind her. "A stallion..." she teased him with an appraisal voice.

"Breeding bull then."

"Every day of the year rutting season, thanks to Ludwig's Lust?"

"I'm NOT discussing that!"

Her staring look almost made him cringe. "Or in fact yes, we should," he conceded. "We are to join the group wedding Friday next week, December 12th. Like with the other couples there will be the dratted copulation control." He stared at his knees, his voice failing him. "T... Twice a week." When she leaned forward to read his eyes, he didn't let her but stared out of the window.

Ginny didn't dare going further along this lane he was so clearly uncomfortable with. As if she were so eager! Sex would have its appeal when given and taken out of love, she assumed. That's why you call it making love. But do it because it is Tuesday? And with a woman he seems not comfortable with? No, this wasn't the right way to put it, he wasn't more comfortable with any other woman either. Less so, most likely, since he hadn't moved his arm away...if he considered her a woman at all. "What about contraception? My age?"

"He still depends on the Ministry. No pregnancy is desired before you are seventeen. But then please, the same day!" The topic was closed for Severus. He got up and ventured towards the lab without looking back at her.

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Wednesday they had one of the two visitors from Monday again. This time he pushed both men rapidly into the lab, and Ginny heard the start of an argument before it was obviously muffled with a spell. Draco appeared soon after. He glanced around inside and peered through all windows, careful not to give himself away.

"I suppose your behaviour means I am to stay away from the windows?"

"Yes." The finality in his voice made it pointless to ask for more.

The visitor and Severus came upstairs when dinner was on the table. Her curiosity was hard to tame. Surprisingly, Severus came to her aid, commanding brusquely, "We have a dinner guest. Bring another plate." He was staring at her meaningfully.

"Yes, sir," she answered obediently and retreated into the kitchen to bring a set for the man. He could use it, she thought to herself. He had a haunted look in eyes that lay too deep in their sockets.

"No delay!" Severus commanded. Ginny hastened back and remained standing until the three men had sat down. She started serving the soup, first to the guest, then Severus, then Draco. She hesitated. Would she be sent away? "Serve yourself now and sit down so we can start!"

The monosyllabic talk didn't explain the errand of the stranger. As Ginny sat across from him, she didn't have to stare to take in his features. His short, unkempt hair had an undefinable colour and was flecked with grey. The worn out robe was dirty as well as darned at places one usually hardly tears them. He ate as if he hadn't had any meal today yet and wasn't expecting anything soon either. His table manners were a wondrous mix: aristocratic understatement with the occasional bout of primitiveness that he appeared to be ashamed of showing.

"Do not worry," Severus said when the stranger sighed once again into his empty plate. "Come and find me any time you need. And can. Even Sunday after next." The stranger looked up sharply but his host continued with composed voice, "Friday morning though, we have business. Afternoon or Saturday should be fine."

He stayed for a glass of wine, a drink she had not yet seen in this household. Severus seemed to make an extra effort to make this man feel comfortable. Draco received one glass as well, while Ginny was wise enough to not even bring a fourth glass or sit down close to them. But she didn't retreat to the kitchen nor did anyone expect this from her. She sat at the table reading an advanced book on medicinal potions, careful to show the book title to the stranger.

After Severus' thorough check outside, the man left around ten o'clock in the evening, not without praising 'the maid' for her cooking skills. *Well*, she thought, *had I been an elf, he would have praised my owner*. Severus accompanied the guest outside and sent his regards to his friend. "He is welcome here just like you." The stranger gave him a look of disbelief again, and disappeared. With a sigh, Severus closed the door.

"Let me guess, a pure-blood from a well situated family? Now on Greyback's pack?" Severus looked up sharply, but then simply nodded. "And his friend lives there, too." Another tired nod.

"Ginevra, do not ask such things. I am tempted to Obliviate the whole person out of your memory. If you had not asked, he could have been on a business meeting. Now..."

She gave a scathing retort. "Oh, but of course you would invite him over for the days of the full moon. Severus, I'm not deaf or blind. My BROTHER is a werewolf."

Severus looked up in shock. "I forgot. My apologies." Not saying more, he berated himself for forgetting Lupin and Bill Weasley. The Order needed these two experienced fighters. He should be able to brew them a cauldron full of Wolfsbane per month, or even two. Death Eaters had sources for ingredients respectable people currently had no access to, but the brew needed time. "Remind me of them in three weeks," he asked.

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I wish to express my gratitude to my betas, Pennfana and Jingjingchiquita, for their constructive criticism and their help with language issues.

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A warm thank also to all of you who have reviewed. Feedback is truly the very best that can happen to an author!

I'd like to remind you that this story does not consider Deathly Hallows. Let's therefore not comment on similarities or differences in reviews either since we might accidentally spoil this book to a co-reader. I will continue with this story as I had planned.

Similarities with DH are purely accidental, as are any discrepancies.

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A Daring Request

Chapter 7 of 35

Unwanted visitors cause a fight at Spinner's End. Ginny considers what they said and makes a daring request.

A Daring Request

Rain drumming on the roof and water splattering out of the gutter woke Ginny up from uneasy sleep. The heated discussion in the Potions lab that had brought tension at dinner, and the glances the man had given her across the table, had followed her into her dreams. Considering that he was one of Greyback's pack, this row appeared in a very special light.

Silently, she stood and went over to one side of the window, sighing *A real downpour of rain! When in this dratted year has it done anything else other than rain?* She kept herself next to the curtains, as Severus had advised her tonight. He had not been that concerned before. *Are we under surveillance? Does Greyback employ or command wizards for his own purposes?* Not even the average Death Eater ever trusted the man.

She visited the bathroom. Returning, she noticed that not only had Severus left his door ajar, but he had the light on as well. Parchment rustled. She knocked and received a hushed "Enter." Severus wasn't even undressed. He had merely slipped off his shoes. A blanket over his shoulders, he had propped himself up and read.

"Why aren't you in bed?" It was said before she could hold it. Inching half a step closer, she quickly amended, "I mean, has something come up?" The light from a candle floating on his side illuminated his book as well as his chest. He had opened a few buttons of his shirt, revealing a patch of skin so milky-white in contrast to his already pale neck it could never have received any sunlight. A few curls of dark chest-hair did not cover the beginning of what had to be an ugly scar. "Did your visitor hint at anything?"

"How so?" He tried to be calm, but Ginny wasn't fooled. When she voiced her thoughts, he insisted that the man was no threat. Yet, Severus admitted, there were rumours that a group of reckless Death Eaters were up to something before Friday. This was why he was keeping guard. "Now that you have rested, would you mind dressing in comfortable, but warm clothes?"

Dressed with almost all the clothes she currently owned and clutching her Potions text from the evening, Ginny soon returned to his bedroom, leaving the door ajar again. She fidgeted once, but then decided to go directly ahead with her request "Sir... Severus, could I have my wand?"

"Of course. My apologies." He gestured as he went to his cupboard, and Ginny obediently turned round.

"Should we warn Draco?"

Severus provided her with her wand, handle first, and quietly answered the second question. "Draco has retired to his room, but he is on guard." He extinguished the light in the sitting room with a wave of his hand. "When they come, they will assume you are in the sitting room. Their next choice might be the lab. This is *not* where you will be. Creep under the bed; search for the loose board in the floor." Ginny did so. A few dust clouds tickled her nose, and she squeezed it almost in time to avoid a sneeze. "Suppress that," he hissed. "Lie parallel to the bed. Press down and push the board towards the window."

The floorboard opened silently, and she peeked into an even more dusty chamber not more than twice her width and not longer than the bed. She sneezed immediately and cast two cleaning spells. "Come up again and replace the board. It is only a last resort. I'm positive we won't need it."

With a flick, he removed the clouds of dust under his bed, and with another he cleaned her clothes, noticing that she didn't have anything suitable for outside. He handed her a soft, woollen jacket (black, of course) before he hesitantly invited her onto his bed. She placed her shoes so that she could slip in rapidly and took up her book. A gust of wind rattled the door, adding to her anxiety and sending shivers through her body.

The warm body behind her felt reassuring. Severus was a strong wizard. She marvelled that indeed she had come to the point where she would trust him.

She had turned no more than three pages...to say that she had understood their contents would be too optimistic...when a tiny pattern of raps on their ceiling changed the monotonous clatter of rain. Ginny listened sharply. This bedroom should be under the left, thus free, room upstairs. But who knew what magic Severus had been able to include in this Muggle-built house?

Severus had been listening intently. "He says he sees at least four attackers."

"Are we sure they are attackers? Couldn't they be Harry and the Order?" Ginny's weak voice betrayed her mixed feelings about this prospect. The Order would curse her current hosts mercilessly before even listening to them or her. They would lose the ally they didn't believe they had. They would readily kill two men who did not deserve it.

"No, for two reasons. With the exception of Albus, I never revealed this house to the Order." Ginny nodded. "Further, I have an idea of whom to expect." His voice or posture didn't give her any clue of his feelings, but at the same time, Ginny felt helplessly exposed to his scrutiny.

A house protection spell chimed, and Severus said, "Five yards." Another four similar chimes followed. Both furrowed their brows at the last one.

"Remember: You are not supposed to have your wand, and you are my servant. I've had ample time to drill you into obedience!" She rolled her eyes while she stashed her wand up her sleeve, put on her shoes and buttoned up the jacket. Thinking of the rain, she applied an Impervius Charm on the shoulder parts and on the back of her trousers...in case she would have to sit down. Adding more would have rendered her clothes crisp, and the rustling might give her away. Severus approved of her actions and added cushioning knee spells and elbow spells on them both.

A silvery mask appeared at the left edge of the bedroom window. Severus shook his head at the ignorance. The windows gave perfect view from inside out, but the other direction was blurred. How could a guerilla fighter not know of such charms? Severus stood silently and gestured for Ginny to move back to the right corner of the outer wall. From there she could just see the profile of the man through the window, as he was illuminated by the street lights. On Severus' request, she indicated the location to him, and he inched to the corresponding place inside. With several gestures, she navigated his wand to point at eye level, wondering what spell could be powerful enough to pass through the bricks. When Ginny nodded, Severus prodded forcefully and chanted a sharp tunnelling spell that would temporarily make the wall conduct a spell. Another sharp incantation of a Sleeping Curse followed. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. With a grin, Ginny pretended to drowse off and glide down the wall as had the man outside. Severus nodded, breathing heavily, and when he assumed the wall was solid again commented, "Can't hex him severely through the wall. Half an hour."

"Another guard could be at the kitchen window."

Again, Severus nodded. "But we cannot risk moving there. And no talking now."

Creaks upstairs indicated that Draco was moving towards the kitchen side. Severus didn't look pleased, and indeed, a red sizzle shot upwards through the sitting room, aiming at the location of the noise. Ginny remembered that they usually reinforced the house protections on Thursday morning. Thus Wednesday evening was a perfect timing for the attack. Draco's next step sounded heavier than before, but they could not make out more. There was hope that he had not fallen.

Suddenly the main door broke open, and three men burst into the sitting room, creating murky puddles on the wooden floor. Glass shattered on the opposite side where the window exit to the terrace was. Severus ordered Ginny close to himself, and they inched to the side of the door. The intruders rapidly noticed that there was only one other room on this floor and entered it together, wands at the ready but not firing.

"What is the meaning of this?"

A mock-friendly voice replied, "Oh, you see, Severus, it is custom to invite your comrades for a party when you have a beautiful girl. Since you failed to follow the rite, we invited ourselves before she's gone. You know how reluctant Greyback is with sharing. You might be easier to convince." The speaker's drawing voice had a metallic touch through his masking charm.

"You'd better leave, Sullivan, before I recognise all of you!" Indeed, the stocky one of his companions showed nerves at this quick identification.

Not Sullivan, though. "You surprise me, Severus, fully dressed at night. And the young lady doesn't look so sexy in her attire either. Haven't had much fun tonight yet, have you?" He lifted the book. "A Potions text, how... er, stimulating. Hey, you, chit, tell me, is it the stirring rod that arouses you? As much as Severus' own? Or hasn't he shown it yet, shy as he is? Maybe then I could..."

"Shut up. Leave. Now."

"Oh, Severus, it would be a shame to give a virgin to old Greyback. He has no style; he cannot honour them."

"We don't need you. Go."

Mock-appraisal in his voice, Sullivan went on. "You don't? Well, you surprise me, positively, I dare say. Why don't we move to the... eh... sitting room of sorts and have a chat about the details and then enjoy ourselves before Greyback can."

"He won't get me!"

Severus hastily gripped her lower arm to stop her, but too late. She had given Sullivan a cue to dig deeper.

"Ah, the little pure-blood prefers Muggles? Do you think our master honours Gryffindors so much that he keeps his promises as they do? Oh, no, my sweet, he will have the last word," he drawled.

While the metallic voice still grated on her auditory nerves, Severus prodded Ginny, breathed, "Now!" and issued a full body bind at the speaker. Ginny, correctly assuming he would head for the spokesman, focussed on the stocky man and hexed him with the very Nerve Twitcher Hex Hermione had used on Crabbe. It rendered him unable to send focussed spells. It was non-tracing, meaning it worked without revealing the caster, a value she had learned to appreciate in discussions with Draco.

"B-bring them i-in here!" the incapacitated man stuttered as loud as he could, clenching his hand hard so he would not drop his wand as his limbs twitched in spasm.

Meanwhile a third Death Eater had gone between the two. The bluish Blocking Shield he established reverberated like a gong, its fringes flinging two books from Severus' bedside table to the floor. Severus soon engaged him in a fight; blocks and curses flew between them.

Ginny surreptitiously fortified the twitch so that the stocky intruder keeled over. He knocked his head and groaned. She was about to issue a Cutting Curse at the fighting man when she heard a familiar, rattling and everlasting breath. Her sweat froze on her forehead, and this time she knew the cold was genuine.

A Dementor swept into the room, hood deep over his face, turning towards the two of them and sucking in the air. The intruders quickly retreated to the sitting room with the command, "The man! Go for the man that holds the girl!"

Next to Ginny, Severus' whole body stiffened. Try as he would, he had never managed a corporeal Patronus...only a vague cloud. "I'm sorry," he said, while the cold surrounded them, clouding Ginny's mind. In the small room, the Dementor was so close that its powers threatened to overwhelm her. "*Expecto Patronum!*" she shrieked. She didn't have a clear enough positive image in her mind, so only an undefined silver cloud emerged from her wand. Yet, it startled the attacker for just a moment, allowing Ginny to take one normal breath. Remembering her father cuddling her, she incanted the spell again. A new cloud of silvery mist whooshed out of her wand tip, its density surprising Severus. It formed into an animal, some sort of cat, Severus thought. Ginny held her wand point steadily to her blurry, feline Patronus, which drove the Dementor to the other wall, but then faded.

A hand sneaked around her waist from behind. "You're doing excellent work," came Severus' deep voice from close behind her ear. "Once again!"

She regrouped, as Tonks had trained her and caught Severus' left hand with her left, forgetting completely who it was behind her as she felt the soft body warming her from behind. Determinedly, she shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*" This time, the cat showed distinct black rosette markings...a leopardess of maybe four feet, who defended them as if they were her cubs. Like every good leopard-mother, she held the whitish tip of her tail upright towards them. She cornered the Dementor, paced in front of it, ready to strike. When it made to advance towards them, she hissed and spit and finally roared, driving it away.

A second Dementor entered the room, and the edges of Ginny's Patronus faded. "No! You're strong!" Severus urged and encouraged her.

"*Expelliarmus!*" came Draco's voice from the other room. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" They are knocked out, Severus."

Severus tried to argue with the Dementors. "Go. We are on the same side. Our master did not order you to attack us. He will be outraged. Go! You have been listening to fools, maybe traitors. GO!" They were clearly irritated, because there was no counter-command coming. But when Ginny's Patronus faded once again, they advanced further, their rattling breath bathing them in ice.

"Ginevra, you can do it," she heard Severus' deep soft voice again, and then he gave her a peck on her cheek that warmed her skin. "Start again," he told her, and she cancelled the spell to re-initiate it with fresh force. The memory had been good enough, and the little kiss gave her a positive boost.

While she shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*" she felt his wand at her right shoulder blade and murmurs of which she only identified *for* *brte*". New energy flooded her wand arm and hand. The erupting leopardess was noticeably larger. She launched herself at the dark creatures in front of her. With awe, they observed how she gave them blow after blow with her paws, hissing dangerously until the Dementors retreated in haste.

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"Chocolate!" was her first word while she tried to stabilise herself with his arm.

She received a tender stroke on her cheek instead. "Certainly, and let's see to our visitors."

With his unexpected attack, Draco had overpowered the last unharmed Death Eater, who had apparently been occupied with the scene in the bedroom rather than watching his back. The man outside under the bedroom window was gone, as well as any potential guard at the kitchen's side.

"The best they could do," Severus muttered. He bound the four Death Eaters and cancelled their masking spell. "Avery, Sullivan, Marshall, and... Flint?!" Severus uttered in disgust. "Married for how long, two months, or three? Already bored?"

"What is it to you?" spat the youngest of the men.

"You disgust me too much to invent punishments right now. I will report you." Severus levitated them out of his house. He tossed their wands in different direction along the dark street and dropped the men hard on the asphalt. They quickly made their leave after a shell shocked Draco unbound them.

Chewing her chocolate, Ginny sat and watched the men carefully repair the door and windows and reinforce one of the wards. They swiftly dried the mud but decided to leave cleaning up the demolished sitting room for the morning.

With a whole bar of chocolate and a mug of hot tea in her stomach, Ginny found herself lying next to Severus once again, still feeble and shaking.

She turned her back to him to give him space, but reached out and pulled his left arm over herself so that he held her just as he had done when fighting the Dementors. She took his hand and laced her fingers through his. Slowly, his body heat seeped through her, and she let herself be enveloped in it. "You're really good at encouraging," she murmured before she drifted off, exhausted.

Severus couldn't but wonder over the witch in his bed. She had saved their lives without even realising it. And here she was again, slumbering in closest proximity to him, touching his left arm, the Dark Mark on her shirt, as if she had never done anything else.

Physical contact normally called back painful memories from his past. Had there been happy moments as well? The simple physical interaction most people took for granted had been out of his reach. He had convinced himself that he had no need for such feelings, such weakness. Now he discovered that she was ready to share them with him, and that this actually pleased him.

With her hair tickling his cheek, he fell asleep. In his dreams, the Dementors entered again, and he held the young witch tight, while she produced one leopardess after the other. The most beautiful and powerful ones appeared after he had kissed her.

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Thursday passed rather uneventfully. The men reinforced the house spells and repaired the furniture, but did not allow Ginny outside, which frustrated her greatly.

For the afternoon and night, Draco had an appointment with father and son Nott. They were to explore an empty estate upon its possibilities as a new stronghold. To Ginny's surprise, they came in person to fetch Draco and even offered to help with the last spells. Theodore, never the talkative one, was yet more reserved, even timid, than she remembered him. Already a glance from his former Head of House had him cowed.

Theo's father was not a man of many words either, but Ginny repeatedly sensed his look upon her. It was intense, gauging her somehow. She did not feel threatened, although she was not sure what he was looking for. His face was unreadable, and Ginny found he might be her own father's age. While he had lighter eyes and hair than his son, his voice and posture resembled Theo's greatly. His relation to Severus was businesslike, but not unfriendly.

Severus asked the man about their schedule and enquired on the risk level until Draco rolled his eyes towards Ginny. Aloud he said, "Severus, this isn't a battle. We have clear instructions. They do not include any potion making either," he noted with a grin towards Theo, who cringed, while his father uneasily shifted from side to side.

"That certainly is a relief," Severus said. "Still, you are my charge, entrusted to me by your mother as well as our master. I want to know what you're getting into."

Nott's last penetrating look at Ginny even had a component of Legilimency. Then he raised an eyebrow at Severus and ushered the two boys out.

While Severus silently worked with a set of books and a scrapbook, Ginny recalled how Nott had been a topic at the Order. They had mentioned his first name, too: Paul. Together with Draco's father, he had been caught at the Ministry and imprisoned. Several times the Ministry had the prisoners interrogated, at Azkaban, but also elsewhere. On one of these transports, Paul Nott had spectacularly escaped. He had taken down one of the guards, injured two more, and together with one other rather irrelevant captive, he had fled. For days the Order had been furious at the lack of security, especially her father. He had, for once, agreed with the sharp comments written by Rita Skeeter. Eventually, the daily business had pushed this event aside, although Paul Nott had been oddly present at the family's dinner table.

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Since Severus worked in concentration, Ginny observed him rather than disturb him. How could a life with this man possibly work out? Here in his house and in their predicaments, he was certainly easier to approach than the scowling teacher at Hogwarts had ever been. While he might not consider her intruding, she still felt more like a guest than an inhabitant of this place. Soon they would be tied together more closely than a loving couple would wish for. She could not afford to upset him. On the contrary, any positive feeling would be hers to create, for Severus did not need this as much as she did. He would not miss a nice word every now and then or consideration or respect towards his person, since he has never been used to them.

Severus' eyes could still be as cold and blank as she knew them, but every now and then, his look was warmer, kinder than normal. In these moments, Ginny hoped that she had reached through his shell. How was she to cause these moments more frequently and to last longer? In retrospect, his openness had mostly occurred after she had been successful in something, not because of her weakness or of her needs. He was a demanding person, and she would have to earn his respect.

What about love? Could she love him? Actually, it felt easier than she would have thought, although she wasn't sure if relief and gratitude overwhelmed her right now. A Severus clad in a Muggle outfit or simple robes was not unapproachable. Nor was he repulsive. True, his hair needed washing, and Toothflossing Stringmint would hardly be advertised using his smile, but he didn't keep himself untidy or filthy. Allowing or inviting Severus to come closer, to touch her, had not been agony.

In her isolation, Ginny craved for physical kindness as much as for words of encouragement. That Severus had touched her back, if only once, on his own initiative was a start.

Intimate contact? Women did survive that, didn't they? Surely, Severus would not enjoy being cruel to her in bed. His attacks had always been verbal.

The excitement of snogging and groping, Ginny knew well. True love, however, was not a matter of physical intimacy. It could not thrive without respect and honest interest in each other.

A glance around the kitchen told her that if she wanted to earn some of his respect, she'd better clean it up before he would do it. She placed plates and knives into the sink, and her thoughts went to her family. Being deprived from all connections filled her with empty sorrow. Nights ago it had driven her into bouts of agitation.

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After an early dinner, Ginny reconstructed the exchange with Sullivan from the previous night. Would he be right in the end? Would the Dark Lord really give her a choice or would Greyback get his wish granted? She couldn't help remembering how those two werewolves had looked at her on Monday. Pitying her, but somehow also... gauging her... wanting her.

"What is it, Ginevra?"

"Sullivan," she started and explained her fears.

"I don't dare promise anything," was Severus' honest answer.

"I cannot stand Greyback touching me!" She shuddered at the image of his greyish talons or his canine teeth on her skin, close to her mouth or... she ran.

Returning from the bathroom, stomach empty, she asked, "Can't you brew some poison, or... kill me?" After a short reflection, she answered herself. "No you can't, for we need you as a spy. I'm sorry, I'm ranting."

He crossed over to her, stood behind her armchair and was about to place his hand on the back of the chair. Remembering his premeditation, he forced himself to lay his hands on her shoulder instead. In silence, he made his thumbs circle over her back. "Do not think about this now. Sullivan might not even have known about Draco's idea. I do believe the Dark Lord will follow it."

"If not, Greyback will gloat in his triumph," Ginny said. Reflecting further, she suddenly pushed away, stood like petrified, her eyes widened in horror. "Oh Merlin, Severus! If Greyback boasts around how he got hold of a virgin, you are in danger as well!"

Severus froze momentarily but then found words he hoped would soothe her. However, he was unable to find the right tone of voice as he said, "It is of no importance." What he didn't want to tell her was that Greyback would harm her enough to not recognise her virginity. The thought alone froze the blood in his veins. "I'll try everything I can to help you and to find a way around this."

"I don't want him to hold a trump like this over me...or over you. Oh, Severus, I want to experience at least once, what it is like to make love with someone... before ~~he~~ rapes me." She pulled him tight, not daring to look up at him for the demand she had just uttered. She didn't know where it had come from, but all of a sudden it felt immensely important. If anyone here was to take her for the first time, then yes, only Severus!

Severus' heart beat in his throat, in his head, in his stomach, everywhere. What demand was this? He couldn't possibly... she could not want him to... His posture stiffened, and she felt it.

"Severus, please?"

He cleared his throat, wiped sweat from his forehead only to realise that his sleeves were drenched already, as was the back of his shirt. Knees weak, he turned to the sofa, but she turned with him, faced him, pleading eyes, close to tears, her hands trembling; one still on his back, the other finding its way to his chest.

His blood thumping in his neck, Severus opened two buttons of his frock to get air. He could sense that she was still looking at him. "Ginevra, I... I don't know what to say." It was a weak attempt to stall for time. *This is not like me. Either I do it or I don't. I'm not shirking or searching for excuses*In another bout of sweat, he quickly decided, "All right then."

Absent-mindedly they cleaned away the parchment, the teapot and cups. When Severus noticed that they were again stalling, he decisively took her hand and motioned her to the bathroom.

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Ginny was too shocked to protest. She moved mechanically, getting ready for... bed. After her quick shower, she noticed she didn't have Draco's clothes and put on her knickers and t-shirt again.

Before she left the room, she composed herself. This is what she had asked for, and if tomorrow brought a terrible decision, she would hold the memory dear. If she were to be allowed the best option...or the third-worst, to be honest...she would only have rescheduled the unavoidable for a few days. And there was still a risk he would refuse her after... *No*, she decided, *Severus Snape isn't superficial or picky. He'll set other priorities.* Keeping this thought in her mind, she held her head high and went to his bed.

While he was gone, Ginny's mind raced through her knowledge. Hear-say as it was, she did know a bit. Returning from Egypt, when Ginny had been twelve, Bill had been desperate since his girlfriend had left him. He and Charlie had had a talk in their sitting room, not noticing that their little sister was once again not allowed to play Quidditch with her brothers, but curled up in the grandfather chair staring out of the window, sulking.

The assistant Bill had been dating for a while had accused him of being a lousy lover. He and Charlie had exchanged some experiences. Petrified, little Ginny had listened to what seemed incredible to her. For the rest of the holiday, both of her eldest brothers had made her feel squeamish, until she had pushed the words...and the juicy or suggestive pictures her imagination had formed...into the back of her mind. She tried to remember as much as possible now.

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Seeing her walk over boldly, Severus felt even more uneasy. Was she expecting a spectacular performance?

He hadn't had a woman in years, and he had never had any who simply enjoyed being with him. In his early Death Eater years, the loner Severus Snape had been coaxed to the corresponding houses of women to 'cheer him up'. It had not appealed to him, and some woman there was probably surprised that a young man didn't want to do anything but wait for the time his friends were busy.

Between the wars, he would have had the chances at Hogsmeade, but again only with women who took money or aimed at nothing more than a one-night-stand. Worst of all had been those searching for the thrill to 'do it' with a dangerous, suspicious, but supposedly very experienced and creative Death Eater. They had sobered quickly, and after a few Memory charms, he had preferred his research in the dungeons.

Now he scanned through his brains what he had memorised from all the glorious moments he had been told about that at the time had not held any importance. Today he would need to know!

It was only so long he could spend in the bathroom, even with a shower. Oh, he could still... clip his toenails? Ridiculous! Fingernails? Better, but not really needed. Shave? Yes, he could settle for that. But even this activity was eventually finished.

With trepidation, he approached the bedroom.

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My betas, Pennfana, Jingjingchiquita and schönes Mädchen, have worked their special magic on this chapter. You would not want to read it without their improvements on language issues, and I'm thankful that I have their support.

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An Awkward First Time

Chapter 8 of 35

first lovemaking and the Dark Lord's wedding arrangements.

An Awkward First Time

Severus entered the bedroom, opened the window as always and then cast a silencing spell towards the door and another charm onto his groin. Slipping under the pre-warmed bedcover, he felt her body-heat radiate through the shirt. She was there waiting... Severus relaxed a little at her soft touch and carefully stretched his legs. She had cold feet! Simple as the fact was, it felt endearing to realise! She was lying on her side, facing him but not looking up. A sixteen-year-old girl, innocent, inexperienced. He stared at the ceiling for a short while. Noticing how impolite this was, he propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her face and shoulder.

Ginny didn't know where to look. Somewhere into the room would be what she wanted, but that was certainly rude. His face? Seeing his smirk at her hesitation? Under normal circumstances, she would have preferred to avert her gaze. This time, however, there wasn't anything to focus on. No black robes, no frock coat, nor his customary endless line of buttons. Staring at his bare chest and what came below didn't seem to be an option.

Hesitantly, she reached out an arm but not far enough to touch him. What would he expect; could she hold up to his standards? If she didn't, would he tell her, teach her? He had been so reluctant to speak about this...although he was ready to marry her. So far, almost all their contact had been her initiative, but from her brothers' talks, she had overheard that men didn't typically like bold women in their bed. Just as well, for how could she be bold if she did not know what to do?

Most likely, one starts with a kiss, Ginevra.

Dropping her suspended hand, she inched a bit closer, finally deciding to look somewhere at his face. Eyes, cheeks, mouth, hmm, it didn't look so bad, with full lips and...WOW!...he had shaved for the night! Her hand easily followed her eyes and confirmed the discovery. "Hmm, soft!"

Goodness, what had he gotten himself into? The girl was certainly straightforward. She appreciated his shaving! She was too close to keep his eyes in focus, but then with her hand on his skin he wasn't able to focus anyway! Her tender touch sent an unknown sensation through his body. "Ginevra, are you sure you want this? Tonight?"

Her hand withdrew, and she averted her gaze. "It might be my very last chance." She hesitantly formulated what sounded all too much like an old-fashioned request, but then she didn't actually know the man's expectations. "I would then not be entering our marriage innocently, is it that?"

"Salazar's beard, no!" he exclaimed in frustration over the misunderstanding and punched his fist into the pillow.

"Do you not like me enough? I'm just a girl, I know..." she broke off, her lower lip trembling.

"Ginevra, no. It is... I'm just..." Oh, she had a capacity of pressing the truth out of him! "...notusedtothismyself." So. He had said it and felt better for it as the tension in his chest loosened with his next breath.

"Oh," she uttered in a mix of surprise and, was it relief? Her hand came up to its previous position in mid-air, settling for the crook of his neck where it soon started caressing him in slow circles. She reached further to his back and pulled him slightly towards her. His eyes darted between her lips and her eyes, and slowly he lowered his lips onto hers.

Kissing was something that Ginny was confident she could do. After an initial shyness, she inhaled his scent and tasted his lips with her tongue. His broad shoulders, his lightly haired chest and arms made him far more male than her adolescent peers, which was enthralling yet frightening at the same time. She slid her lower arm under his armpit to his back and entangled her upper hand in his hair. She enjoyed having him so close, relished in the physical comfort.

Severus wasn't comfortable at all. This went too quickly, she was so bold in her actions, waking feelings and urges he had trouble reining in. He jerked away to gain his composure. He would feel better if he removed his too tight pants right now, but what would she think?

Breathe! In, out, think of nothing, not of her certainly.

She was now drawing flourishes on his upper arm, slowly proceeding to his shoulders and neck, tickling and arousing him *Ginevra, take a break!* he wanted to cry, but didn't come further than her name.

It had the opposite effect. Encouraged, she cupped his chin with her hand, drawing him close yet again. With a groan, he tilted his head away from her lips, landing on her neck instead where he soon caused her to gasp. Her breath came heavier now, driving him into madness. Even under her shirt he saw her little breast heave in excitement, felt her hardened nipple on his bare chest.

He pushed away his underwear and proceeded to do the same to her. Touching the soft skin of her thighs drove him wild. Growing more urgent, he spread her legs with his and lay heavily on her. "Ginevra, open up," he pressed, and without further ado he was inside her. Her wincing drove him higher, and he held just a moment before he thrust deep and deeper and rapidly came to a relieving climax.

Swiftly, he withdrew and rolled to the side to catch his breath.

He lay there unmoving. She might have tentatively touched his arm, but he was still too taken with his own feelings to react. Falling into a light sleep, he barely noticed when she inched away from him.

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Eventually, Severus started taking in external signals again. His bed was shaking slightly, regularly, and there were small noises from her. He tilted his head to watch her. Somewhere in the mess of pillow, shirt and hair she must be. He leaned over, stroking lightly over her head, and the noise became louder. Sobs? Was she crying? "Ginevra?"

It was dark outside now, but the waxing moon stood directly over the tree. *Wait a moment, then it is around 11 p.m. Have I fallen asleep? Since when has she been sobbing? Why?* "Ginevra, what is it?" He tentatively searched for her shoulder and turned her on her back into the ray of moonlight. Her eyes were puffy, her face wet with tears; this was not what he had expected. "Ginevra. What? Tell me, whatever it is..." She rolled away.

Frustrated, Severus rose to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to her. He set his elbows on his knees and held his face in his hands. Something was wrong...terribly wrong. "Ginevra, what have I done?"

Looking down in his lap he saw blood. Of course, her blood. How could he have ignored that! With an "I will be right back," he headed for the bathroom, snatching his boxers. After cleaning himself, he selected a gentle ointment for sore skin, wet-warm towels and also brought a glass of water back to her.

He wavered at the edge of the bed, offering the water first, "Ginevra?" When she didn't react, he tried again, "Please, let me ease your pain." Slowly he reached for her shoulder to get her attention, "I'll remove the cover now, and I need a bit of light." She didn't object. Kneeling beside her, he covered her generously with the towel and gently washed her blood away, not looking too closely at her.

Hesitantly, he kissed her forehead. "My apologies, I... I was not attentive." At least she nodded. "The ointment will further sooth your skin, if you will?" He offered her the tin, but she didn't take it, just stared at him expectantly.

Desperate now, he declared with force, "Ginevra, I am neither patient nor skilled at dealing with emotional matters. Tell me what you wish me to do."

What should she tell him? A part of her wanted him to snuggle close to her to make amends; the other wished him to leave her alone. She remained unresponsive.

Severus lay down next to her and covered them both against the night chill. When they were warmer, he once again suggested the ointment with a practical voice. "You should apply the ointment now because I know it will help. Whatever else there is, we can discuss. Now, tomorrow, or another time."

No reaction.

With a huff, he started applying the cream himself, under the cover to keep warm...and to keep his eyes off. This was a medical aid and nothing else. He started with her inner thighs that had been red and swollen from his unconcerned actions.

Soon she caught him with a warm kiss, breathing heavily. He stopped abruptly, withdrawing his hand, averting his eyes. "My apologies." This had all gone wrong!

Ginny collected all her courage. "Would... would you continue? Please?"

His breath hitched. Not wrong? She wanted his touch? Still wanted it after he had not paid attention to the foreplay, had not given any thought to her! "I skipped this?" Another kiss and a fearful nod.

He still wasn't sure what to do. The experiences he had, had tended fully to the client's, that is the male's, needs. What was it a woman would want? Too ashamed of himself to look at her, even in the near dark, he hid his face in her hair. He wanted to ask her, but no words passed his lips. He wormed his hand under hers so she could guide him.

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When the crescent of the moon left the last twigs of the tree, Severus held a positively beaming Ginevra in his arms. He had roamed her body, stroked and teased her, growing bolder with her reaction until she had been rejoicing, whimpering under his touch. Severus had no words for what this felt like!

Loosely spooning, with his left arm on her belly, they relaxed. When her even breath showed that she was asleep, Severus still reconsidered those last few minutes. It had given him so much pleasure to please her as he could only dream about. He had not had any further release himself, had not felt the need. This was an unexpected concept, that he would enjoy the act of giving and in return getting... touches, strange sounds and a kiss. As a deep internal calm spread inside his body, he finally fell asleep.

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Sometime in the small hours, Ginny awoke. Severus' breath came steadily from behind her. Outside, the sky had turned from black to a lighter grey, promising daylight, but no sunshine. This was nothing new these days. She moved gently to feel for her arms and legs, her joints and finally the part of her body that had changed last night, had been changed forever.

Her need for the loo jarred her into action. Very carefully, she withdrew herself, but the bed creaked when she stood.

When she regarded her image in the old, tarnished mirror, it looked as it always had. Yet, she felt so different that the glass should have cracked or got boils, should it not? Inspecting herself, she was impressed at what the ointment had achieved: she was not sore any more, not the least bit of swelling or irritated skin. She briefly considered last night, remembering that Charlie had botched it with his first girlfriend, too. It had not been the end of the world because the woman had understood.

To freshen up, she brushed her teeth and washed before she quietly made her way back, remembering that Severus had looked past her getting up, although she was sure he must have woken up.

He had turned. A streak of hair covered half of his face. Lifting the duvet as little as possible, Ginny crawled back into the warmth. "Sorry," she said. No answer. "Don't pretend you are sleeping," she tried again, but Severus lay still as a stone, or so he tried.

"All right," she huffed, "then don't speak," and slowly turned away, wondering... A tentative hand connected with her elbow, but when she moved, it slid off to hold her hip. It felt colder than her skin, although it had been she who had gone out. It was shaking, too, and when Ginny interlaced her fingers with Severus' to still his tremble, they got sweaty. She turned on her back but he had hardly moved. "Severus?"

Hearing his name sent a shiver through his body, she felt it clearly. Slowly he worked his jaws, gripping her hand tightly when he croaked, "Why are you coming back? I hurt you."

Rapidly she propped herself up and pulled his shoulder down to turn him towards her, although she didn't go so far to make eye contact. She whispered, "Have we not rectified it?"

"How can you say that?" he breathed.

"It's what I think we did."

"Don't be ridiculous." His croaking voice came louder and harder than he intended.

Ginny stiffened. "Ridiculous. I see." She opened her hand and withdrew from his grip, her first leg reaching for the floor.

"No!" Severus almost shouted into the quiet of the night as he rolled over. "Don't leave, Ginevra!" He tried to get a hold on her but she slipped away. His brains worked like mad, how to keep her here? "Ginevra, stay. Please?"

It must have been the right thing to say, for she stopped and looked into his eyes. They were as anxious as she had ever seen them. Slowly she returned, and when he took her into his arms, she settled back comfortably. His body-heat seeped into her, making her drowsy. A car drove by, breaking the utter silence.

Severus murmured, "I was convinced you were gone to return to your bed, or sofa."

"It would have been a bad start," she murmured. "Sleep, Severus."

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Severus felt uneasy due to a stiff right arm. He tried to roll over, but was blocked. Ginevra! Last night! Him botching it! Then discovering her properly, without haste, only for her. She was still here, and so very close. After hugging her in gratitude, he removed his arm carefully and headed for the bathroom.

"Good morning, Severus," he was greeted on his return.

"Ginevra, good morning!" The cold in the room had him shivering, and he crawled back under the cover when she offered it. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful."

He arched his eyebrow at the hearty comment. "Do not say so if it isn't true."

"I'm... really fine, Severus." She turned, and their eyes locked. "And you?"

He twirled a strand of hair from her temples with his forefinger and craned to kiss her chastely on her cheeks for lack of a verbal reply. To his surprise, she turned her head, caught his lips with her own and answered his kiss. Soon her hand was in the nape of his neck, effectively preventing him from drawing back. When they finally broke their kiss, Severus felt his cheeks flushing and found similar signs in her face.

It wasn't even eight o'clock, and Draco had been out till late. They had ample time. Severus decided he would show her just how well he felt this morning.

His hand revisited the places she had guided him to last night. Again, he felt an asymmetry, a feature he had not expected. His scientific mind could not let this pass without inspection, so he swiftly bent his knee and pulled the duvet down with his foot to expose their torsos. Her left breast looked juvenile as he knew from life experience or the covers of magazines for men. Her right side though... the nipple lay a little higher and escaped his finger, sulking, slipping away. That needed further examination, and he concentrated hard on what he saw and felt, oblivious to the frown on his face.

Ginny had feared this moment for years. When she had regarded herself in the mirror, the conversation between Bill and Charlie had repeatedly plagued her mind, and many times she had wondered just how a boyfriend of hers would react. When she was older, Molly Weasley had dispelled her anxiety with practical words. Despite the retracted nipple, her breast could be made functional for feeding a baby, which was its purpose. If a boy or man could not overlook an aesthetic point as this, he wasn't the right one anyway, and it was only good to realise it in time. Easy to say!

If Severus took offence, there wasn't anyone else to bail her out. Contrary to her assumption, he did more than a double check. Even in the dim light, she saw his brows furrow and Greyback's ugly grimace popped up in her mind, mocking her. She threw her head violently left and right to rid herself of the horrifying image.

He rapidly withdrew his hand, still in irritation over his discovery. "Did I hurt you?" he uttered as he stilled her head with his hand. Their eyes locked, and he saw a glimpse of Greyback before she rolled away from him. "What has the Werewolf got to do with this?" His question was void of all sarcasm, showing only his bewilderment.

"Ginevra, look at me," Severus demanded when she did not reply. "I told you I'm not good at guesswork in these matters. What is it?" His hand found her cheek again, and he spoke more tenderly, prompting her to explain herself.

"If you can't approve of... this... me..."

"Approve? You imagined I would withdraw my offer? *On that?* Look at me," he commanded, pointing on several scars crossing his chest. "I'm myself to blame for them...or for most. What right would I possibly have?"

"Some... some would. I had not expected you to, but... your brows..." Ginny pulled up both hands to cover her face.

Just to make a point, he kissed the very place. Checking carefully that he would not hurt her, he repeated what he had done earlier. He paid attention to make her react equally on both sides, even if the right needed more caressing to cause it. Tears of relief rolled down her cheek, and for once, all was good.

As Severus paused to look at her, Ginevra's hand roamed his front and hesitantly inched downwards. Around his navel, she paused. "Severus, show me how?"

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Hours later, Draco accompanied the two to the Dark Lord, who had gathered about half of the Inner Circle together for the decision on Ginny's future. She was led into a separate room, and Draco promised to stay close. He peeped into the main room. The Death Eaters were standing in a crescent around their master who resided in an upholstered wing chair on a pedestal.

A lengthy debate began, but Draco didn't hear the details. The fat supervisor of the Muggle hooligans, Fenrir Greyback, and lastly Severus would be asked to present their need for the captive. The first candidate made a few points but was not convincing.

Next, Greyback's rasping bark carried through the whole house as he argued for his case. His effort to prolong the wolfish state showed disgusting signs of success. With permanent patches of fur on his forehead and the backs of his hands, he looked more menacing than half a year ago on the Astronomy Tower. His longish snout sported pointed canine teeth. His gnarled claw-like fingers clenched and unclenched while Severus made his point. Draco preferred not to imagine how he looked under his too tight robe.

Severus might appear composed, but to the few who could read him a little, his anxiety was obvious. He was given more time, and their master continued questioning him. At least twice Draco saw clear signs of Legilimency. What pictures would Severus present? Arriving late last night, he had seen that the sofa wasn't even Transformed into the makeshift bed. They had been in very good mood indeed over their late breakfast.

The high-pitched voice turned to Draco. "Bring Weasley in!"

He removed the ward from the room and went in. "Come now," he ordered briskly but continued in a low, friendly voice, "Severus was questioned and submitted to Legilimency much longer than the others."

Draco led Ginny into the centre of the room. Severus had explained to her, that under these circumstances, the interrogated was supposed to answer loudly and clearly, for all to hear. She had come so far, she certainly could do that. She did her curtsies as she had been instructed and kept her eyes averted. "My Lord."

"Weasley. Stand and look at me." This sharp command had no resemblance to Tom Riddle's coaxing, for which she was immensely grateful.

He scanned her memory of the last week. She concentrated hard on her Occlumency as well as on not revealing this concentration. He checked through her interactions with Severus. Shopping and their discussion on the way home. The cooking sessions, evening talks. Of course, he looked for different scenes of physical interactions and found the events of last night. She didn't show him all her frustration, but let him believe it had been quite fine, even if not perfect.

Trying to catch her off guard, he repeatedly fished for memories of before her capture, but found nothing he hadn't known yet. Nor did he find anything about certain werewolves visiting them.

The Dark Lord very thoroughly examined the night-time attack with Dementors. From Ginny's understanding, he was most interested in her capability to cast a Patronus. Maybe she should not have had her wand? Quickly, she showed him the scene when she asked for the wand and then rendered her clothes water repellent.

Finally, he seemed satisfied. In a flourish of generosity, he addressed her, "Young lady, you have been presented with three options. Tell us what you have chosen."

She breathed, set up a dismayed face, if not for him then at least for the round. "With my Lord's permission, out of the three options you presented, I'd rather select the last one, marrying Severus Snape, be a devoted, faithful wife and found a family with him."

The Dark Lord nodded. "So it shall be. The nuptials will take place December twelfth. You will be informed about the details in due time." In a gracious wave, he ordered her to stand next to Severus, and she retreated slowly, walking backwards, always facing him.

The contact person for the Muggle street gang shrugged. There would be other victims. His boys were not choosy.

Greyback's face, however, had frozen at his master's gracious gesture. He rushed a few steps into the circle and addressed their master with just the slightest indication of a hasty bow. "My Lord, we have been waiting for a witch like her. We cannot take just any girl; they don't last. We need witches, pure-bloods if possible."

"*Crucio!*" The werewolf wriggled on the floor but no sound escaped. For what felt like an endless amount of time, the Dark Lord let him suffer, reinforcing the spell every so often. Severus shifted to Ginny's side so that the back of their hands could touch. At long last, Greyback screamed.

Releasing the curse, their master waited to be thanked. Then he stared at Greyback and intoned coldly, "Be glad I have punished you but lightly for the moment. I'm developing another nice curse to keep you all disciplined. As for your sexual desire, Fenrir, you'd better not wear your playmates out so quickly! Get out of my sight!"

This time Greyback bowed as deeply as his rangy, but wolfish, bones permitted, his body trembling in the effort of straightening up again. He left with a malevolent growl towards Severus and Ginny. Murmurs rose from the far side of the room while most of those closer to the door wiped their nose as he passed. Draco backed into Ginny's waiting room and didn't come out as long as the stench of sweat and dirt dwelt in the corridor.

When everyone had settled again, Severus advanced just two steps towards the centre and faced the Dark Lord. He bowed obsequiously. "My Lord?" In contrast to Greyback, he stopped there and thus avoided the punishment.

"Severus?"

"I wish to thank you, my Lord, for this great gift with which you have presented me on this day. I will strive to prove myself worthy of it and of the great honour of remaining in your service."

"Severus, of all that I require from you now, my greatest command is this...that you shall sire many children, that the next generation of Death Eaters may be multiplied so that they, in their great number may subdue the Earth! Do not fail me, Severus!"

Severus bowed deeply. He didn't continue speaking out of turn but he didn't retreat either. Ginny saw his little finger roll minutely against the ring finger in nervousness. Their master's voice assumed a tone of annoyance as he asked, "Is there anything else, Severus?" Ginny's chest tightened. *Did I just consider him our master? Mine as well?*

"My Lord, may I enquire about the status of my fiancée. I understand that she needs to be restricted, but I have business to attend to. I will be more efficient about it, if I have got your edict against ill-wishers like the recent attackers."

"Indeed." The red eyes that never blinked turned from one Death Eater to the next as he continued, "The fiancée of a member of the Inner Circle is to be given our full respect. Everyone present here is to propagate this directive to his charges." He looked around sharply, and no one dared even a murmur. "Given her history you would not let her run loose. She is to be seen as under probation, very much like young Malfoy here. Can you pursue your duties with this arrangement?"

"I can, Master. Thank you for your generous support, my Lord." He advanced, bent and kissed the hem of their sovereign's robe.

They made their leave shortly after. Murmurs among the Death Eaters and glances towards the unlikely couple accompanied them to the Apparition point.

Inwardly, Ginny was beaming but didn't show any of it before they had entered their house at Spinner's End. There, however, she whirled around and hugged Severus strongly and laughed and cried at the same time, blatantly ignoring his startled look.

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In the afternoon, Severus hesitantly handed Ginny a tall beaker full of cherry-red, fizzling potion. "A contraceptive, Ginevra."

Draco stiffened, and his face rapidly shifted from red to green.

Ginny nodded. One could get such a potion at the hospital wing. It was to be taken once a month, after the menstrual period had ended. "Are you going to admonish me, berate me... deliver all the warnings Madam Pomfrey provides with it?"

Amused, Severus replied. "I consider it not adequate in this case. As it appears, you know them anyway."

"We *do* share dormitories, bathrooms and a common room."

"And gossip."

"It is called girls' talk," she declared with force, then looked into the beaker. "All right then, this stuff tastes like a troll's fart, makes me want to puke for three minutes, and in half an hour I face the same again?"

"Basically, yes. It is still the best there is, Ginevra. In the heat of the moment, a spell can be forgotten or wrongly applied in as many variations as Professor Flitwick can list. Outside marriage, a girl...or woman...should never rely on the partner, anyway. Which does not..." he added forcefully towards the staircase, where Draco had just disappeared. "...free men from their responsibility." He steered her to the sofa.

Ginny sat down, held her nose and drank the stuff down in one. "Not as bad as they said," she judged.

"I took the liberty to make it more palatable than Hogwarts batches. As I said, you do not need the educational part." He smirked. Ginny's outrage at the idea that Severus and Madam Pomfrey had deliberately provided a foul-tasting variant was overpowered by the first bout of sickness. With a grunt she glided down, and Severus swung her feet up to suspend them over the armrest.

Ginny was glad to notice that he did not leave her until she stood up, and he stayed with her through the second beaker, too. Madam Pomfrey had regularly demanded a similar support from the boys in question, and equally regularly they had found most important business to attend to just during these 35 minutes a month, or the girls had refused to even deliver the request. This solidarity had to be one more difference between a teenager and a grown man.

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Draco and Severus alternately received tasks for their master, and in the next two days, Ginny and Severus had little time to talk. To take her mind off things, she took up his advice and made herself familiar with his library. As she followed the first years of *Oliver Twist*, she was glad Severus had suggested a different book the other day.

On Sunday, they met again with the Dark Lord and a selection of Death Eaters for the last wedding preparations. The Dark Lord beckoned the couple into the middle of the circle where, once again, they curtsayed and bowed, respectively.

"We need to discuss ceremony and the contract details," the Dark Lord started. The cold, red eyes of his snakelike face moved from Ginny to Severus and back. "Topic number one, re-housing." His eyes locked with the bride's brownish-blue ones. Fully aware of the rite, Ginny was puzzled at this suggestion. Murmurs on the rows behind her confirmed her. "Severus, I'm afraid we cannot execute it right away, but you know that the contract can require it for a later date. After five years, or after the male heir is born, maybe?"

Severus' mind was racing. Why had he not expected this? Certainly, he was not willing to break the young girl's spirit, but how to formulate it convincingly? Could he even let it appear as an asset?

"My Lord," he began, "I realise that my bride shows the distinct qualities of her house. A ridiculous sense of absolute justice, but especially an unbroken courage, as you will have noticed. She does have quite a temper as well." He paused for a long breath. "I have come to enjoy this. I relish in the opportunity to challenge her, conquer her temper. I truly cherish her pride that I expect her to teach our children as well."

He turned to his bride who was facing him now with an unreadable expression. "Coercing her, provoking her, ensnaring her and seeing how she melts is enthralling! What a loss it would be to subdue her with a couple of potions and spells and find her always ready to my bidding. Never to experience this excitement again." He gently tipped her chin up with his index finger causing their eyes to lock.

Merlin, these dark, fierce eyes of his! They looked at her with an incredible tenderness, showed an affection she wouldn't have known he could possess. His mouth came closer still. "I would much rather grow with the challenge she presents." And he kissed her, chastely, softly, lovingly. Could this all be a farce, a well staged act, only for the Dark Lord?

She relished in the sweet moment, but internally her Gryffindor pride was already protesting. The Dark Lord observed her closely. Her temper was going to show, she could hardly avoid it. She turned away from Severus and to their master, who appeared to enjoy himself. Shortly their eyes locked, and she saw... *oh, yes!*

"Miss Weasley, you are about to burst," the Dark Lord chuckled, although one should call it cackle. "Do enlighten us with your opinion, will you?"

And so she burst: "How so very egocentric of you, my groom. You seem to forget that I am the pure-blood of us. My family shows quite a steady line of Gryffindors, with a few members of other houses. Of *all three* other houses, mind you."

Severus felt cold sweat run down his neck and back. He feared for the worst. If she enraged the Dark Lord now, all could be lost. "My Lord, you see, her temper," he threw in and squeezed her hand in a desperate hope for her to stop.

But Ginny was not to be stopped here. "My temper? You should be glad that I'm not insisting on pushing my temper alone on our children. You ought to be aware that I have all rights to request *your* re-housing. I would not be the first pure-blood bride to do so when marrying a half-blood." She had spoken herself into a fighting mood by now and had retreated three steps from him. Her cheeks and neck crimson, her eyes looked at him with fury. Her arms trembled, her hands shook. To Severus she was more beautiful, more entrancing than ever, but he would not dare mention this now...if ever. This was a marriage of predicaments!

He could only hope the Dark Lord would be forgiving today and let her live.

With two deep collecting breaths, she approached him. Her body under full control again, she tenderly lifted her right hand to his chin and purred, "But I don't. Re-housing is neither in my family tradition...oh yes, my *wizard family* has a set of traditions...nor is it in my personal list of values." She locked her eyes with his again and continued in another purr, "I rather love to flirt with you, to seduce you." Here she stroked along his cheekbone, and he had trouble to keep his eyes open.

She turned and proclaimed with steady voice, "No, My Lord, I would not exchange this man with the empty shell that would remain if we re-housed such a complex, multi-layered personality as his."

It was Severus' turn to fume in fury. He barely kept his emotions in check.

For some of the assembled Death Eaters, it was the first time to see their master laugh. Even with his disgustingly shrill, nasal voice, it was clear how much he had enjoyed himself. Feet shuffled on the floor at this unexpected behaviour. "My loyal servants, my dear Severus, honourable Gryffindor Ginevra..." he bowed slightly towards her, "...I believe we can expect some entertainment and a set of very capable children from you. I would not endanger that prospect with a re-housing clause."

Severus exhaled a breath he had not known he was holding. Several Death Eaters braved into joining the Dark Lord's laughter.

The Dark Lord turned to a group of younger women. "There are more things to discuss. Serena, Barbara, Ariana, you still have your wedding dresses and accessories, don't you? You will help out this young bride in need." He looked over their heads. "Narcissa, you invite the young ladies tomorrow morning and see that the young bride is well equipped." It wasn't a question.

Paul Nott and three tall bridegrooms from the last group weddings were ordered to assist Severus in a similar manner.

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Their master gathered a certain, male-dominated group, and the meeting turned to business. An elf served refreshments.

The younger women had either never been active or were now exempted from active service, waiting for pregnancy that was so hard to achieve these days. Ginny idly talked to them for a while, but removed herself soon. She looked around, and her eyes fell on the Notts. She noted that the woman was easily in her own mother's age. A no-nonsense woman, from the look of it, who kept herself aloof from the other women and certainly from the likes of Narcissa Malfoy.

Fathers of Ginny's peers tended to be much younger, or rather: they had so few children that none was coming as late as she had, she corrected herself. The Notts must have had Theo well past the usual time to found a family.

Now, Paul Nott was to arrange the outfit for Severus. When he turned towards her and their eyes locked, she noticed she must have been staring at him and quickly averted her eyes.

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Back home, before Ginny could even open her mouth, Severus let out his anger. "What were you thinking? You endangered the whole project. He... he could have you killed any time for this impertinence."

"No, Severus, I was *absolutely* sure he would not."

He barely acknowledged that, clenched his fists and continued. "How dare you humiliate me in front of people I demand to respect me, to fear me? Within minutes I lost all the honour I've built up in years!"

Quietly and without being stung by his harsh words or his menacing voice, Ginny waited. Since her groom was hardly a person of a thousand words, his tirade ended soon enough. Softly, she said, "Severus, trust me." She took his hand into hers, and he didn't withdraw it. "You perfectly impersonated the groom in love, which was expected, wasn't it?" Her voice slightly rising, she ended her talk. "And it was you who started this baiting."

He collected himself a bit. "Probably it was. I provoked you. However, Ginevra, you are still a prisoner depending on his mercy. You insulted a member of the Inner Circle, a Slytherin, a hero in their eyes. Do you even imagine how dangerous this was?"

"I saw into his mind," Ginny quipped.

Severus Snape in a loss of words, mouth agape...it was a sight Ginny would not forget. "Merlin, don't tell anyone. He would kill you in an instant! What did you see?"

She had his full attention now. "It happened twice. The first time was when he started the discussion on re-housing. Remember, he looked at me all the time, although he talked to you. I had my mind Occluded firmly, showing him only random pictures of Bill's wedding. Suddenly I saw something else. A man... Goyle senior, younger than today, maybe twenty-five. A dominant woman in a wedding dress and a formidable, elderly man, undoubtedly her father. He spat at the groom, who sported a shawl in Hufflepuff colours. Then I remembered what Fred and George told me: Goyle's mother is an only child, and the heir. She was to wed a Slytherin, but fell so terribly for Goyle, that finally her father accepted him...with immediate re-housing. It has added his brains, as you well know."

"So all the time while I was... err... teasing you... you knew what the Dark Lord wanted?"

She nodded. "You did not realise that he never indicated who would be Re-housed. Egocentric bat of the dungeon that you are. This is a pure-blood rite, Severus. Noble families in the Dark Lord's lair would have been outraged!"

She added extra-nicely, "But you didn't mock me, I hope?"

Severus preferred not to answer. "What was the second occasion?"

"After that wonderful kiss you gave me." Her pause didn't help her read his face. "The Dark Lord provoked me, remember? When he all but invited me to explode, his mind was on that banquet, on the occasion when that imbecile, Avery, clapped my arse, and how I almost smacked him. The Dark Lord waited for me to set you right, he *wanted* to see the Gryffindor courage and temper. After your... detailed elaboration, it wasn't too difficult to obey him."

When Severus didn't answer, Ginny went to the kitchen and returned shortly with tea and chocolate biscuits. Jerking her chin towards the sofa she offered, "Can we call it a draw? We don't have time for this now."

He nodded. "But Ginevra, *beextremely* careful with this Legilimency." He cupped her chin and forced her attention to him. "He must not suspect. Do not try it on your own initiative." The couple went over and sat down. It had been a long evening, and they enjoyed the first cup of tea in a comfortable silence.

Hesitantly, Severus asked, "Ginevra, you spoke of some traditions your family holds. Are they linked to marriage? Something we should discuss?"

Ginny stiffened. Here they were, now she would have to face it. "Yes, one is. However, depending on the circumstances, I would possibly break this tradition. I'm sure my parents would understand, although..."

There was nothing for it. With trembling voice, gripping his hand tightly with suddenly shaky, sweaty hands, she began. "Severus, for this I need to know how you... how you feel about the whole arrangement. What you said back there, in the circle..." She didn't know how to continue. "How you looked at me... how we... how we kissed." Merlin, this was hard.

She had his full attention now and quickly finished. "Was it what you really feel?"

Her whole demeanour showed anxiety, her chest moved with each breath. She really wanted to know? It didn't seem like she would pity him for his... what? His feelings for her? He suddenly found it hard to breathe, hard to swallow, hard to look into her pleading eyes. "I told you and I showed you how I feel, Ginevra."

She almost collapsed on the table, pulling his hand towards her. "Then I want to ask you about the form of the marriage."

To get it over with, she related in quick words. "My family normally goes for the pure-blood fidelity fast binding. Soul binding and all. There are certain charms invoked, such as the presence of the partner's ring fortifying any protective shield charm one partner casts over both. The other can attack more freely."

She looked up at him, and her speech slowed down. "The rings furthermore protect against sexual assault. But... this comes with a spell for lifelong fidelity, Severus."

By the four founders, how can she consider this? A wave of warmth passed through him. She had true feelings for him. Or she believed she had, which was already more than he could have hoped for. Yet, he could not force this on her, even if today she believed she wanted it! How to refuse the idea without refusing her? "I see the advantages, certainly in your protection.

"But you are only sixteen, Ginevra. This... this is not the right thing to do, not with the predicament you are in. I could not face your family...if ever it comes to that. You will soon feel that you've missed something in life. Face it; you have already missed too much in your youth. You want to see something, want to meet the world," he swallowed, "other men."

"Severus, we are supposed to have a child. Now. They take years to grow up."

"Even if we assume the unlikely, that is, I survive the war, even escape Azkaban, what will be in fifteen or twenty years? You could be free then, under forty years old, about as old as I am now."

Her fingers loosened. When she answered her voice was hollow and hoarse, her look empty. "You want to be free after the war. I understand."

Severus flinched. "No, not that! I chose the worst comparison to say this. I, for myself, have had enough loneliness in my life. I am not craving for more. Whatever freedom I might want would not be freedom from you. Freedom from the circumstances, the war. Freedom from the constant demands of my father, Abraxas Malfoy, the Dark Lord, Dumbledore and now the Dark Lord again. Do you understand?"

The name of Draco's grandfather registered in Ginny's mind, but she did not probe. "Yes. I miss such freedom myself. It was nice to travel to Egypt. Today, even the most boring visits to my aunts and uncles would be welcome."

He huffed. This was barely the freedom he meant. Her idea showed again how little she knew. Still, the statement sobered him. "I will not be able to afford travelling. Never Egypt, Ginevra. I cannot even provide you with a decent house. You will eventually want to escape a place like this one." His arm showed around the cramped, ugly sitting room.

"I do not have a job either," he added.

"It isn't... so different from The Burrow." That was an understatement, but she didn't care. "I'm not spoiled. You can always work as a potions developer. Remember, there are so many dunderheads in need of ready-made potions. You can sell Wolfsbane commercially. I'm sure we will come up with something profitable enough."

Ginny regarded the sitting room with a critical eye now. "When tiny little hands start to decorate them with lime marmalade, the books tend to move to other places. Instead, there will be toys, socks, boots and pets to trip over. Racket all day long, plus most nights. *This* is what you have to consider, Severus, not if you can afford a journey around the world. Oh, and there will be visits to grandparents and six uncles, don't forget those." She hesitated. "Severus, are you ready to accept that?"

He considered this at length, his face showing no emotions whatsoever. Ginny smiled at him.

After more silent contemplation he said, "But Ginevra, we are talking about it as if there is a choice. *We* are getting married, and as the war stands *we will* have a child. If I can wrangle it, there will be only one before you finish your education. By that time, the war will be over, one way or another. What we should discuss are the options thereafter, the binding we submit ourselves to. I do not know these spells he uses; I cannot say if they could be broken."

"If you want to be free after the war..."

"All the freedom I crave for would be a mental freedom. I should think that I can enjoy that with a family, with a child or more. And with the woman I... the woman I..." He continued in barely a whisper, "respect."

Ginny's heart rejoiced. He would, of course, not use the word love, not yet, not now.

More firmly he said, "The question is, do they want me, will they let me?"

"Why would they not?"

"Can you know this today? With what you propose, you would be tied to me in forty years or even in sixty."

"A demand for a regular consummation of the marriage is not included. That is the Dark Lord's surplus, and he has oh-so-generously limited that to three children. We could separate, also for a month, let's say for research, or for study. If... if you want to."

"We should discuss about what *you* might want to. What are the alternatives to the fidelity fast binding, do you know?"

"Of course! There is the Muggle-like marriage, allowing divorce any time. A pair of rings mainly for their beauty and to no real advantage. They bless the rings the same way, but it isn't more than a farce. Trelawney could do that," she related with little enthusiasm. "The consummation and obligation to have children are add-ons, as before."

"This form legitimises the children in equal ways, doesn't it?"

"Yes. The public has no inkling as to the form of the wedding anyway. I've always pitied people taking half the step. If you know it's right, why not go for all of it. Look at my parents. They would go mad without each other."

"The Malfoys..."

"...took half the step. Draco told me so. It is common with families demanding re-housing. Most end up taking a lover."

"Lucius is in Azkaban, and if the Order wins, he has hardly a chance to get out. Ginevra, if I do not die, I will most likely end up there just like him."

"Don't you *dare* die out there!"

She could not know how this outburst hit him emotionally. His world was being turned upside down. Until recently, dying immediately after his master had fallen under the hand of Harry Potter had been his dearest wish. In the past few days, his wishes started to rearrange themselves along the lines she needed or wanted. Nothing was as it used to be.

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My undying respect and warmest thanks go to my betas, Jingjinchiquita and Hollime199 for their support. They helped me tremendously in making this story consistent as well as readable.

Confrontations and Wedding Preparations

Chapter 9 of 35

As they prepare for the wedding as well as Ginny's life in her new home, she is confronted with the world of Muggle clothes, and she leads Severus through unknown aspects of the world of wizards. Severus himself is back to the dreadful tasks in the everyday life of a Death Eater.

Confrontation and Wedding Preparations

Since Draco was going to stay at his mother's for the night, it was Paul Nott who came to pick Ginny up and bring her back to Spinner's End on Monday. He didn't say much, but he looked at her several times as if searching for something as they passed along the dreary rows of dilapidated houses.

It couldn't escape Severus' eyes how she slowly turned her head left and right, taking in the whole room, resting her eyes on a chair, the sideboard, a bookshelf. Finally she nodded, her shoulders dropped, and she breathed heavily before she took up her packages again to quickly disappear into the bedroom.

Severus was suddenly awkwardly aware of the shabbiness that had not bothered him for a long time. When he entered the crammed sitting and dining room, hovering a plate of sandwiches and the pot of tea, Ginny stood in the doorframe intently watching her forefinger trace over a scratch in the wood.

Severus remembered all too clearly how he had envied Lucius the first time he had set foot into the immaculate Malfoy manor in Wiltshire. It had been the summer holidays before his fourth year when Lucius had been out of school already. He had done everything, even endured the humiliation of acting as Lucius' training target in Abraxas Malfoy's special lessons, wishing for nothing more dearly than to earn their respect. He had impressed the older Malfoy with his knowledge and magical abilities, and the praise had stroked his ego. Only the permanent washing and the fuss the elves had made about the clothes he had been expected to wear had annoyed him so much that he had gladly left them behind as he had returned to school. How could Severus have known about Lucius' motive to keep a foot in Slytherin house, where a charming Narcissa Black was surrounded by boys, and to take his father's mind off from the son's dubious second life? Abraxas Malfoy had at least partially been altruistically motivated. He had fancied himself in the role of the generous patron as long as it didn't cost too much, especially with the appraising press this step had earned him. In Severus Snape he had also found a person easier to manipulate than his own son.

Severus' eagerness to please the Dark Lord had possibly stemmed from there.

After half of their lunch had passed in an increasingly awkward silence, Severus could hardly stand the tension. He wished to hear her comment, dreading it at the same time. She had, after all, immediately compared his pitiful house with Malfoy Manor, had she not? Severus lifted his gaze to consider her.

Silently, Ginny ate the hearty, simple meal that gave her jaws more to work than the soft, sweet, white biscuits Narcissa had served. With every other bite, she lifted her head to assess the strange mood lying over them. Severus kept staring down as if his plate could divulge a secret if he applied Legilimency on it. Finally, as she was about to finish, his hand slipped through his hair, uncovering most of his face. *He looks apprehensive.* Ginny tilted her head and answered the unspoken question. "Their house and grounds, the way these people move, how they converse... it is so different from The Burrow. I must get along with them, mustn't I?" Severus merely raised an eyebrow, and now Ginny could not interpret him. "I take it as a yes. Well," she huffed, "I sorely needed the experience, in that case."

"I doubt the plans of the Dark Lord include my getting of a villa or a manor with elves. You can take this hope off the list."

"What do you mean? I don't want it, no thank you." At his dubious look, she explained, "All their perfection makes the place cold and without personality." She frowned, deeply considering how best to explain what she meant, using examples of Severus' life. "Take... err, books. Look around. This shelf holds books you read frequently. Their covers show creases; a few of their pages sport a blot of ink or are dog-eared. This one protrudes from the line, and here we have a bookmark. At the Malfoys', all books are most carefully arranged in the shelves. I could not detect which had been read today, yesterday, this week, which are read twice a year and which have possibly never been touched after entering the shelves."

"Many belong to the latter category," Severus confirmed. He gradually registered that she was not enthralled by the wealth and affluence she had seen. She had seen the mask, even if Severus doubted that she had looked behind it to see the loneliness, cruelty and sadness that it covered.

"I don't exactly mean that. I don't really want to know. Although I would not understand why someone would buy books if not for enjoying them. Or then schoolbooks," she added with feeling.

His eyebrow rose. "Which subjects are you referring to?"

"All except for two. Satisfied?"

"Don't play the Slytherin, Ginevra."

"I told you, I've a bit of Slytherin blood as well. But the Malfoys..." she resumed her report "...are so full of themselves. Even Draco, who is rather, uh*normal*, while he is here, changes his personality in that house. He becomes colder, more calculating, cunning, and also possessive, of course. I was shown upstairs to admire the rooms and the garden. It's huge enough to fit two Quidditch pitches with visitor stands. From each window one can see certain parts of the garden, and the view matches the room. The Japanese room is next to a French room, their windows face towards the same direction, but they still show different views. Isn't it sick to spend so much thought, effort and money into these things? Of course, there wasn't a single autumn leaf anywhere, no puddle or twig on a path. Two elves for the garden! It looks worse than Gryffindor common room at 5a.m."

"How would you know that?" he wondered in sudden amusement over this comparison.

"There *is* the odd night I cannot sleep and need to walk and not just to pee," she admonished.

His scrutiny full in place now, he continued playing the teacher. "Other reasons, Miss Weasley?"

"Uh... when I entered the room through the portrait of the fat lady at this time of the night, then yes." With a glare she continued, "I usually was out of breath and glad to have escaped a certain never-sleeping teacher with a hooked nose and billowing, black robes. Or a nasty cat with equally scrutinising eyes."

"I beg to differ. Mrs Norris' eyes are not nearly as frightening as mine."

"Easily agreed." She smiled before her brows furrowed again. "But back to Malfoy Manor: look at your floor. Stains and chips make the floor tell stories. Not to me, but certainly to you. You'd find nothing like that over there. Those poor elves are obliged to render the house in a state of eternal youth, and I don't mean that in a good way. Sterile, sort of. When I enter The Burrow, there is the wardrobe that's too small. I can see right away who is at home, even who came home last. I see the notch on the hanger and remember Charlie throwing a blue vase at Fred. Even if I'm all alone, I can make myself hear Mum calling for help or see George sliding down the banister. I know that he has to hop off before the end to avoid the rough parts where Fred's Filibuster firework had exploded. I remember the tirade Mum showered him with when it happened." Her view became distant as she pictured her home and all the people dear to her. She pushed away her empty plate.

"When Dad comes home, however tired he might be, he would run a finger over a certain mark on the door frame. It is from Bill's very first accident: he knocked over the umbrella stand. It was taller than him. You know, the small things that make a house a home." Her eyes became wet at the memory, but one more memory had to be told, although her voice betrayed her inner turmoil. "If a step on our topmost flight of stairs creaks in most familiar ways, I know it is Ron, because he lives under the roof. If the same stair creaks higher and lighter, then Harry is visiting. He steps down the stairs more elegantly. I don't believe you'd ever know such a thing at the Malfoys," she ended.

Severus didn't say anything for a while. Oh, yes, the floor in Spinner's End told stories, too. Hardly any of them he enjoyed remembering, though. And no, they had not made this place feel like home to him.

When nothing more was coming from her, he felt safe to switch the topic. "I believe it is part of the game that I'm not to know any details, but: was your mission successful?"

"Yes, I think you'll like it," she replied, albeit hesitantly.

He frowned. "Ginevra, I will marry *you*. Not a dress, not whatever they do with your hair. I'd be most pleased to recognise you."

"I know that, Severus. And besides," she added, her voice rising with her chin, "these young brides smirked at each other when they presented their dresses. Narcissa had a strange expression on her face, too. I believe these were not their best dresses, not their *wedding* garments."

Suddenly outraged, Severus stood and exclaimed, "They mocked you, humiliated you? I will not have it!"

She put a hand on his arm, squeezing lightly, again surprised at the soothing effect physical contact had on him. She led him back to his seat where the second half of his lunch was hardly touched. "No. They did not manage to hurt me. These dresses were still more beautiful than anything I've ever had, or even my mum. I simply made sure they did not notice this. I pretended that I'm obliged to them because I don't have access to my own wardrobe. I'm not concerned, Severus. What is a dress, especially one I only borrow? Come on, what does it matter?" She had sat down again while she talked and observed Severus meticulously chewing his sandwich.

Severus swallowed and took a sip of tea. "I don't understand such things, but dresses appear to be so important for women and wedding dresses even more than others."

Dangerously quickly she retorted, "You regard me as one of those...?"

"No." Severus took her withdrawing hand to stop her before she could start a tirade. "I want you to be... well... at least satisfied."

"Severus, I'll be wearing the most beautiful dress I've ever worn in my life. And I'll have a most formidable, highly respected bridegroom."

"I don't give a damn about *their* respect."

"You did the other day, remember?" Ginny said, and he grudgingly conceded. She went over to him and tentatively placed her hand on his shoulder, making him jump. "Considering it all, I'm satisfied with today's result. I quite like what I will wear on my wedding day."

Ginny let this sink in before she addressed a sore point. "I learned much *about* these women, too. Is it all right if I ask Draco to stand with me? I cannot connect to any of those hussies. And no, Pansy Parkinson isn't my type either. She might bewitch you to say her name instead of mine!"

"I'd be damned for a lifetime."

"What?" She pushed away from him but was held by two strong arms. "You refuse the fidelity fast binding with *me*!"

Wrinkles appeared around his eyes. Yes, Severus actually smiled as he stood up. "May I reformulate: she would follow me into my nightmares even years after our immediate divorce. That is what I meant."

"You had better!"

Once again they stood close and regarded each other nervously. Unable to focus his eyes, Severus felt like retreating a step, but how to do so without rebuking her? He pulled her tight instead, closing his eyes as they kissed. Heaven.

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Severus had been equipped with dress robes and a shiny, silk shirt. "You will have to check over my clothes as well." She nodded, and he looked at her again. "Is there still something else we need to arrange?"

Soberly, Ginny replied, "Invite the family."

Severus held her tight. There was nothing he could do, and she knew it, but it could not remove her pain. How could he turn her mood into a positive one? He wracked his brain and finally found some consolation. "If you wish them to be present, you are at least not horrified about the whole idea. I still wonder how that is to be explained." His arms tightened.

Ginny leaned on his shoulder. She changed the topic, saying, "Narcissa will check a jeweller for rings. I gave her an idea, and she'll bring a few examples. Will that be all right?"

"Pray tell me, my experienced, pure-blood bride, what is important about the rings?"

Not taking the bait, she explained, "There is a pair, one for each of us, like in a Muggle engagement. They are the carriers of the spell, either spell actually. Any metal will do, but most popular are platinum and gold. Gold can come as white gold or the traditional yellow. Platinum is favoured by some. A new trend is using stainless steel, and Hermione confirmed that also Muggles have them nowadays."

"What? Iron? Simple iron?"

"No! You'd be surprised. They do look fancy, and they aren't cheap. I'll have you know that Dad's parents had simple, hammered iron, and they were happily married for seventy years!" she pointed out.

"You won't be able to take your ring off. Depending on the agreement, this may be possible if we divorce but quite possibly never. Therefore, it is best that your ring fits you and does not cause you any inconvenience. A simple band is best. I went with Bill when he pre-selected theirs. We learned a lot about shapes and cuts."

Severus' left thumb went to find the root of his ring finger, finding it hard to imagine a metal band around it. Observing this, Ginny said, "You get used to it, they say. Just don't start fiddling with it for hours."

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In the evening, Severus went out with a group of Death Eaters. "We are investigating something...don't ask what it is. It should take a few hours."

They did some reconnaissance all over Azkaban Island, searching for the weaknesses in the fortress and spying on the routines of the guards. For lengthy hours they observed the patterns, which, as it should be, seemed not to exist. With relief Severus recognised two of the guards as Aurors from the Order. But then again, the whole prison had been so neglected under Fudge that now without the Dementors, it was a wonder they still could hold anyone imprisoned there. This evening's task was to find out how to change that. He made a mental note to warn Draco.

They were bathed in a dim, cold light as the crescent of the young moon peeked through a gap between clouds. Severus noted that it was later than he had thought. He called back his men with a sign. As he checked on the scouts at the back side, he conveniently startled the last one enough to make him trip loudly. Three tiny threads of red light shot towards him from the fortress, and a red halo around his form indicated that the guards had Stunned him. *One down and the Aurors are warned*, he confirmed to himself as his hand closed over the Portkey.

They gathered miles away on the main island, one man missing and one injured. They were drying their clothes from the spray of the sea and crudely ridding it from vermin and moss when an owl arrived noiselessly.

"We've been called to reinforce a campaign against Mudbloods, sir!" The men's eyes sparkled at this much more rewarding task. Severus had not known that there was such a plan this night. Now he worked his brains as he instructed them on the first step to reach their new target.

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Finished adjusting her wedding dress to her size, Ginny inspected Severus' outfit. It looked little different from his teaching robes, she noted with a frown.

An hour later his garments were clean and spelled to the correct size. Ginny returned to her reading, learning another two wards as well as deepening her knowledge on medical potions. When she could not keep herself focused anymore, she prepared supper.

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Some families had obviously received warnings, but there were still enough unsuspecting Muggle-borns. Severus and his group were sent to a farm where their victims included sheep and a pig as well as the young Muggle parents. A little boy's accidental magic amused them as they had their way with him. Severus swallowed hard and cast strongly registering spells to rapidly attract the Ministry. Their fight with the Aurors resembled a mud bath, and they lost a woman there.

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Ginny had been absorbed in a Muggle novel for an hour already.

Supper stood there, untouched. She tore her attention away from the novel and looked up at the clock. Severus was far later than she had thought he should be.

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For their last target they headed to a neat neighbourhood of a middle-size town. Their muddy trails stopped at the Creeveys'. The guards from the Order or the Ministry...Severus wasn't sure which...were dozing when he and his team arrived. There wasn't a single magical person standing against them. These were the situations he hated most since he had no chance whatsoever to reduce the harm. He could not even be a passive bystander. The two boys put up a respectable fight and Severus was forced to stare at their knowing faces, unable to help them. With careful manoeuvres Severus managed to have Dennis and a small, wide-eyed, pre-Hogwarts witch killed prematurely to ease their last pain.

The Creeveys were no more.

On their retreat they engaged in a lengthy fight with Ministry officials, which they won with few casualties. Severus, as the leader of the first action, brought the injured to the makeshift hospital of the Death Eaters. He was too weary to pay much attention to Crabbe and two other men discussing about this being a chocolate or flower day, even when they grinned at him.

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Pacing the rooms for what seemed hours, Ginny was reciting to herself the fragments Severus had told her about his mission. Why did he not return? What if they had caught him? She would not even be able to testify for him since she had no idea at all where he might be.

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Although he didn't know the exact time, it was way past his estimate when he finally dragged his feet home, tired, exhausted, mentally empty and physically covered with mud. Nothing else than a shower and a bed seemed to hold any appeal. In moments like this, Severus appreciated the peace at Spinner's End. His hand moved on automaton to tear down the wards around the house. He mobilised his last energy to re-erect them before he even turned to face the room.

Staring at the wall without seeing it, Severus moved his hands to unbutton his clothes. *Shower, bed, don't think of anything else.*

A shrieking voice cut through his nerves like knives. "You said you'd return for a late supper, but it is two o'clock in the morning now!" Ginevra's voice was shrill and piercing, and she hardly took time to breathe. "Where have you been? Just look at you!" She managed to screw her voice one octave higher, still. "I'm imprisoned in this place, no note, no chance to contact anyone!"

Without much thought, Severus took up his wand and silenced her. He gripped her hard at her shoulders, and his cold eyes frightened her. "Cease this ridiculous Banshee impersonation immediately!"

Close to tears, Ginny retreated to the kitchen, her hands massaging her shoulders. A spell washed over her neck and vocal cords, but she didn't react. For hours she had been worrying, and then he comes in and throws a set of dirty clothes haphazardly around without a single word or even a look for her, not wishing to eat or speak!

When she had tried to reach him, he had not reacted at all until she had exhausted herself in that fit of nerves.

She reconsidered. How does one get into such a state? Maybe he really had not heard her questions before. What would he need now? Water ran in the bathroom: he was taking a shower or bath. Clearly, a fresh pair of pyjamas was in order and a fluffy towel as well. She'd warm up some food and ask what he'd like to drink.

Ginny did not come far with her plans, though. Severus had used his old towel, was clad in his previous pyjamas and sat in the armchair, pinching the bridge of his nose. The room was only dimly lit.

"I've been so worried," she offered, but with her hoarse voice it came out harder than she had wished.

"This is my life! You cannot expect me to be home for dinner as if I were an assistant in a shop with fixed shift hours. And you cannot even know what has happened."

"No, I cannot know. I can only worry."

Grunt.

"Tea, or something else to drink?"

"No."

Ginny relaxed because he had obviously not been tortured by his master. She sent the clothes to the bathroom. "Food? At least a bowl of soup?"

With a last "NO," he left for bed.

Ginny did have her wand still from his time out, and she Transfigured the sofa into the familiar bed. However, she considered it a bad sign if she went there right away. It was more of a precaution. Hopefully she would have time to explain her actions tomorrow.

She had long been ready for bed. Taking the tea along might be a good idea.

Silently she slipped under the cover next to him. He didn't so much as stir.

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"NO, not again. Away, GET AWAY!"

Ginny woke with a start. Severus was tossing around, beads of sweat on his forehead. He hadn't really shouted, but his sharp voice had had a desperate edge.

"STOP IT. Out now."

His arm flung around directly on her nose so that she couldn't avoid shrieking. This again woke Severus up, and he had his wand in his hand in no time *Expelliarmus! Stupefy!* The second curse hit her squarely from a minimum distance. Without a sound, she slid to the floor.

Severus waved on the torches. "Ginevra, what have I done? *Rennervate!*" He picked her up, inspected her crushed shoulder and then saw her nose. "Wait, I've got a remedy." He was, after all, a potions master and kept his stocks filled. Within seconds she could breathe and speak and even roll her arm in her shoulder.

Severus had not been shy touching her for healing, but now he dropped his arms and stared out of the window.

"You've had a nightmare, Severus."

"No wonder," he noted absent-mindedly. Getting focused, he asked, "Ginevra, did I say anything specific? Names?"

She considered that with a frown. "No. Only general exclamations... 'stop it' and the like. Look, I understand that you won't answer if I asked now." He nodded with pained eyes, and she continued. "You were tossing around and sweating. I'd say for a nightmare it wasn't the worst it can get, but it was awful enough."

"I woke up rapidly this time, which is good. But why?"

"You hit my nose, and I screamed. No, it is all right, don't worry." She changed her tone and asked business-like, "Severus, what can I do in such cases?"

"Before I knock you out or stun you?"

"Preferably," she snarled. "I'd like to keep my shoulder in place, too."

"I do not know. This time, waking me up has worked. If you cannot do that, maybe leave before I harm you?" Severus lowered his head to look at her with mixed emotions. "I really do not know." His hand went up to stroke along her healed nose. Clean and somewhat rested, he now considered the evening from her perspective, silently taking in her features. How many hours had she been waiting? If he was killed, she was doomed. Their lives were already linked.

In a soft whisper he confessed, "There has never been anybody waiting for me at home." He gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Nor anybody next to me in my bed..." He kissed her on the nose. "...Whom I could have harmed." Ginny caught his mouth, and her tension vanished as she melted against him.

Ginny pointed out the tea on the bedside table, and this time he took it. "We have beef soup, if you would like it now?" she suggested. The first shades of daylight were visible in the east, so Severus preferred to wait for breakfast. He gulped down another cup of tea, wiped off his sweat and crept close to his fiancée, spooning with her. Holding her by her waist and nuzzling in her hair, he soon felt comforted enough to fall asleep.

They woke again before nine, not really ready for the day. Severus' advances became earnest now. He stroked her and set a series of feather-light kisses on her face, her neck and breasts, attentive to her every reaction. When her breath came heavily, she gently caught his lips with hers and paid his body similar attention.

It was past ten when Severus' growling stomach urged them out of bed for a hearty brunch.

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In the afternoon, Narcissa brought eight sample rings. Ginny held her breath when she saw them. None of them would have been anywhere close to Bill's budget. Carefully avoiding Severus' gaze, she admired them. Admittedly, on Narcissa's hand, together with the rest of her exquisite jewellery, they would look adequate, if not modest. For herself, they looked exclusive, if not sinful.

"These are the basic forms only. You decide on the material, the runes and the gemstones separately," Narcissa explained.

"Gemstones?" Severus echoed.

"Well, you would not use rubies, I assume, but emeralds, sapphires or of course diamonds. These are the different sizes and cuts." She pulled out a table with sparkling, animated examples and very impressive prices.

Ginny looked up sharply. "The magic is in the metal, not in the stones," she remarked and locked her eyes with his. She opened her mind to him, and he saw a wider, beautiful four-poster bed with bulging duvets replacing the one he had. True enough, Severus' narrow, old bed sagged severely under the weight of two, and it didn't let them sleep in comfort. He blushed remarkably at the memory of its loud squeals of protest at their movements, and he turned away in a bout of coughing that didn't sound quite genuine.

"There is magic in the runes, too," Ginny continued. "Bill and Fleur did the same as my parents: one rune in each ring, and after the wedding they told each other which two would have followed. It is as good as paying for them."

Narcissa's shocked expression was priceless. She finally pulled out a list with the runes. "Yes," Ginny confirmed, "this is the same list I saw."

"If you want to have a look, it is 65 Galleons per rune." Narcissa pushed the list over to Severus.

Severus was familiar with all the runes, and Ginny had learned most of them already in Ancient Runes or with her brother's wedding. "Bill paid 40 Galleons per rune," she remarked soberly.

Severus took a deep breath and addressed the noble woman: "I'm sorry, Narcissa, but these appear to be the higher price level. Would you mind terribly going once again?" He knew that she would not deny him the request.

Ginny took up the thread. "I won't walk around with pricks of conscience for years. We can have the same idealistic value and the same magic on a more affordable level. I remember where Bill and I went. Would you please ask for the same rings that William Weasley pre-selected? Oh, and also his sister's favourite, which he discarded, please."

Narcissa wasn't pleased. But then her selection cost 230 to 300 Galleons apiece, and she felt she'd better not say that aloud.

Ginny reconsidered. They were discussing Severus' money. Never had she earned more than a few Sickles herself. "Severus, that would be bands for 85 to 105 Galleons apiece, is that okay? If not, they had some in silver for fewer than 60 Galleons. We only found they looked cheap. Then there is bronze or brass... I really don't mind if you..."

By now, Severus grew restless, and clearly, Narcissa's patience was dangerously stretched already. Rings seemed to be required, so he'd get some, but this procedure was getting out of hand. "We will finish this here and today." He took three rings out of Narcissa's box and made Ginny try them. Fearfully, she placed one on her finger. This did not look like her own hand any more...or any Weasley hand.

"Lift it up to your face... and hair... eyes..." Severus ordered three times before he declared, "The decision is easy. Your warm tan is enhanced with the gold, so yellow gold it will be. Narcissa, if you would be so kind as to bring a pair of those rings Ginevra would have wanted, but William didn't put into the selection? And I will take these two runes. Ginevra, you select two, please. Yes, two," he insisted when Ginny looked up at him in concern.

It wasn't difficult. One rune for deep-rooted trust and one for comfort in protection. Marking her choice, she was already excited to see which runes Severus had chosen for her ring, but she would learn this only after the wedding. Ginny didn't chose 'love' because wasn't that the base of every marriage? Was it for theirs? Which one, then? There were several runes symbolising passionate love, spiritual love, deep-rooted love, flowing love... How could she know after three weeks?

Not revealing any emotions, Narcissa promised to care for the rings. The way Severus had simplified and shortened the process, she at least didn't have any extra trips to make. She would find a way to pacify her regular jewellery dealer, an expensive way probably. She reminded Ginny of the hairdresser date on Thursday, and she left.

They both let out a breath. "Severus, are you all right with wearing Gryffindor gold?" Ginny wondered.

Dismissively, he said, "Look at me! I'm ugly as it gets, and I wear black and white. Silver is almost as shockingly uncharacteristic as gold is. It won't enhance or diminish anything in me." Thoughtfully, he added with a soft voice, "But it did make a difference on you."

"You do wear green, Severus." She grinned.

"Yes, there is green in this dratted Muggle track suit. The only other colour scheme for this model was purple with yellow!"

"It looks nice... for a track suit. You have green boxers, too."

"Ginevra!" he chastised her, but continued softly, almost fearfully, "Are you all right with no gemstones? If not I can send Pöllö... a sapphire?"

"No way! Such stones are either minute splinters, in which case they are overpriced and don't sparkle a bit, or they are really big, and then they aren't handy for everyday work and...well, one must pay for their size. No, really, I like the model we'll get. It has some cuts and spells to reflect the light nicely. Oh, if you don't want that, you can undo the spell. Bill did that as well, but after the honeymoon. Neither he nor my parents have any stones."

When he didn't answer, she probed a bit. "Do you recall your parents' rings?"

"I remember them fighting, if anything. They didn't wear rings or jewels at all."

"I'm sorry."

"As long as my mother had her wand, there was balance of power, but eventually he caught her unawares and snapped her wand." Ginny came close. She did remember the rare occasions of her parents having a row. It had frightened her to the bone. They embraced in silence.

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From Narcissa and the Notts, Ginny received basic wizard robes, a cloak and buckle shoes that had taken their combined effort to Transfigure into shape for her feet. She badly needed Muggle clothes for the rainy winter season, though. Severus Apparated Ginny and himself to the closest town which housed a large shopping centre. Wandering indecisively from boutique to boutique, Ginny was amazed at the selection, but the aggressive flashing lights and the Christmas carols shrieking out of tiny, grey boxes or funnel-shaped gadgets made her jump. Each shop had its own, and still there wasn't a single person singing or playing. *Ecklectic loudspeakers*, Ginny thought.

"Can't they agree which CD to play?" she groaned.

"Seedee?" Severus wondered.

"Those flat, silvery Pensieve-disks for music that need a box working with ecklectricity." She indicated a size of four or five inches. "And here I was thinking you knew all about Muggles."

"Ah, LPs, or albums, you mean, but they are black and about that large." Severus' hands showed a diameter of at least twelve inches.

At the next record shop, Ginny made a surprised Severus acquainted with the newer technology. He admitted that this development had bypassed him. "Muggles do have a way of making you feel your age," he grumbled.

Some windows sported animated holiday decorations, like a Father Christmas with reindeer. They were surrounded by a strange collection of smaller, sweet-looking, cheery figures, most of them a little overfed, with pointed ears, a tail and red cheeks, dressed in red and gold. They seemed capable of speech and even script and some handled tools, so they would have some intelligence. However, Ginny had never seen or heard of such a being.

"Oh, Mum, look!" a little girl declared seriously, dragging her mother towards the display. "Here are the elves that will make my doll house!" Ginny had a hard time trying not to double over in laughter.

Severus showed his disgust at the dressing conventions of the Muggle youngsters lazily hanging around in clusters. Some were smoking little white sticks that Ginny knew were called cigarettes.

"You'll have to show me what you would accept," Ginny told him.

Severus suggested a long skirt. "Skirts are just not practical. I'd not merge into the masses; look, not a cloak in miles. Or what is it, a coat. They all wear short jackets." Some were forbiddingly short, displaying patches of bare skin around the waist, but after a look around, Ginny nudged towards a group of three girls. "Look, these jeans are neither torn nor faded out. They don't end mid-calf, either. And the sweaters look *sinfully* comfy!" Ginny wrapped her arms about herself, as if welcoming their warmth.

Grudgingly, Severus conceded that these garments would suit for her visits to the Muggle world.

With determination, Ginny stalked over to the group, pulling a very reluctant Severus along by his sleeve. "Hi, sorry to interrupt. I'm completely new here. Can you tell me where I could get jeans and tops and jackets like yours in this place?" She made a vague sway with her arm.

"Oh, sure. Got your daddy to pay, have you? Or godfather?" They told her how to find three shops for the fashion of their liking. When she retreated with thanks, the smallest one shouted, "Your lucky day, is it? Use the chance, milk him for all he is worth." Ginny waved her hand leisurely in reply.

"Sorry for dragging you along, but I wasn't sure I would understand their directions. Do you think we can find these places?" Severus nodded, still shocked at her straightforwardness with complete strangers, Muggles even. These Muggles had not noticed anything strange about her. She was indeed able to blend in into different groups.

Ginny surprised the assistant with her ignorance about her dress size. Petite and regular, 8, 10, 12...it didn't tell her anything. She was about to say she would shrink them to fit, but Severus intervened with a sharp cough. The clerk wasn't pleased with her simple choices, trying to persuade her to something fancy from the winter collection of a glorious, but eccentric designer. He had his next surprise coming when Severus did not have any credit card or a loyalty or points card. A harsh remark, "Do you not use pounds sterling in your shop?" spurred him into action, though.

Shoes next, and now it got all messed up. English sizes, continental sizes, American sizes... oh, dear.*How do Muggles live*, she wondered again and again. "You need another pair for training in the forest," Severus reminded her. They were sent to a sports shop.

Passing along the shelves, Ginny admired all the gadgets, the different balls and utensils Muggles considered necessary for sports she hadn't even heard of. Each required special clothing as well, although they all looked like pants and tops. After some search they found trainers and a very simple, soft track-suit as well. They quickly waved off the assistant before Ginny got all styled up for her forest training.

A new bra topped her purchase and was maybe the only piece where she got decent service, albeit at a not-so-decent price. "This one is exquisite and forms your bust wonderfully. You'll see, you will have three or four new admirers before New Year." Ginny forced a smile on her face. "You'd be wise to remember the size, dear," the assistant went on, checking that she was out of earshot from others. "Then you can buy simple ones for daily wear in a department store when you feel comfortable to pick one for daily wear, dear." Ginny debated with herself whether to take the exquisite one or go through the huge shop at the other end of the shopping centre with her new knowledge. A short memory flash of Severus' stressed face was answer enough.

Waiting for her outside, close to the entrance, Severus had managed to shrink the bulging bag while she had been busy with the lingerie. He had then overheard two young men discussing engagement rituals. "She insists on having the whole family there. We need to take an engagement photo under the Christmas tree. Big party, anyway."

The other man groaned with feeling. "That reminds me. First she dragged me through five jewellery shops, and then I still had to change our engagement rings twice until she and her mother and her sister were satisfied. The wedding ring had to have a huge stone, of course, and now she noticed that it is too big for wearing under her gloves, she caused a ladder in her knitted cardigans and all. A nightmare!"

Ginny and Severus reconsidered their purchase. Ginny noticed that he had not bought anything for himself. "Don't you need anything? Shirt, jumper? Black trousers? Socks?"

"I need to get out of here," he declared with feeling.

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On Thursday, Ginny was at Malfoy Manor again to have a hairdresser home service do their job, the outcome of which Severus dreaded greatly.

Severus was glad to know that the Malfoys' house would be warded well because the werewolves were still furious. He would not put it past them to hurt the girl.*this* girl, what a thought...if they found her.

She had left a shopping list which Severus expanded considerably before leaving. Having enough time, he opted for the off-town shopping centre where he would find a good assortment of specialised shops as well.

"HERE is where you get me a Christmas present," he heard a sharp, female voice. "Don't you dare come up with kitchen utensils again." Severus turned to see a pregnant woman pointing at a jeweller's shop.

Severus' eyes followed the young, hesitant husband into the shop.*This could prove interesting*. An assistant approached with such a strange expression that Severus couldn't resist. He applied Legilimency upon her. *Another man with no ideas. The Christmas shopping season alone could provide me with the material for a Ph.D. in psychology*.

Amused about these Muggle problems, Severus started his grocery shopping. Queuing for the fish, he suddenly noticed that these weren't far from his own troubles. He would need a Christmas present soon, the first one he would have to buy in twenty years. Certainly, the Hogwarts staff had given small gifts of recognition to each other, but it had been easy. Eight identical packets. He usually gave away stationery material, which he was sure would be used, whether liked or not.

It was very different this time.

Weighing grapefruit, he caught someone saying "engagement ring". Sweating now, he wondered if he was expected to come up with an engagement present as well. The practical person in him quickly discarded the ring. Traditional as it might be...was it for wizards? He didn't even know!...Ginevra would get a wedding ring. Another piece of jewellery had better be something else.

He went over to select salads and onions. Hmm, the garlic looked like a treat, and there was a sufficiently fresh cauliflower and green beans from... Kenya! No.

Queuing at the cashier, he saw the young husband enter, who patted a bulging breast pocket in visible relief.

After paying, Severus went into a corner and shrunk his purchase before entering the jewellery shop. He looked around, having no idea what he might want.

"Can I help you, sir?" the assistant asked. When he didn't provide her with a clear wish, she explained the structure of the shop. "Accessories and jewellery for young girls are here at the entrance: firstly the everyday wear, then here the pieces for special occasions." She paused, considering him. "We have the more representative presents for wives...Christmas, birthday or wedding day...over there. The modern styles are to the left, next the traditional patterns, and the folklore style is on the right."

Severus hesitated. Which of these categories fitted to his fiancée?

With great caution, the woman hinted, "We have our exquisite and extraordinary men's jewellery in our main shop at Queen's square." Startled, Severus pried open her mind and saw himself handing a present to a lover. A male lover. He coughed. She shrugged and smiled. "You are looking for a present for a woman, then?" On his nod, she continued in her matter-of-fact tone. "Your wife? Daughter, niece? God-daughter?"

Sweating now, Severus settled for, "A... a young girl, maybe god-daughter would come close. She is sixteen years old."

"And ..." She took a good look at him. "You want something special, genuine material, right? Fine, then we better drop this corner. Can you describe her current jewellery? We might try and find a match."

"She has... nothing." On her doubtful look, he snarled, "There are families in this country that count every penny. *Goodness, what concern is this to her?*" he wondered.

"Oh, but this is nice of you!" She smiled. "I propose either a ring or a necklace as a base. A bracelet is not worn as much as a necklace or a ring."

"Not a ring."

If the woman was surprised, she did a good job not to show it. "A necklace, then. I suggest you take a really nice but neutral one, sir. Add a simple pendant that suits her today and matches your price limit. When her taste changes, she can exchange the pendant, but she will use the necklace for ages and remember you. It is a future investment, sir."

When her taste changes. The thought left him more raw and vulnerable than he would have thought still two weeks ago. He looked at several necklaces and found a pleasant belcher chain. The assistant demonstrated its flexible use, hanging very different pendants to it. She was right. It would be a good base.

Now the pendant. While some of the ones he had just seen were agreeable, none really caught his attention. The assistant asked for her hobbies or pets *What would she say to Quidditch?* Severus recalled only that Ginny had been attending Care of Magical Creatures, but knew nothing of the pets in Gryffindor tower, thank you.

"You can take an abstract form, like this one, if she is more of the strict type, straight clothes, short hair. No? Well, many girls go for horses, but no," she quickly corrected herself, "she's not affluent, is she, sir? Could you give me some idea...? What does her room look like? Her posters? You don't know? What are her favourite videos?" At Severus' doubtful look she added, "Or books? Perhaps she is into her fantasy and legends, you know with witches, elves and unicorns?"

"You have elves or unicorns?" he blurted out.

"Yes, there is a manufacturer for the current fashion. It came up with the books on witchcraft in the wake of the revival of the Lord of the Rings," she told him. "Quite a lot sold this autumn and Christmas season, indeed."

"Well, maybe something of that kind. She does... err, read and talk about witches. Do you have a broomstick? Dragons? Unicorns? Or... *eh* normal animals?" His voice lost the hesitant tone. "Do you have big cats? I recall she likes them. She has a few books on cats, in fact. Or maybe owls?"

Ah, finally we're getting somewhere, the saleswoman thought. To Severus, the selection of dragons was most amusing. None of these animals would stay airborne while blasting fire, Severus thought. And never had he heard about one with blue eyes! The broomstick pendant was sold out. Severus saw a snowy owl, which he discarded since Potter's owl was a snowy. Next she presented a formidable lion, a kind of tiger and even a leopard. *It could pass for a female one,* he thought.

"I will take this leopardess playing with the ball," he declared, feeling similarly relieved as the young man an hour ago. "In gold, with the blue stone. It goes with her eyes," he added firmly, now desperate to leave the shop.

Goodness, what a type, he sensed her thoughts, *but at least he knew a few things about the girl.* "A good selection, sir," she said amiably. "The ball is Lapis lazuli, not the most noble gemstone. If you want we can get it with a transparent blue sapphire before Christmas."

Severus declined and was about to pay when a formidable-looking man in his late forties entered. He indicated one corner with his hand as he said, "Find me a few things for 200 to 250 pounds. Platinum, no rubies. I'll be back in an hour to pick it up." And off he went.

Phew, that man again, he sensed her and got the impression she had after all preferred serving him.

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Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Severus wondered what he would say and how. A pity that the mirror wasn't magical. Or lucky, maybe; it would never reveal this scene to her. He had seen a few Muggle films from the forties and fifties. Dreamy eyes, romantic music, the man usually kneeling down, possibly reciting a poem. All these thoughts appalled him more than cause any other feelings. *This is not who I am. I cannot be the dreamy lover type. Even if she has wormed herself into my conscience, into my...yes, admittedly, into my heart!...she cannot expect this from me,* he decided.

He settled for preparing a nice dinner and started preparations.

The warding charms announced Ginny's arrival. Quickly he stashed all decorations in the kitchen.

"What have they done for hours? You look your usual self," he wondered with a light voice, teasing her.

"Well, thank you!" she burst out.

"Oh, I am not complaining," he reasoned. "I told you I prefer recognising the woman I marry."

"Yes, well, I assume you will," she conceded. Feeling the need to talk, she explained, "They have a nice method. He tried a few styles, and I picked one. Then he somehow fixed it into my hair. Narcissa and I were taught the spells my hair remembers, and we'll redo them tomorrow *after* you have left. So you won't see it before you

are allowed to," she reminded him.

"I can sleep without fearing for my hairstyle. I just wonder why Fleur didn't come up with this," she mused. Then she sniffed the air and followed the smell towards the kitchen.

"Stop! This room is out of bounds for you tonight."

"Ooh, that makes it all the more tempting." She lightly punched his arm. "But I'll be a good girl, all right?"

Unable to keep it much longer, Severus announced that they would have an early dinner and retreated into the forbidden room.

Amazed and flattered that he would do something special, Ginny was hardly able to concentrate on anything for the next hour. She kept remembering her family, who would be grieving for her, imagining her suffering, while in fact her destiny wasn't as bad as it sounded.

Well, she would not have had the idea of marrying this man or marrying at her age at all. But compared to other captives of the Dark Lord, she had been granted a most surprising amnesty. She would have to stay where she was, of course, and within months she would be pregnant. A child from Severus Snape, whom at least half of her brothers detested with all their heart. She wasn't so sure about Percy, Charlie or Bill.

The elder ones were at least a bit closer to him in age and had not experienced his concentrated vitriol to the same extent yet. As for Percy, well, he was just Percy. Law abiding as he was, he never got on the wrong side with *any* teacher at all. Not even Snape...oops, Severus. It was hard to merge the two into one person.

While she still remembered his outbursts and the detentions he had given her for sloppy cutting and brewing out of the set task, he didn't frighten her anymore. He had made an effort not to, which was a new thing to him, and she had done her best to encourage it. Sometimes he fell into teaching mode, but with their age difference it was maybe natural, or understandable, although she would not tolerate it in their marriage. Already now, Severus tried to avoid it. Only he didn't quite succeed.

He had not tried anything else than frighten her in the Occlumency lessons before her first encounter with the Dark Lord. But she was ready to admit that his style worked. Severus had taken most of the fear out of her system before she had met the vile, serpent-like wizard personally, which then had not completely paralysed her. Severus' harsh treatment had enabled her to keep her mind and concentrate on the Occlumency for hours.

Not that they had needed this much of concentration and fear of failure in each Potions lesson! How Ron had hated them. Oh, Ron. Mum, Dad!

Just before she lost herself in desperate thoughts, the door opened. "Will you freshen up a bit? In the bathroom or bedroom, just get OUT of this room."

Nervous now, Ginny took one of Narcissa's old robes into the bathroom. Even if the dress didn't fit her style at all, it was a witch dress and not her Muggle outfit. She checked her hair again, excited at the prospects of a fancy dinner. With Severus, her fiancé.

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She was called in a few minutes later and stalled just a little to enjoy the anticipation.

The curtains were drawn closed, and the whole room was dimly lit with candles. The table was laid most accurately and with matching pieces. A light white wine waited for them, too. She was about to wonder if he would de-alcoholise it for her when he took the chair and helped her sit down. Wow!

His vague smile couldn't hide his anxiety. "Wine?" he asked. "I will de-alcoholise it, or you can mix it generously with water."

She offered him her glass. "De-alcoholised, please." Severus prodded the filled glass with his wand, urging small bubbles of alcohol to rise and dissolve in the air.

"We'll first have soup, then roast," he announced and cleared his throat. "Pudding is fruit salad with ice cream."

It was delicious, Ginny thought but could not fail to notice that Severus hardly touched his food. A few spoonfuls of soup, half a potato and a tiny piece of meat. "Oh, it is wonderful, what a surprise, Severus!" she exclaimed to compliment him and encourage him to try more of his own food.

Cleaning the table, Severus showed nerves and dropped the bowl of salad. Ginny leapt up and caught it but wasn't allowed to bring it into the kitchen. Severus returned with the dessert, and again she noticed he wasn't really eating any. "Have another go, Severus," she tried but he looked almost nauseous. Something strange was happening with him.

She finished quickly, sensing his tension. "I can help in the kitchen now," she decided and got up.

"No," he pleaded. "Wait." He stood up as well.

Stepping close to her, he took a nice little box out of his pocket. "Ginevra, you... I..." he started and faltered, looking terribly lost. "I want to tell you that you... this marriage... I find myself excited about it, excited about you. Ginevra, you..." He hesitated again and then finished his little speech rather matter-of-factly. "So I think an engagement present is in order."

She took the unwrapped box, and seeing the apprehensive look in his eyes, she opened it. "Oh, Severus, how nice! You found a leopardess! She is beautiful."

Her surprise was genuine, he was glad to see, and he let out a breath he hadn't noticed he was holding. "It's not much," he started, but her wild embrace and kiss interrupted him.

When they broke apart, Ginny said, "She is wonderful, thank you so much," and took his hand to go to the bathroom. "Will you put it on for me?" she asked, facing the mirror expectantly.

A bit of fumbling with the clasp, but finally he had it fixed, all without magic. "I could try and make her play with the ball, if you want," he asked her image in the mirror while his hands glided down to her elbows and hips.

"No! It stays as it is. After all, it is Muggle jewellery. You are half-Muggle," she reminded herself, leaning back to his chest. She was tall enough to lean her temple on his chin.

"The blue suits your eyes, as I guessed it would." He bent down to kiss her neck gently. He looked up at her image again, fascinated at the feeling of holding a woman who showed such affection for him. He'd try hard to make her comfortable for whatever time they were bound together!

The old battered bathroom disappeared from his vision when she turned around in his embrace and moved her hands up to his shoulders. "I'll be wearing my own jewels tomorrow!" she said with satisfaction. "Thank you."

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Ginny removed the necklace, and when she put it into the box on the bedside table, she found a note:

For many people all over the world, Lapis lazuli is considered a stone of truth and friendship. The blue stone is reputed to bring about harmony in relationships and to help its wearer be an authentic individual who may openly state his or her opinion.

Entering the bedroom, Severus checked once as he saw the happiness on her face. It felt far too good to be true.

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A/N:

1. According to the Black family tree, Narcissa is born 1955. I'll make this November so that Severus, born 1959, is only 3 years behind her. Lucius is then born 1953 or end-1954. This scenario is valid before Deathly Hallows (DH).

2. We don't know what additional subjects Ginny took in her third year. I assume it was Magical Creatures and Ancient Runes. Whatever she knows about Muggles she has heard from Harry, Dean, Colin or Hermione.

3. My well-informed beta informed me that the original form of the revitalising spell... "*Ennervate!*"... would actually have knocked people out if it had been spelled with only one "n", so JKR changed it to "*Rennervate!*".

4. Neither Severus nor Ginny can be seen in public to select wedding bands. Since jewellery is expensive, it is normally traded in the well-secured premises only. We should assume that Narcissa lends the few samples against a security. Contrary to that, a hairdresser home-service is easily available since they do not have to transport valuables. Also note that Severus, the searched murderer, doesn't meet the hairdresser. Maybe the man is also threatened into secrecy.

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My warmest thanks go to the team of betas that has been supporting me greatly, Jjingjingchiquita, Hollime199 and Angelika. They've made the people and scenes British, let the sentences flow naturally and keep the characters in line. They improved the language to sound genuine British, and finally they added or moved my commas in place.

What still sounds odd is all my own doing.

The Wedding

Chapter 10 of 35

It was just too good to be true.

The Wedding

Despite the nice evening, Ginny and Severus did not sleep very well before their wedding day. Besides her permanent longing for her parents, Ginny remembered Bill warmly. He had been worn out as well. It was nothing but the excitement, she told herself. Whatever the circumstances, weddings are singular events in one's life. Fleur had been fussing for weeks, whether to wed July 9th, or August 8th or rather September 7th to get a fancy wedding date in the year 1997.

For me, Dec 12th will never be a normal day anymore.

Severus was turning and mumbling in his sleep. When, for the second time, he was snatching more than his part of the duvet, leaving Ginny in the cold, she huffed and went to put on her running suit...romantic be damned.

When day dawned, Severus wasn't only irritable, but could not eat the least bit. When he went to brew a third cup of coffee, Ginny interfered. "If you don't eat anything, have a sweetened tea with milk, or take some juice. If that doesn't appeal then water or nothing at all."

The fact that he conceded, albeit grudgingly, was indicator enough for his nervousness. He paced the rooms, didn't get his shirt buttoned or his freshly washed, flying hair tamed.

Still in her running suit, Ginny tried her best to arrange his outfit, vividly remembering Charlie's complaints about grooms. "Severus, you're worse than a first year when the train pulls into Hogsmeade. Will you *please* stop fidgeting for a moment?"

"I can't! You have no idea!"

"No, probably I haven't!"

"I'll botch everything. I've forgotten where to stand, what to say. This isn't anything I'm used to."

"Oh, I see. The difference would be that I've been getting married every Friday for the last three years!"

He looked at her with eyes like a puppy. "Don't joke now, will you. It is bad enough."

"Bad? Just what I like to hear on my wedding day!" Ginny retorted. She went back to the bedroom to pick up her dress. "No, you stay out of here!"

"Ginevra, please. I'm not in the mood for sarcasm." He looked so desperate that even teasing him lost all appeal. *As if a state like that has ever prevented him from berating his pupils*, Ginny thought, but relented, for who else was there to help?

She carefully laid down her dress again and placed both her hands on his shoulders. With a soothing voice, she proposed that he sit down, but the next moment she had to shout, "NO, not on my dress!" He sat on the bed next to the dress, and she sat sideways on his lap, gazing into his eyes. "Do you know how glad I am that you are nervous?" Kisses on his cheeks. "We both agreed on this out of predicaments, yes, but today it appears to be more than just a rational decision..." A kiss on his nose "...so much more, doesn't it? We know it is the thing to do, and the excitement is part of what makes this day special."

He held her hips as she tried to move, and she gave in. Holding her like that, feeling that she indeed accepted his tainted and clumsy hands on her body, his lips on hers, left Severus' nerves raw and vulnerable. It didn't feel real but here she was. He caught her lips with his for a tender kiss and then said, "I don't want to spoil the day for

you."

In these last few days, they had both made an enormous effort to become accustomed with each other, and Severus had found the result more than rewarding. It was spectacular to have someone who cared, but it was at least equally spectacular to return such care. She made him feel liked, and she had made him want to care for her needs too. Yes, he wished her comfortable, he enjoyed bringing her the little bit of appreciation she was so dependent on, and, oh, yes, she had ways to reward him, some subtle, others very obvious.

A warning voice in the back of his head reminded him that this closeness was too artificial to last forever, but Severus had decided that he would strive to make it last as long as necessary and worry about the rest later. This realistic approach gave him less of a headache, and his shoulders were more relaxed. Why would he risk a debate while nothing could be done?

With these thoughts, he let a deeper kiss follow the first, but then Ginny broke off. "Keep this for later, Severus. We cannot have our clothes crinkled now, nor are you supposed to be in here at all. Why don't you go out into the sitting room for a while? They are coming any time now to fetch you, and I need to get ready." When he made to leave, she tried for a last time to get some food into him. "Take a glass of juice, or eat a fruit or cereals. There is a bit of porridge left, too; surely you can warm it without burning it? Don't mess with your hair, will you."

After what seemed ages, the house-guard spell announced Nott. He spoke shortly with Severus and probably made a full check on his attire. They greeted Narcissa Malfoy, who commanded an elf to arrange things.

"You will exercise some restraint, will you?" Severus demanded.

"When my son's mentor is to marry, his bride will not look like the jumped-up nobody that she is."

"She's not..." Severus interjected with fury.

Nott's deep voice interrupted the rage. "You are a respected member of the Inner Circle, Severus. You do want her to look her best, or she'll never hear the end of it."

With a last goodbye towards the closed door to the bedroom, they were gone.

Ginny breathed deeply. She had everything prepared for her hair. First, they spelled it all to stand up, and then Narcissa insisted on applying make-up to all the skin visible above the dress. She offered to cover all the freckles along Ginny's arms, but Ginny had the distinct feeling Severus wouldn't know her anymore. As it was winter, and she had been indoors far too much in the last weeks, there weren't all that many. She insisted they had to stay.

While Ginny felt bizarrely like preparing for a costume ball, she knew that Narcissa had been made up professionally on her wedding day and uncountable other occasions and that the other brides of the day were most likely sitting still for hours. Considering Severus' status, she was determined not to look like a beggar...as if she would give Mandy Sands the satisfaction...but there were limits!

The elf was rudely ordered to add a little warm-brownish rouge to her cheeks and was warned not to smear the bride or her Mistress. Selecting a tone to suit bright-red hair gave Narcissa some headache, but she clearly was more experienced in this subject than in adjusting plain clothes for a captive. The same warm tone went to Ginny's lips, but she rejected a fill-out charm on them...or on other body parts...no thanks! She put an end to ideas on her metamorphosis when Narcissa suggested that she have her light snub-nose straightened, and the noble woman huffed in annoyance.

Her nails were not made to grow longer either, but once they were coloured, Ginny did not recognise her hands. Warmth washed over her as she imagined a ring there!

Layer by layer, they then took down her hair and reactivated yesterday's spells. The temporary locks fairly obediently rolled and curled as they should. Narcissa placed the end of a golden ribbon of silk into the hair above Ginny's temple. Prodded with a charm, it searched its way through her hair, reappeared twice above her forehead until finally both ends were stashed away.

As she observed the plain band, emotions washed over the girl. How she had admired Aunt Muriel's glimmering tiara, one of the few family heirlooms. Goblins had wrought it from filigree gold and studded it with five diamonds. Rapidly, the unnamed elf dabbed the tears away from Ginny's cheeks, and Narcissa admonished her for smearing the make-up.

With a dubious look, Narcissa fixed the simple necklace with the leopardess pendant instead of the heavy, old-fashioned, borrowed one that had reminded Ginny of Aunt Muriel's favourite. They checked again on the few locks that were allowed to hang loosely down the young bride's neck.

In an unconvinced voice, Narcissa stated, "You look sweet. He will not know you!"

"I hope he does! He isn't the type for overdressing. He warned me."

"Don't worry. It will be fine." Her words were kind, but her voice betrayed that all this was a job she considered below her. She bore with the girl just to keep safe her son's life.

Ginny had to visit the toilet once again...was it the fourth time this morning...but finally Narcissa covered her with a cloak and Apparated them both to the entrance of the hall where ceremony would take place.

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In their various states of nervousness, Severus and the other bridegrooms stood in the foyer and waited for their brides. When the first stunning young lady appeared, her groom dropped his jaw. She looked... *good probably*, Severus thought nervously. *Or should I use words like stunning, or gorgeous?* For him, she mainly looked so different from normal that he became even more apprehensive of what Ginevra would wear and how she would be made up. Well, they had done a decent job in flattening this bride's sticking-out ears, but cartilage was a delicate matter to deform by magic, and Severus wondered how long it would last.

And yes, just as he had expected, the groom got slapped on his fingers for trying to twirl a lock that had escaped of his bride's tower-like arrangement of her own and false hair around his finger. He wasn't allowed to stroke her cheek either, although to Severus' knowledge, these two were at least a little fond of each other. *Oh, brilliant.*

Severus' nerves stood on ends. If the ceremony didn't start soon, he would be bathing in hot and cold sweat. His sensitive nose already smelled it. He fingered his borrowed collar to get air, although it wasn't any tighter than his teacher's attire had ever been. Paul Nott came over for the third time. "Don't worry, Severus, and stop rolling up the hems of my frock! Come, let's see how the hall is arranged, where you will stand and who has already arrived." He dragged the jumpy bridegroom into the ceremony room. Many guests were seated, or standing close to their places. Children of various heights, sporting their best clothes, jumped around and shouted, but even Severus had to admit they showed somewhat more civilised manners than normally. The elder ones who knew him as a teacher stopped instantly when he approached.

They went over to the east side and then back towards the entrance. Mulciber was entering with two bound and gagged persons. The short, pink one was unmistakably Dolores Umbridge, and Severus noted her anxiety with a sneer. Just the person he had missed for his wedding! Mulciber handed her over to another man, and then the impertinent bungler grinned widely at Severus. "Hi, mate. We got ya li'll bride a pressie for her special day. We took great pains for her, hope she likes it." His head jerked to the other person he had in tow.

A redhead? Indeed! The familiar sight of eyes bulging and mouth agape relaxed Severus. Here was a situation he was used to. "Mr. Weasley, what a pleasant surprise!" he growled, clearly not meaning it. "Let me make you comfortable for the events to come." He flicked his wand to remove the gag and swished once around the hands of the prisoner to loosen the bindings slightly. He even replaced the tight magic ropes around the ankles with slings that allowed for very small steps.

The figure before him looked bewildered. "Snake!" Working his wrists, he turned left and right, noticing the festive attire of the gathered Death Eaters, many of which he

knew at least from photos...from Wanted-photos in the Ministry, more exactly. "What is going on here?"

It was Nott who answered. "A wedding. You should feel honoured to be invited."

A snort was all he got, and Nott nearly slapped the man for it. "Don't!" Severus intercepted his move. "He represents the whole family. I want him to look his best on... on his sister's wedding."

Thick, horn-rimmed glasses dropped to the floor, but the boy was too afraid to take them up. "You cannot be serious," he finally snarled.

"I am most certainly not, you impertinent brat! Paul," Severus said, turning to Nott, "could you arrange for my fiancée to have a word with her brother before the ceremony starts? Five minutes should suffice." He felt so gracious now that he stooped to pick the glasses up and flung them into Percy's hands.

When the room went quiet, Severus dared a glance towards the entrance. Two dressed-up young women were entering. One was stuffed in a similarly pompous outfit as the first bride, her most becoming piece being a floor-length embroidered veil that thankfully hid her hunchback as well as her strong jaw line, though it was not able to cover her trudging step. The other one was... Ginevra. She was beautiful, but still the woman he knew...was to get to know, rather. As fast as he managed to get through the assembled people, he reached her side, feeling the putty in his knees again. "You're here, finally. And the most beautiful bride is mine," he whispered with a hint of a smile. His left hand went to the small of her back while the right hand carefully cupped her face, and he gently placed a shy kiss on her lips.

"Oh, Severus, we're not alone. What an assembly here. And don't say that. They admire the other brides much more than me. Their gorgeous dresses, their stunning tiaras, a veil..." She became pensive. Had she not tried her best? Would she still be the laughing stock, causing Severus trouble?

"They need this," Severus provided, "while you are gorgeous and stunning all by yourself." Ginny's heart beat in her head. Who would think that Severus Snape could be ... charming?

Surprised by his own words, Severus moved her over to meet her brother, remarking that she wouldn't have more than five minutes.

Two Weasleys stared at each other, not believing what they saw. Percy was radiating anger, Ginny was radiating excitement. After twice starting simultaneously, Ginny won and quickly got her message over. "I'm glad you're here, Percy. So glad. At least one." Noting his restrictions, she embraced him lightly. He was fuming in rage. "Percy, calm down, please. I'm fine, really fine. Will you meet mum and the others? Oh, I miss them. I so wished they could be here."

Percy didn't know what to think of this, let alone what to say. This wasn't real was it? Not even Fred and George would conceive such an elaborate hoax, now, in the middle of a war. For over an hour, he had hoped to wake up, had pinched his hand and thigh and awkwardly rubbed his eyes. He stuttered a few words with a voice too long out of use, but was again interrupted.

"Listen now," his sister whispered urgently, gripping his upper arm tightly. "I think you will see them before I do. Maybe right after the wedding, my wedding...Merlin, what a thought...is over." She checked for a moment and then placed a kiss on his cheek. "I send this kiss to Mum. And you WILL deliver it! Don't let me hear that you didn't!" She paused to let her words sink in due to Percy's lack of concentration. Imagining her family's distress, Ginny continued, trying to convince herself as much as Percy. "You will tell them that I am fine. Severus and I want the wedding. Yes, Severus. And yes, we have been asked! He is treating me wonderfully; he'll protect me so that I have little to fear. And I miss them all terribly. They should all be here today," she added sadly.

Before Percy was able to argue, Nott interrupted them because all three bridal pairs were to go outside to prepare for their entry.

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"Over here, hand me your little finger," a witch greeted them. Severus picked up an oblong parchment in front of her. He held it in different angles against the light to scan that it was indeed fresh, except for the strange smell it emitted. He prodded it twice with his wand, murmuring, but all it did was flatten out and bathe in a blue hue. Finally, he was satisfied.

With just a bit of a prick, the energetic woman extracted a drop of blood from each Ginny's and Severus' forefinger and had them drip onto the parchment that sparkled up as their names appeared. Severus checked twice that indeed no other name had appeared. Ginny checked the text. Instead of seven years, she was given ten years time to produce three children...but that was all he had been able to achieve. Before she even reached the small print, the witch took all three parchments up and nodded towards the entrance. "That would be it, you're registered."

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The Dark Lord greeted them. He also arranged the order of the three couples, a topic that had excited the crowd already. Of the bridegrooms, Severus was of course the oldest, the most honoured and closest to their master, but his bride merely escaped a sure death by marrying him. The other betrothed were all four descendants from considerably better situated pure-blood families than the Weasleys. You could see it from their dresses and jewels. None was even related to a Gryffindor, Salazar help them!

Ginny wasn't sure whether it was an honour or not that they were to start the ceremony. When they entered, she could not help to overhear some disapproving grunts, nor the aahs and oohs when the other brides appeared behind her, but she decided she didn't care. Facing this attitude wasn't anything new to a Weasley, and becoming a Snape would not make a difference to this point. She noticed that Severus had made no comments on her dress and decided she would check the next day, if he even remembered what it looked like.

The ceremony was a simple but lengthy one. Umbridge greeted all assembled. She bored them with a lot of general ideas about love and marriage, the importance of wizardry and to educate their offspring in the wizard way. To his chagrin, Severus' stomach rumbled. Ginny giggled a moment, but sobered when he pressed her hand.

Two images appeared behind Umbridge. On the left...seen from the assembled...a serpent and the elderly Salazar Slytherin in wonderfully embroidered, green robes, silver hat, shoes and beard, with a wise smile and an almost embracing gesture. However, Ginny found the cunning and disparagement in his eyes disturbing. He seemed to weigh you, and beware if you were found wanting! His huge snake slithered around his feet, taking in the scent with its forked tongue. On the other side, where the bride was to stand, the image of an old, scraggy lion with dull eyes and a blond-grey fragile man in shabby, burgundy robes appeared. He was given a surly expression as he leaned heavily on his cane, his fatigued eyes looking nowhere in particular. A chuckle arose among the assembled Death Eaters. Never had there been a picture of Godric Gryffindor in any of their group weddings, but this one certainly was a sight!

Severus was asked to the front, next to Umbridge, who had been positioned on a stool to reach eye level of the bridal pairs. His mouth dry, hands sweaty and knees wobbly, he felt like he was going to the gallows. He could not read the toad's expression. Was she a Death Eater? A sympathising member of the Ministry? Or was she forced to play along? By what means? She didn't look as if she was under an Imperius, which meant that the wedding would be official. The contract they had signed with their blood bound them already into consummation and children regardless.

The Dark Lord, being Severus' best man, stood at Severus' left, while Draco, standing with Ginny, awaited her on the right. When she was asked to advance, she noted that a freshened-up Godric benignly looked at her. His familiar's fur was now shiny, and as the clear eyes sparkled in black, his whiskers straightened together with his posture. At the suppressed gasps from the audience, the Dark Lord looked up. He checked with Severus but didn't react.

Percy was to replace his father and accompany his sister to her bridegroom's side. He put on a face of stone, forcing his sister to nudge him slightly. "Will you please not spoil the photo!" Indeed, a flash blinded them just as Percy lifted his right hand. He gave Ginny's left hand into Severus', who relaxed visibly when she was next to him again. How could he not, radiant as she stood there, smiling at him.

Severus barely stood through Umbridge's drawl of words. When the Dark Lord nudged him and handed over Ginny's ring, he awoke from his trance and repeated whatever it was that the toad made him say while he struggled to get the ring out and on her finger. "... you, Ginevra Molly Weasley... honour... protect... accompany through life..."

love... blessed with children." Yes, he would, of course he would! The ring slid easily over her finger and tightened there into proper size.

The vows were repeated for his bride. Three benches behind them, a group started sniggering deviously. Severus frowned and strained his ears in the effort to identify who that was. Flint most certainly. He would have to protect Ginevra from that depraved family.

Ginny bent Severus' finger rather forcefully when the ring would not glide on.

"I declare you husband and wife, according to the laws of wizardry," Umbridge drawled on. Gauging the unworthy, half-blood man, she added with a smirk, "and your pure-blood heritage." Severus didn't react to the bait, but by holding his wife's hand tighter he noticed how Ginny gasped.

"You may kiss the bride."

He turned to the right, bending his head in her direction...and froze. Ginny had let out a screech and jerked her head away with a "NO," pushing at his shoulder, her face suddenly as white as the wall.

Something turned inside Severus. She had not meant it. She had only played nicely to survive. He dropped her hand and stood beaten. This was it.

He heard laughter erupting behind him. Despite his current position, he would be the laughing stock of the Death Eaters.

They were ordered to sit down. With long strides, Severus went back to his place, not caring if his wife came along or not. She had grasped his arm firmly to keep up in her borrowed shoes, and he had to hold back not to shake her off violently.

The end of his dreams had come early.

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Severus sat down, making no effort to give her space to get seated with the wide dress. Immediately after Ginny had arranged herself a little, she leaned over to speak to Severus intimately, but she could not reach him. He stared right ahead and had isolated himself from everyone with a sound reflector shield. She tried to lay a hand on his thigh, but it was magically stopped an inch above the leg.

She is revolted. She has played nicely for three weeks, just to lure me. She has played with me. I'm a fool to have believed it.

Haven't I investigated the traps the male body can fall into? I've spent years observing how women manage to make their husbands behave like fools, lick their shoes, polish their wands. How could I have fallen into the same trap?

Percy observed the pair. Ginny's distress was equally obvious as the professor's. It didn't make sense, did it? He glanced over to Malfoy, who was talking agitatedly to his mother. He seemed irritated, while the woman shrugged. Everyone else who had noticed the scene showed malicious joy. Most of them, then. When the next bridegroom stepped forward, they moved their attention back to the front.

Whatever happened to the other couples bypassed Severus. It bypassed Ginny, too, but he didn't notice that. His mind circled around the one thought: *should never have let anyone come near.*

Within seconds, he had rebuilt the walls that had been the prison of his soul and heart for decades. These walls were cold and hard, but they were a reliable shield against everyone and everything.

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They went over to a banquet. Severus followed the masses in a stupor. He sat down, took a minimum amount of food and accepted the wine. He didn't touch anything though. His hands hung loosely to his sides. He didn't even bother lifting them to the table.

The Dark Lord threw warning glances in their direction, which Ginny fearfully acknowledged. She had lost contact with Percy, but she exchanged a desperate look with Draco. As soon as possible, she excused herself for the bathroom.

At the seats in the back of the hall, Draco's mother surreptitiously did the same. She found a desperate bundle of nerves tearlessly crying in a corner of the room. Silently, she put her hand on the shaking shoulder.

Narcissa had been only eighteen years old on her own wedding. If they had been permitted to wait, things could have ended differently. How much more true was this for a girl one and a half years younger, marrying without her family, to a man twice her age that she didn't really know? Even Narcissa could not deny that too much was required from the girl. "Let's check your make-up."

Ginny nodded and sniffed. "He is shocked and does not let me explain. He got it all wrong. Sooo wrong. I like him, maybe I can love him. I cannot lose everything on this misunderstanding."

It wasn't what Narcissa had expected, not at all. How ridiculous, really. Pushing him away like that, what could he not understand?

Ginny continued, "I need to make him listen. Normally, I know how to do that, but not with all these people."

"We cannot stay for too long. Are you finished here?"

"Just a moment." Ginny went for the loo, washed her hands and checked herself in the mirror. She would need a mask on her face to survive the day. It wasn't but two p.m., and the party was supposed to go on until late in the night.

Wearing a stony face, she returned to her place where all food had disappeared. People were standing or sitting idly now, changing places to meet friends. The Dark Lord approached them. He was furious, although he held himself in a neutral stance.

Ginny nudged Severus' hand, and he acted just in time, removing the shield and putting up a neutral face. They greeted their master respectfully. "You gave us reason to revise our decision, young lady. You have ten minutes to arrange yourselves. Greyback is still waiting," the Dark Lord threatened.

"My Lord, I assure you, it isn't what it seems to be," she started, but he turned to Severus.

"I expect you back in a mood worthy for this occasion."

Severus nodded in acknowledgement and strode towards the wardrobe. He rapidly took his cloak and went outside, not caring for Ginny, who hastily fetched the borrowed cloak, lifted her dress and ran after him. Her sandals with heels didn't allow for the quick pace Severus set up. When he had to wait for the second time, stubbornly looking at the ground, he impatiently flicked his wand. Her feet were in sturdy winter boots. *Oh dear!* She made haste to catch up with him again.

"Severus, I'm sorry ..."

"You lured me and tricked me," he spat. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he continued. "I would have married you on another basis as well, but you preferred to play with me."

"It isn't that, it is ..."

He didn't let her finish a single sentence, but clarified in a threatening tone. "We'll play pretend the merry couple because I don't want to give Greyback the satisfaction of a victory. For no other reason!"

"OK for today. Back home, I'd like to..."

"It will be *OK* for as long as this war is on. Kindly refrain from calling my house your home." In purest teacher manners he warned her, "No speaking out of turn. Ever." He turned and left her.

Inside, Severus dropped his outer clothes and headed back to his place. It was Draco who noticed her winter boots and Transfigured them back to sandals.

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They managed to keep up appearance through the evening, never addressing each other directly, but not showing explicit hostility either.

With a friendly look at her husband, she left to check on Percy. When he wasn't to be found, she asked Mulciber. The man sneered. "Oh, his time was over. He's been asked some place, but by now he should be back to farting into his chair at the Ministry," he told her, not without scrutinising her for the scene she had caused.

Severus wasn't known for being a dancer, so he escaped the affair with a single round, staring stubbornly anywhere else than at his wife in his stiff arms. She tried to compensate with a general smile, but felt she failed utterly. Later, Draco asked her for a dance. "One, Malfoy," Severus growled.

Draco nodded, and they were off. He searched for a corner where they revolved almost on the spot. "Ginny, for heaven's sake, what did you do?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Ginny! I would understand if you were in a shock, but frankly, that isn't the case. How could you do that to him?"

"Believe me, I could not possibly have behaved differently."

Draco asked how he could help them, but Ginny didn't have a satisfying answer for that. "Please, Draco, just believe me, will you? Do not try to mediate. We need to resolve this on our own, else it will not work out. I'm hopeful. Rest assured that I like him, maybe I love him." Draco didn't get another word out of her until the music faded out. Before he let go, Ginny said, "The way Severus takes it, he has feelings, too. I must build on that." He walked her back to her place in silent worry for them both.

The couple made their departure as soon as possible. This time, Severus succeeded in setting up no worse than his average scowl.

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Big hugs to my betas Jingjingchiquita and Hollimel99, who worked their own, wonderful magic on this chapter before you had to face it.

Repercussions

Chapter 11 of 35

Ginny is helplessly exposed to Severus' wrath at her betrayal.

Percy informs his parents about what he has witnessed and Arthur visits Rita Skeeter.

Repercussions

Inside the house in Spinner's End, wards in place, Severus Snape immediately snatched the wand out of his wife's hand. "I am not risking anything," he spat and proceeded to his lab without another look at her.

Ginny's mind worked feverishly. Everything had fallen apart, and he blamed her. In fact, everyone blamed her, but she did not care for them. She had to find access to Severus again, but he was hurt, so hurt that he acted irrationally and jumped to conclusions. She could not even blame him. She had had to refuse his kiss, although they had shared kisses...and so much more...before.

For at least an hour, she sat in a silent stupor, alternately brooding and fuming. She listened, but heard no sound from downstairs. Then glass shattered, and at least one cauldron hit the stone floor with a reverberating, tinny bang. A vision of all the caustic, raw or fermented ingredients for potions came to her mind, and Ginny shuddered. If only he wouldn't hurt himself in his furious ramble! He had to calm down on his own, and then, hopefully, he would come up, and she would explain what had happened.

With a sigh, she laid the borrowed dress aside and put on her warm, loose track suit. Freezing from more than the cool room, she added some logs to the fire. This would at least create a comfortable temperature for the discussion that was bound to start frosty.

There were no more noises from downstairs when Ginny sat down with a steaming pot of a bitter, herbal tea composed mostly of calming-down herbs. She listened anxiously, but it took a long time before she heard anything she could identify. Severus ran the water in the stone sink. Was he cleaning up?

Steps could be heard on the stairs, and the door opened. Ginny stood and looked at her husband apprehensively. "I owe you..."

"Nothing. I want nothing at all from you," he interrupted. His face and voice were not revealing any emotions, and his posture indicated aloofness, maybe an attempt at indifference, as he looked over her head. His arms hung stiffly, and he clenched his hands for control as he spoke in an ice-cold tone. "We are to keep up an image towards the Death Eaters. The Dark Lord keeps records on the copulation schedule. Get ready. As my touch suddenly revolts you, I will not put you through the ordeal of foreplay."

Ginny jerked back with every hard consonant in the last sentence. "Severus..."

"You are speaking out of turn. Do not make it a habit. Get ready." With this order he left for the bathroom.

Ginny was frozen to the spot. He couldn't possibly mean it!

He reappeared and saw her rooted on the same place. In the short moment of indecision, Ginny tried to read something in his face and found only disgust. A flick of his wand replaced the sofa with the makeshift bed. Another set of flicks removed Ginny's trousers and knickers. "Is even that too difficult for a pure-blood without a wand?" Ginny blanched.

With rough movements, Severus shoved her along to her first bed in this place. He was done quickly, eyes cold as stone, hardly touching her and not approving any touch from her. He removed himself rapidly and left for the bedroom...his bedroom.

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For hours, Ginny moved around in her bed, went to the toilet and kitchen in turns or paced the few yards of the sitting room. Sleep would not come. Even crying herself to sleep wasn't an option, for she felt void of tears. He had deliberately hurt her and then left with no word at all. Numb and shocked, she had been lying for a long time before she had carefully moved her legs and finally stood to go to the bathroom. Against her physical pain, she had found the known ointment in the front row of the apothecary cupboard. Within minutes her skin had lost its burns and the raw feeling.

Ginny's mental pain, on the other hand, went deeper and would leave the most ugly scar behind if it wasn't treated.

In her heart, she clung to the warm memories that, knowing the teacher from Hogwarts, struck one as odd: Severus, raising an eyebrow in bemusement over her, as she insisted that preparing food was fun; Severus, sitting at her bed, focusing hard on not jumping while she stroked his arm; Severus, wiping a tear from her cheek, desperately searching for words of consolation; Severus, stumbling over his own words as he handed her the necklace; Severus...

First thing in the morning, she would explain their problem. They would once again peruse books and make plans on how to overcome the obstacle the pink toad had set before them.

What if he refused to listen? Then she'd try again as soon as the situation was less tense. The man wasn't stupid, was he? With a sigh Ginny admitted that he was, however, incredibly stubborn...and deeply hurt. This mix could prove hard to overcome. She would have to show patience.

How many people would have realised what had happened? How had Percy perceived the scene? Had he heard Umbridge's words at all? From the Dark Lord's comment about his role as intermediary, it certainly had appeared to her that he had been sent back alive. Ginny had not followed up exactly who had taken up the task to see to him. Would Percy finally contact the family, now that he had information to share? Would he talk to them in person? Her least sociable brother had been utterly surprised, as if he hadn't even known she had been caught, that she had been missing for three weeks already. The festive atmosphere and her wedding with Severus had, of course, befuddled him. The two men must have spoken with each other before Ginny had arrived, and she could just imagine how Severus had beamed, gloated even... only to be so utterly humiliated later.

Oh, if she got hold of that arrogant Umbridge meddler! Why did she have to tease him; was it some revenge from an encounter at Hogwarts back in Ginny's fourth year? How exactly had Severus handled the situation back then? Yet again, her thoughts had returned to Severus. Always Severus.

Gathering her wits, Ginny decided she'd have to observe Severus most carefully. His face was unreadable for most of the time, but there were tiny indicators that gave away his tension. A twitching finger, for example. He always managed to keep his index and pinkie still, if not relaxed, but the middle finger and the ring finger could give him away. Or a clenched fist, to counteract the twitch, as he had chosen earlier this night. The soft black hair on the back of his hands was another indicator. It lay flat most of the time, but in fear and pain, when he would possibly get goosebumps under his clothes, the hairs on his hand would stand up. His long, slender hands appeared before her inner eye. They were so skilled at handling mortar and pestle, stirring a cauldron and cutting up ingredients evenly, without a single fail in shape or size. These hands could also balance and play with a wand most artfully.

The same hands had learned to play over her, had indeed ensnared her senses...without a potion or a wand.

She sighed. They would not do it again soon. Back she was to her problem! She would observe his every reaction to her actions, to her person, her presence. He was behaving stubbornly, like a child, really. If this continued, he would not want to be given favours, but he would not want to be treated worse than before either, and certainly he would not want to give her recognition for whatever she did.

She wanted to show him what she knew about him. Unfortunately, there were wide fields she did not know anything about. Should she cook his favourites and say so? Should she cook food she knew wasn't on this list and not say anything?

Should she provoke him?

The herbal tea let her finally fall asleep.

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The sun was up when Ginny awoke from restless slumber. She eyed her dress from the day before as it lay on the armchair, mocking her. Resolutely, she got up, took the everyday clothes into the bathroom and emerged washed and dressed. The room was frighteningly silent, and the table was empty, but she found evidence that Severus had had breakfast in the kitchen. She haphazardly gathered some food for herself on a plate and sat at her usual place. A parchment became visible.

Schedule:

Sat 2.15 p.m.

Sat 9.41 p.m.

Sun 9.13 a.m.

Sun 9.55 p.m.

Mon 10.23 p.m.

Tue 10.32 p.m.

Thu 10.04 p.m.

Mon 9.57 p.m.

Be ready!

If my duties keep me out of house on the set times, be prepared 25 minutes after I return

Her food lost its taste, and she disposed of it. He couldn't mean it? This was far worse than she had expected. Surely there must be a way to talk to him?

Ginny Snape faced four hours with nothing to do but to prepare herself for this date of sorts.

With another pot of hot tea that failed to remove the chill in her bones and soul, she listened at the door to the cellar. The sound of the grinding pestle and mortar was forceful, but regular. She rapped lightly. No answer. "Severus, some tea?" The grinding continued unaltered, and she received no reply. A clinking sound indicated that Severus was pouring the powdered substance out of the mortar, then scraping it clean with the pestle. In her mind's eye, she could see his hands at work, but in the real world there was no way of reaching him.

Severus appeared around noon. He did not look left or right as he went quickly through to the kitchen and closed the door with an additional spell.

This won't do, Ginny thought. *Eventually, he will finish his lunch.* She stalled in front of the kitchen door, listening. For a long time, she heard nothing unusual. Severus cut bread and cheese and made coffee. Footsteps...but not to the door...and a cupboard-door squeaked. He might have fetched a tomato or a fruit? Rapid chopping sounds and then a marginal intake of breath. She heard him murmur a blood stalling spell, and the next cuts came slower in succession, albeit even more forceful.

Tears came to Ginny's eyes, but she blinked them away just in time, for his footsteps did come towards the door, and she prepared herself. When he opened the door, she stood directly in his path on his way back to the cellar. He did not acknowledge her at all, instead heading for the bathroom as if she didn't exist.

Should she play the same game again? The bathroom door was narrower; he would not be able to stalk straight past her if she placed herself perfectly.

Severus took his time in the bathroom, vigorously washing his already clean hands. Again, she had tried to mock him. She would not get a chance! He would not listen to any of her invitations, accusations or humiliations. She would be given strict orders and regulations like the child she was after all. He checked his watch. The planet movements were unstable, reflecting his state of mind. Two hours left until the time he had set her. He needed this time to finish the potion, and she would not make him fail! The skin on his hand could not stand another attack with the simple soap he used. It was reddish and itchy already. With a huff, he took a bit of the skin balm, although he hated the smeary touch it left. After creaming his hands, he flung the door open to leave with speed.

He crashed into her, taking the wind out of her, but he didn't adjust his pace. "You are blocking my way," he snarled, opened the door to the stairs and stomped down.

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It was ten past two when his potion was bottled and labelled and the desk cleaned. Severus sat idly on his stool for three minutes, mentally preparing himself. For twenty years, he had avoided the rapes on the raids he was forced to participate in. He had declined every party announced with the prospect to 'have women', and when the offers had come unexpectedly, he had immediately bidden his goodbye with whatever excuse he had found.

His master used to allocate him the job of supervisor, and the others were left to believe what they wanted to.

Now, after all these years, Severus saw himself forced to regularly take a little girl because the Dark Lord registered their... copulation.

Two minutes to go. He would do it, yes, he would, and no one would suspect anything! For the first week, he had set up a schedule mimicking the spontaneity he had been so close to actually experiencing. *No, don't go there!*

A minute to go. *She had better be prepared!*

She was standing in the middle of the sitting room, now clad in a lose robe of Narcissa's. His anger rose. "Can you not prepare yourself?"

"Severus, can't we..." she began anxiously, seeking his eyes with hers, but he stared past her and interrupted her sentence.

"We are about to, aren't we?" He tore open the robe... to find her nude form underneath. He forced himself to tear his eyes away from her unequal but lovely breasts, her slim waist and the hips that were about to grow from adolescent to true female curves. With a frustrated grunt, he moved her shaking form towards the makeshift bed.

Ginny had been so sore last night that she had rummaged the kitchen and bathroom and finally prepared herself with a liberal amount of oil for lubrication. Clinging hard to the better memories, she was awaiting a hard assault that didn't quite come. He wasn't exactly tender and gentle, and he lifted his chin high and past her forehead, but he kneaded her butt and stroked her back and her hips enough to make her relaxed, if not aroused. When he noticed how she had prepared herself, his breath hitched.

Severus found himself unable to abstract the required task from the girl (woman, wife!) herself. Already twice he had forced himself upon her; first in ignorance, but yesterday he had done so deliberately harshly. He had hurt her because she had hurt him. She, the first female in years who had held his interest, who had shown interest. He tried with closed eyes, but saw the brown and blue speckled eyes, begging... It did not work. *She was never interested in you. She deserves...*In the end, he had to include her more than marginally to stimulate himself...a fact that didn't go well with him at all.

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The small group that gathered in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place nowadays was a despondent one. Years ago, each meal for about a dozen people at the kitchens at Headquarters used to be a loud affair.

In the last weeks, most of the non-Weasley members of the Order escaped Headquarters before dinner and did not arrive before the morning meeting. Harry, Hermione and Ron as well as the Weasley-parents lived permanently in the house and were always present for meals, but there was always at least one more person for meals. It was a good thing that they had never fixed a seating order; there was no chair associated so strongly with Ginny that it would have to be kept empty. Even without a point to set their eyes to, they missed her cheery presence so much that it hurt physically.

This Saturday morning did not make an exception. Fred and George did not open their shop every day anymore, and today they had come over to console their mother or at least give her more shoulders to load her grief on. They would then prepare medical remedies in the Potions lab in Headquarters.

Mr Weasley had a working day and was already in his office. He had decided to take Mondays off and replace them with Saturdays where he had recently been called on a regular basis anyhow. Scrimgeour had not minded much...the man had other pressing matters to attend to.

An owl delivered two copies of the *Daily Prophet*. Fred fished twelve Knuts out of the jar at the window, surprised at how early the bird came this day. Tilting its head, the bird intensely considered a slice of bacon offered by Fred, when a shriek took it by surprise. It knocked over the tea and hooted indignantly. George jumped hastily off the table to escape the hot flood and dropped his scrambled eggs into Ron's pumpkin juice. "Hermione!" several voices shouted. Ron got up to take a tissue and close the window behind the irritated owl.

Hermione, however, ignored them all. "It's *Ginny!* Here, page three! Oh, Harry, leave it and take the other copy!"

They barely arranged who was to hold the newspapers without tearing them apart. For several minutes utter silence filled the room, save for the dripping tea that no one cared for. A half-page article with photos showed the missing youngest member of the family, beautifully dressed, positively beaming at the hated Potions master and murderer of Albus Dumbledore, who himself looked...

"...relaxed," Molly noticed.

"...surprisingly good," Hermione commented, earning scoffs from the assembled males.

"...different," Fred and Harry admitted.

"That's Percy!" Ron cried as Ginny leaned even closer to her bridegroom, allowing the spectators a clear view of the third occupant of the photo.

"If you were *reading*, Ron, you'd have noticed," Hermione murmured, but no one was listening, and she was herself still engulfed in the article.

In smashing words, the reporter described a group wedding.

...

The pairs bound yesterday, Dec 12th, are all enthusiastic followers of the greatest wizard alive. The most honourable one is a certain Severus Tobias Snape, 38, who was wed to Ginevra Molly Weasley, 16. Lacking the support from most of her family for her choice, only one brother made his appearance, Percy Ignatius Weasley, right hand of the Minister of Magic.

...

Another owl arrived, followed shortly afterwards by a third, both with an official envelope from the Ministry in their beaks. They hooted indignantly as they bumped on the closed window until Hermione, who was a fast reader, finished and let them in. Hooting furiously at being ignored, although their missive was most urgent, they were barely consoled with the bacon she offered absent-mindedly.

She tore the first letter open, noticing too late that Molly and Arthur Weasley were the addressees.

Mum, Dad,

Meet me at 10.45 in the Green Lantern for lunch. Do not bring anyone else.

Percy

"That's the Muggle place Dad has visited before," Ron noted. "It's a Greek pub close to the Ministry."

In parallel, Molly had opened the other letter. It was for her from her husband, confirming Percy's missive, adding that he would pick Molly up and that she should wear Muggle clothes. Arthur insisted on bystanders from the Order and mentioned four names.

Molly, dear, try to reach them and only them. Arrange with one at least to sit in the tavern before we arrive.

Don't wind up your nerves beforehand. We do not know yet what Percy has to tell us.

Love, Arthur

It was half past nine. Hedwig, Errol and Pigwidgeon were sent to Mad Eye, Lupin, Mundungus and a school chum of Arthur's and trusted Order member, Greta Creak, with the question if they could free themselves for an early lunch.

The Floo flared, and Remus and Tonks arrived, tightly followed by the equally concerned Headmistress, who pushed at them so that Tonks knocked over a jug of pumpkin juice. Remus drew his wand to temporarily close the Floo to avoid a crowd, but Neville was quicker, almost throwing Remus into Fred's back.

As the birds returned, the replies passed through the excitedly discussing throng. Dung, never receiving the *Prophet*, declared the time to be too early for him to be on duty. Whatever this was about, it had to wait. The other two readily agreed and expected next orders.

:.:.:.:

Arthur paced nervously at the Floo before he could finally announce the location...only to be bounced back in a cloud of soot. Angrily, he Apparated as close to Headquarters as he dared. He had a long walk, which made his timing a close cut.

When he stomped into the kitchen, the only occupied room, he was already in Muggle clothes. Letting go of Fred and running over to him, Molly exclaimed, "Arthur, finally!" She embraced her husband with shaking hands.

"Molly, dear, don't get soot all over you now. I'm sorry I'm quite late. There is something wrong with the Floo," he explained as he vigorously brushed his baby-blue suit. With a rapid movement, Hermione charmed it to show an irregularly patterned, dark blue. "Ah, good thinking," Arthur acknowledged her.

Guiltily, Remus nodded. "I wanted to keep others out; didn't think of tailoring it."

"You did the right thing. Look what I've got here," Arthur told the room, focusing on Minerva and Mad Eye. "I Apparated to the yellow bushes in the park and took a run. I was about to enter the street when a huge owl arrived, screeching indignantly at me."

Reading aloud to them all, Minerva became even more furious.

Mr Weasley,

Word has it you have given your under-aged daughter into marriage to one of the most searched-for Death Eaters, the murderer of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape.

Kindly agree to explain this unexpected step to our readers. Please meet our special reporter Rita Skeeter at 13.30 in our editorial premises, Diagon Alley 12 5/7.

With kind regards,

Notorio Pester, Chief Editor

The Daily Prophet your connection to the world

"The nerve of these reporters!" ... "Don't go!" ... "How dare they?" Everybody shouted until the Headmistress called for order.

"You must leave. I understand that you selected the people to support you such that the Ministry would not get suspicious. Very wise. I suggest that Remus and Mr Longbottom should go. Yes, he wasn't on your list, but he will be a wonderful excuse for Remus to be there in the first place. Dolores Umbridge or others of her retinue might turn up together with Percy. They would recognise a half-breed, as they say...Nymphadora, mind the coffee...immediately. Alastor, if you would keep an eye on the tavern from outside. Please join Longbottom only if Remus is made to leave and he is left alone. We'll play nicely if they do, so to say."

"Don't you believe I could play the Slytherin way, Minerva?" Remus tried to joke, but it did not go too well. He was already dressed in jacket and jeans and asked Arthur for directions while Harry fetched a Muggle outfit for his friend, who had arrived in wizard robes. "Don't hesitate to hex the git before he gets you," Harry said, feeling less than gracious towards Percy. The two departed.

Arthur told the rest of them that he had not been able to contact his son at the Ministry. "The Auror department had him questioned all morning. He was barely allowed to send the owls when they received the *Prophet*."

"He will come with bodyguards, you'll see," Ron said.

"Guarding him from Mum and Dad..." ... "...or them from him?" the twins asked, one finishing the other's sentence.

With all the patience she could muster, Hermione waited for a silent moment. "This article is formulated differently from the normal *Prophet* style. Have you recognised who has written it? I have not." None of them knew the moniker *sdv*.

Contrary to most, McGonagall and Hermione insisted that Arthur should go to this ominous interview. "Try to ascertain who is behind this article."

"I know Skeeter. Insist on a normal quill or you won't recognise the result," Harry added. "Say hello from Hermione and myself. That should help."

Littered with further advice and wishes, the nervous couple flooded to the Ministry, which wasn't far from the Green Lantern.

Professor McGonagall set the remaining Weasleys and friends on several tasks about the article. She left them a third copy of the *Prophet*. "I must leave. Such a disruption is too predictable to have all of us drop our current work. Merlin knows what has happened in the half hour I was here."

:*:*:

Molly and Arthur Weasley spotted their son immediately. He sat three booths down from the entry and looked wary and far less self-assured than on their last, difficult meeting months ago. On that occasion, he had point-blank refused to attend his brother's wedding because the bride was a foreigner and part-Veela. Now he slouched on a bench at the window seat with a Ministry Auror blocking his way out. Another Auror sat at the head of the table, leaving Molly and Arthur the two places opposite their son.

Purposefully, they did not spare a glance at the two men in the booth they passed. Molly made to move in and was taken by surprise when her son stood to peck her cheek. "From Ginny," he said stiffly and sat down again, his right hand shaking. "She insisted I convey it to you."

Molly poured questions onto him. "You've seen her? Actually talked to her? What did she say? How..."

"Mrs Weasley, Mr Weasley," the young Auror next to Percy interrupted sharply. "We don't have all day. We have questioned your son all morning, and he had best tell you the story as he saw it. Please keep your questions for later."

While thoroughly annoyed, Arthur gripped Molly's hand. "Calm down, love. We'd best follow their rules."

"Thank you, Mr Weasley," the man at the head end said. "Oh, and I'm Auror Constantine Rutting; this is Malcolm Dim, an apprentice," he said with an excuse in his voice. "I understand your anxiety, and I'm sorry for what you and your daughter are going through." With a sharp look, he reprimanded the young man for his rudeness. "Mr Percy Weasley, please," he gestured for Percy to begin. Arthur couldn't help thinking that Mr Rutting had not registered the significance of what his son had told and was about to report again now. "Start from your encounter in the office Thursday afternoon."

Loud enough to draw the attention of all patrons to their table, Percy retorted, "It was not in the afternoon! I was in my office *working late* because the regulation for..."

"Never mind that. You were working, although it was late, what time?" Rutting interrupted.

"It was definitely past eight. I usually work that late. Considering our situation, my investigation is of utmost..."

"MR WEASLEY. Report on the issue at hand. Facts. The door opened..."

In a slightly dull voice, sounding as if he had done so repeatedly already, Percy related his experience. "The door opened, and I was being friendly with the other night-time workers. But they did not bother and hit me squarely with a stunner. Who would think one had to expect such behaviour!" Back in the other booth, Remus and Neville shook their heads. Percy Weasley was upset about the lack of respect Death Eaters showed towards a junior Ministry official!

The tedious monologue lasted for more than an hour. Every now and again, Rutting or Arthur had to draw Percy's focus back to the wedding. Even Molly lost her temper once and reminded her confused son about the topic they were currently interested in.

Filling their stomach with a Greek village salad, dolmades, tzatziki, grilled octopus and souvlaki and an Ouzo, Remus and Neville took notes that they would later compile to form the following report:

Percy Weasley was stunned and abducted Thursday night around 8p.m. from his workplace. He woke up.or was Rennervated, this wasn't clear...**around 7 a.m. the next day, lying in his underwear on a camp-bed in a small, badly lit room. A voice told him to dress, and he did not find his wand. The clothes that he had worn all Thursday were neat and tidy, indicating that an elf had cleaned and ironed them. An unknown elf gave him a rudimentary breakfast of porridge and coffee...although he told them he preferred tea!Blindfolded, bound and gagged...hmpf...he was Apparated to a building full of people, where he saw Dolores Umbridge, who was bound like him. Both were levitated into a hall by Mr Mulciber.**

The hall in the shape of a quadrant had a stage of sorts in its tip. Huge flower arrangements decorated both radial sides and the back of the stage. The stonewalls had tall, mullioned windows. Torches gave warm, smokeless light. A three-step pedestal was placed in the middle of the stage. Rows of chairs were oriented to the front, that is, the stage. Folk in their best clothes and high spirits entered, talked and eventually sat down.

Umbridge, who looked irritated about something, but not exactly about the whole event, was placed on the pedestal.

A pair of formidable men in festive dress arrived. Snape, a carnation in his buttonhole, appeared to be more nervous than Percy had ever seen him. Stalking over to Percy, he put a smug sneer on his face and mock-greeted him. Obviously unafraid of their many bystanders, he removed Percy's gag and even loosened the binds on his hands and feet. While Percy worked his joints, they exchanged a few nasty words wherein Snape announced he was to wed Ginevra.

Snape then demanded that his bride be given a chance to talk to Percy before the ceremony, but at that moment there was only another bride in the hall, dressed up to the nines. Percy recognised her and her bridegroom as Slytherins from his own year and the year above. Neville and Remus jotted down their names, although neither rang a bell.

When the room had suddenly gone quiet, Snape turned and his whole demeanour changed. He was suddenly all the... loving... groomPercy had as much trouble saying it as Neville noting it down. **His eyes not wavering, he strode over to Ginny. The girl looked more adult than ever before as she stood there in her dress and heels, her head high. She was so pretty and radiated excitement...she was as excited and lovely as a bride should be.** No, Percy insisted, there wasn't a sign of a curse, a potion or any other mind-addling influence. But he admitted he hadn't been fully attentive, still hoping he would wake up from the nightmare.

For an exchange of maybe five sentences, he spoke with her, or actually she had talked most all the time. She insisted that she was there voluntarily, gave him the kiss for their mum and expressed gratitude that at least one family member was present. She missed them and sent her warmest thoughts.

The first formidable wizard interrupted them, sent Ginny out, placed Percy into the second row and gave him instructions on what to do. With the alternative either being put under the Imperius or doing it from his own motivation, he decided to stay in control of his mind, even if he still had doubts that it all was real.

Shock went through all listeners when Percy reported that the Dark Lord was Snape's best man. That Draco Malfoy stood to Ginny's side was greeted with almost similar dismay.

In lieu of their father, Percy accompanied his sister to her husband's right-hand side. She gripped his hand hard, but walked with firm steps. He noted that the image of Godric Gryffindor and his lion smarted up as they approached.

In the neighbouring booth, a fork dropped on the plate with a clatter, and hastily, Molly coughed.

"You-Know-Who did not interfere?" Arthur asked in disbelief. Percy replied that he had appeared amused, if such a notion could be seen in the snake-like face at all.

For Umbridge's speech and spells, Percy was not allowed to return to his previous seat, but forced to the back where a wand was poked into his left side. He recalled only how Ginny refused to be kissed and Snape's shock. They had kissed each other fondly before the ceremony...yuck, thought Neville...but this time she would not have it. Snape turned a pale shade of green and was a terrible sight when they walked back to their places. Percy's eyes did not leave his sister's and Snape's backs, but they never turned around.

Here, Ruttig told them that his mind had registered more anyway, although the acoustics were bad. They had gathered all of it in a Pensieve. Arthur would be granted access rights to the Pensieve once the Ministry was finished with its analysis.

At the feast, Percy was placed at the lowest corner and given potatoes and sauce only. He did not see Ginny or Snape again before being hauled from the room and Stunned.

Percy indignantly obeyed to skip how the Death Eaters had interrogated him, but he rolled up his sleeve to show marks. Then he reported how they had thrown him through the entrance of the Ministry. His shoulder still hurt; he winced. At this remark, Arthur finally lost his nerves and cut him short. He should imagine what his sister was going through and immediately stop wallowing in self-pity. Percy accused his parents of always looking for an argument when they met him. And besides, why had they discarded Ginny so easily, he argued. "You are the ones playing a dangerous game at her cost!"

It was the last straw. Molly, who had always been ready to defend the oddball of her family, got up and slapped him.

While the two glared at each other in disbelief, Arthur discussed with the Aurors how to get the most out of Percy's memory. "Can we identify who abducted him, who returned him?"

"He was, of course, Obliviated, sir. We could break the charm, if you wish to press charges, but to be honest..."

Arthur immediately shook his head, yet Percy got furious, accusing them of wishing to impair his judgement only to destroy his career.

"Oh, yes, a brain does not always recover after strong memory charms," Arthur returned coldly. "Remind me who it was who had put poor Miss Jorkins in a similar state?" Before Percy was able to retort, the Auror apprentice had put him under a jaw-lock. This time, nobody felt they should correct the youngster. The Aurors made to leave, pulling Percy along.

Hastily, Arthur kissed his wife goodbye. "I will see to the *Prophet* by myself if you aren't up to it. Relax. Take your Ouzo now, I think!" He returned to his workplace with the three other men.

When the door to the tavern closed behind them, Remus and Neville moved over to the next booth to give Molly their moral support. She had hardly touched her food and shoved the plate to Remus, who tucked in with little hesitation. She eyed the drink with suspicion, but on Remus' reassuring encouragement, she downed the foreign drink. They were soon joined by Alastor Moody. He was quickly informed about the Pensieve and the Aurors' ideas when to deliver it. "I'll show them myself who gets to see it and when," he roared and left. After all, he was still an authority at the Ministry, albeit only called for special tasks.

By now even the last places of the tavern had filled with Muggle lunch guests, and the innkeeper asked pointedly what else he could get them. The three Order members settled their bill and returned to Headquarters, where Hermione and Ron placed Molly on the sofa and handed her warm tea. Everybody sat around them and was filled in.

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A shrilly orange Rita Skeeter, smiling like a Cheshire cat, generously invited Arthur Weasley into her office, quill poised. Her robe sported fringes along the sleeves and the hem of the skirt, which flapped on their own accord and emitted little silvery sparks as she spoke. A photographer hopped around excitedly, and for a moment the three performed a dance of sorts as Arthur moved to turn his back towards the camera while the other two tried to avoid just that. Mr Weasley forbade any picture-taking. "With regards from Hermione Granger and Harry Potter," he relayed to her with a determination he didn't feel. Skeeter immediately waved the man away. "And kindly stash away the Quick Quotes Quill," Arthur added, fascinated at how smoothly she obeyed. The fringes stopped emitting sparks and nearly lost all will to wave. What hold did those two have over her? He stored the thought for later reference, but today he would use every means to get through the meeting.

"I'm not going to talk only to you, Ms Skeeter. Please call in Mr Pester," he demanded. She clearly despised the fact that a good story was lost, but agreed.

Arthur concentrated hard on asking more than answering. They would not catch him with an article in the tone of their letter. Notorio Pester had indeed received the ready-made article and been threatened into publishing it unaltered. "Look around in Diagon Alley," he argued, waving his arm towards the window. "Two-thirds of the businesses are closed. I'm not keen on ending up as Ollivander or Fortescue. When He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named needs publicity, he will get it."

"I can see that," Arthur replied and pulled a parchment out of his pocket. The short text had been discussed with Rufus Scrimgeour. "You may publish this tomorrow under the same notion. I'm not keen on ending up on the first pages, but please do not place it amidst the obituaries."

Skeeter grimaced in dismay and pierced the parchment with her talons as she tapped on it. "I could pep this up here and there..."

"...but Miss Granger said you would not."

As her face lost its sparkles, even her dress changed to a subtle shade of apricot. "Very well."

"Mr Weasley," Pester started again, his voice neutral. "Would you like a few high quality copies of your daughter's wedding photo? I cannot deliver the negatives, but colour photos on glossy paper, maybe four-by-six inches, would be no problem at all."

Arthur Weasley was torn between the shock over the unconcerned question and the thought that this might well be the very last picture they would ever get from their daughter. He selected one where the bridal pair was visible in an oval shape with the rest blurred and whitewashed, so that no one else was to be seen. It was a nice shot, but the pair did disappear from view rather often. With a sigh, he also selected one giving the full scene, allowing the bridal pair to stay in view and Percy to appear behind them. It inevitably included Malfoy and the red-eyed, reptile-like monster everybody feared. He was the man whose juvenile form had already stolen a year of happy school life from his daughter. Now he was once again holding the threads of her life in his claws.

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Ginny's whole weekend followed the same pattern as Saturday morning. Severus restricted their interaction to the bare minimum. The most positive thing was maybe that he didn't purposefully hurt her body. On Sunday night he took more time, even touched her gently, but Ginny wasn't fooled: he needed to please her to trick his body into a performance his mind abhorred. Her own meagre comfort was more of a by-product.

Yet, there was an honesty in his actions. He hated her for luring him into showing his feelings, which meant his feelings had indeed been honest. Most likely, Severus hated himself just as much as he hated her. It was a sad thought, bringing her no comfort.

After missing him getting up on Saturday morning, she made an effort to be ready to have breakfast with him on Sunday and Monday. On both occasions, she asked about his plans for the day. He hissed sharply that she knew the schedule and everything else wasn't her business. At least she received her wand on Monday because Severus was leaving on a spying trip.

Whatever it was, this time he seemed to be going out alone. She would not get any details. She couldn't expect anything from him before seven minutes to half past ten.

Sharp.

:*:*:

Ginny found herself confronted with uncountable hours of loneliness. She was not to leave the house, except for shopping, and even the garden was out of bounds. The only company she could find were... books. There was an abundance of them. For the first time in her life, Ginny got absorbed in books. It was not like she had never read before, but with her brothers' noisy and often smelly activities it had not been very easy. She was not like Percy, who would close the door and demand silence for days in a row.

Consequently, the small repertoire of books at her parents' place had never held her attention. Here, she could hardly complain about missing a book that would grip her. Severus was well equipped indeed. Tomes on Dark Arts, Potions and text written in ancient runes were represented aplenty. On all the other subjects Hogwarts taught...with the obvious exception of Divination and Muggle Studies...his collection contained at least intermediate-level books. The books he had on plant-life and fauna considered them mostly from the point of view of a potions brewer. However, since many Potions masters grew their own supplies, your average Herbology student would do well enough if he knew half of what they presented. Remarkably, many of the texts were inaccessible to Ginny because they were written in what she assumed was French.

The books that actively attracted her attentions were all on one shelf that she steered clear of. She had had her share of aggressive books and didn't feel like spending endless hours in their power.

It was, however, another shelf that soon caught Ginny's attention: small, soft-cover books made from thin, rustling paper...Muggle literature. She quickly understood that these were not the material Hermione called Science and that the girl had compared with their school subjects. No, Severus owned a selection of English and international literature from the last few hundred years. Famous names were among them, names that she had heard mentioned at times, but had not been able to place.

With time at her disposal, Ginny discovered different genres, poems, novels, short stories, stage plays and learned to differentiate books focusing on personal relationships, of which Severus had only a few, from books describing and accusing social conditions, then and now. Many a book was commented on in Severus' tiny writing, and for some that described despotic or authoritarian regimes, like the shocking story called *1984*, she noticed that his comments had been erased and altered several times.

She became irritated when the Muggles in one book built complex contraptions and flew to the stars where they met strange extraterrestrial beings she had never heard even Dean or Colin talk about. Conversely, in other books, the Muggles did not use cars or electricity. Ginny started reading the back covers and forewords to understand what was supposed to be close to reality...even if she did not easily recognise this reality...and what was deliberate fiction. Just like Wolfsbane and other advanced potions, Muggle medicine and what they called technology had been invented and developed over centuries. Dickens, for example, had simply lived and written before the first cars had been built.

With a smile, she recalled that Severus had not known of CDs, even though they seemed to be an essential part of her own age group. Thinking of tonight, the smile froze on her face.

Despite her miserable life, she had to laugh at the fantastic stories on dragons or wizards Muggles had come up with. So had Severus, as was visible from his sarcastic comments. Yet, some seemed so oddly close to wizard legends that she wondered if it had not been a wizard, or maybe a Squib, who had written them. Quite many books contained a Dark Force, or a Dark wizard, suppressing the good.

At times, Ginny succeeded in forgetting her miserable conditions and, for the first time in her life, lost herself in a good book.

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It was Wednesday morning, and Severus was glad to have his first 'day off'. Off from the appalling task he now had to perform. Twice a week was the requirement, and after what simulated a honeymoon to all those who enjoyed looking at the charts, he was now finally getting into the scheme. Thursdays and Mondays it would be.

He had kept himself out of the house the last few days and likewise, he would do so today.

According to a reduced training plan, Draco would be visiting them every Tuesday and Friday. Yesterday, the girl had launched herself at him verbally and entangled him in a most friendly chat over dinner. She had made an effort to include Severus, but he hadn't felt Draco needed any illusion of the mess he had created. Severus' answers had been polite but short or dismissive, so that soon they had left Severus out of their discussion.

Draco's eyes had wandered from one to the other, brows furrowed in concern. When he had taken up the packet with her borrowed wedding dress and shoes to have his mother return them to their owners, Ginny had asked him imploringly for dinner next Friday and the other training days. She had taken Severus by surprise, but he could not recall an invitation his wife had given. Draco had frowned but politely agreed for the following Friday and Tuesday, but not without a questioning second look at Severus.

Whenever she was in a room with him, she had made an effort to talk to him, but he would not allow it. As if he would give her the satisfaction!

In the mornings, she had been at the breakfast table or had joined him in the kitchen...whatever way he arranged his breakfast.

This morning was no exception. They were standing in the kitchen for breakfast for the sole reason that she had prepared a big meal with scrambled eggs and bacon as well as porridge. His intent to show her how little he cared was broken quickly. The smell was just too good to resist, although he wouldn't tell her so. He tucked in heartily.

In contrast to the day before, she wore the necklace with the little leopardess he had given her in the befuddled state of mind he had been in. She had worn it on most days, but not on all, and he didn't see a pattern. *Why do I spend my thoughts on trivialities like this?* Severus was sure he had not frowned or otherwise shown his displeasure, but she jerked back as if sensing it all the same.

When he was about to leave the house, she asked him, "Severus, will you be home for lunch? Or maybe for dinner?"

Angry at the interruption, he turned around to face her. Her right hand clenched over the pendant, knuckles showing. "We have clarified that it is none of your business." *And stop using my name*, he would have liked to add, but it wasn't really a request he could make. He stared at the yet unopened door to collect himself. With a last fierce look back at her, he opened it and left...or that had been his intention.

Instead, he caught her staring at the far wall, tears in her eyes, kissing the little pendant. It had nearly undone him. She clutched to the thing as a means of comfort? Something he had given her?

:*:*:

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Once again, my thanks go to my betas Jingjingchiquita and Hollime199. They worked their own, brilliant magic on this chapter to make it readable and logical. Their help and patience is invaluable.

Are you curious how it came that Draco works with Severus? Check out the little prequel *Three Options for Draco* that I have started here in the same archive.

A New Project

Chapter 12 of 35

Annoyed with his new circumstances, Severus keeps himself out of house as much as he can. He learns about a new school project in the Dark Lord's plan. Ginny's many indications how she feels fall flat. Severus does not want to pay her any attention, but it isn't as easy as it should be.

Remus detects an odd streak in Severus' behaviour at the wedding.

A/N: To help you follow, here is a summary of the rules for the wedding between Severus and Ginny.

For all the couples, Voldemort's key goal is to breed wizards or witches. That's what the curse they sealed with their blood is tailored to: intercourse-till-pregnant until they have three magical children.

Voldemort's goal in this particular pairing, SS/GW, is, however, not limited to the children, although he does expect them. His short-term goal is to keep Ginny in their hands and leave the Order desperate.

Severus returns from his preparation chat with Voldemort, reporting that Ginny has time till her seventeenth birthday to become pregnant. But he makes it clear to her that the regular intercourse means that she cannot escape.

When she drinks the contraceptive, Ginny remembers that it is to be taken after the period. To me, it seems closest to Muggle contraceptives this way ==> she'll get the two beakers only once a month, and there isn't a secret at all.

The requirement for intercourse terminates when the third child has magical powers, so I'd think after each birth one checks the book (like Lucius did) and in case... uugh!

At the wedding, Ginny saw that she's been given more time than the other couples to produce the offspring, but she could not identify any details of the spell.

A New Project

Together with Nott and Sullivan, Severus investigated another manor with wide grounds that had belonged to a family he had not been able to save. They had been a fairly rich family with magical abilities lingering in the bloodline for centuries. The current owner was Muggle...or would one call them all Squibs?... married to a Muggle. He only had the misfortune of a magical daughter. Severus had not heard what had happened to the ambitious, good-natured Ravenclaw girl, her parents or her non-magical brothers, but the house had lain abandoned for two months. Since he was reputed to be familiar with Muggle filing systems, Severus had received the task to remove the manor and its park from their records. The Dark Lord was pleased. He must have big plans for the impressive, solitary estate.

Each Death Eater family in the possession of more than two elves had been ordered to give a powerful elf in his prime to the place. They worked under strict scrutiny of Mrs Mulciber, whom Severus knew to be a scrupulous pursuer of the Dark Lord's plans to purify their race, although she was not often entangled in raids. Furthermore, she was an ace in Charms, and not to be ignored in her Arithmantic skills. She strutted around the place with her retinue of elves and took possession of every rock and ditch in the ground, every branch of every tree. She measured and noted, calculated and compared, paced the length of the estate and the buildings and other distances and had marks positioned in certain proportions relative to other measures also considering the direction of the sunset at the most holy and sacred days of the traditional wizard calendar, Imbolc, Beltane, Samhain and others Severus wasn't even aware of.

Her complex graphs and long rows of Arithmantical equations resembled those Vector had put up the summer before Potter had started at Hogwarts. This all made sense if the estate was going to be important and under her charge: she would have to not only know it but imprint her presence on it. Albus had done the very same when he had made everyone believe that he strolled the perimeter of Hogwarts grounds just to enjoy them. Possession magic held primarily on stone, next on the watercourses. Trees came next because their roots held the soil in place around the minor rocks, and the whole plant stored the same waters that soaked the ground. They also accommodated the minor spirits, and Mrs Mulciber seemed to bind them to herself as she went. She could have done all of this a lot less pompously, though.

This would become a very well protected place, and with a rush of adrenaline Severus wondered, *Don't I know of objects that require such protection more than others?*

Today, she at least gave Paul Nott and Severus the grace of greeting them. In fact, she asked Severus to come inside and discuss her plans.

They were to build a school! That was a challenging task indeed. The Dark Lord had been most displeased with the syllabus of Hogwarts, and Severus had suffered his share of punishments for not being able to revise the N.E.W.T.s level of Potions to include Dark brews. Today Obscuranta Mulciber, the designated headmistress of Salazar's Academy, wanted Severus to guide her through the design of the wing for Potions lessons. She flamboyantly hinted he might become the teacher here, if he remained in her favour. Now would be his chance to get suitable work facilities. So they went over the needs in the classroom, what tools to provide, which ingredients to stock, in what kind of safety devices or spells to store them. Would he recommend a separate storage room, or shelves and cupboards in the classroom? Is there a need for the teacher's own storage and his private lab, and what should his office look like? She even asked him to mention books for up to 1500 galleons. If he ever could lay his hands on so much money, all for potions literature! It irked tremendously to spend the bulk of it for beginners' material, and he strictly advised not to buy more identical samples than one third of the size of a class. "One out of three pupils knows no other pastime than riding his broomstick, and half of the rest is illiterate, Headmistress. This does not mean that the last third will actually benefit from reading them."

Mrs Mulciber ignored the remark and went on with similar questions about the subject he had taught last year. She would use his answers to design the facilities for the subjects closest to Hogwarts' lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Of course, we are not restricting ourselves to their defence. We'll have "Defence and Duelling" as a mandatory subject for all pupils as well as "Group Combat and Strategies" for the third year and above. Fighting Irish Pixies, Red Caps or Hinkypunks will *not* be our concern!" she snorted. This curriculum sounded para-militaristic, but certainly, Severus could go with dropping how to fight M.O.M. Class XXX beasts in times of a war! Outside a school like Hogwarts...or maybe this one...there was no protected space, and even the children were easily entangled in a skirmish and had to know how to protect themselves.

In a falsely sweet voice, she continued, "Severus, you are our greatest asset when it comes to pedagogical experience." She swiftly transgressed into the spirit of bossing him about, handing him three colour-coded lists of topics to cover. "You will set up a syllabus for these subjects: Potions, Defence and Duelling and then Group Combat and Strategies. Define a reasonable order and sketch the most effective teaching methods. Our master wishes to have the black topics covered in the first five years that are mandatory for all our children. The red topics are for the N.E.W.T.s classes, where you can set entrance criteria, and you can expect even more eagerness to learn." He snorted at the 'even more', but she continued firmly. "Don't think that we go with the mollycoddled treatment of pupils the old fool has established at Hogwarts! We will have more than two thirds Slytherins here, and we will have them sit on their behinds. Half of the others are Ravenclaws, for which academic excellence is a virtue in itself, whatever the subject." With a swanky smirk, she added, "Should you wish for your... little girl... to attempt her O.W.L.s in our Academy, she would be a lone Gryffindor kitten."

"My wife *will* further her education for as long as possible," he replied smoothly, not giving her a chance to question the quality of his wedlock. Severus knew well enough

that most lessons would be too dangerous during her expected pregnancy. But she had a few months still, and they should not be wasted.

Mrs Mulciber nodded. "I'd like to go through the plans with you on Sunday. Or maybe Saturday? What about the two of you joining us on Saturday for some pre-Christmas festivities? There will be a few couples our age, and they will bring their elder children along as well." She grinned. Against his inclination to rudely reject it, Severus accepted her invitation for teatime. "The party might run until late, but we will certainly excuse the newly wed couples earlier." He wished he could wipe the smirk off her face.

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A spartan meal of stale bread and crumbling cheese and the sorry excuse of a small tomato was all he found in the kitchen when he returned. It would have been his normal meal in pre-Miss Weasley times, but now that his appetite has been stimulated and his taste sharpened... *No, pampered...* his stomach complained seriously.

It wasn't late yet, but she was in bed already, eyes closed, breathing regularly. The necklace with the pendant was draped on top of her clothes.

Severus noticed he was walking on tiptoes. Damn her!

:.:.*.*:

Minerva put down her teacup with a sigh. Taking her breakfast in her office had been a splendid idea. Ever since she had taken up teaching in addition to administering the McGonagall estates and production, she had constantly had a huge workload. She could stand tension fairly well, so she thought, but nothing had prepared her for the role of a general in a war like this. The last days had been too much. In addition to leading the Order, there were now the Weasleys to be cared for. Distracted in grief over their little girl, they were hardly able to follow a command or take responsibility. Then there was Harry Potter, the boy who had the most terrible task upon his shoulders. Since the day Ginny had been taken from them, he had been tormented by a guilty conscience. It didn't spur him into fierce actions, though. Instead, he acted in a resigned way. Minerva recalled with worry how easily he had accepted that the task to accompany Remus to the Greek pub had fallen to Neville the other day.

Everyone in the Order understood that they needed to support him, but some were pampering him beyond measure while others demanded just too much of him. She would have to set this topic on the agenda of the next meeting.

Cleaning of Hogwarts grounds was progressing nicely, if one overlooked the rough work Grawp did at times. She organised the people and their tasks in similar manners as they had always run Hogwarts school. The Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, intervened into her activities as much as he could, which was very little indeed. He had finally understood that there were more important people and events than what he called an unmanageable headmistress. One who didn't even run lessons for the time being! He would most likely think that she was operating on her own, supported only by her staff, in keeping an eye on Potter. Minerva would hardly dispel these thoughts.

Watching the wedding of Severus Snape with Ginny Weasley had left Minerva raw. The girl had been eerily composed, and, as Percy had insisted before, also Alastor and Minerva had not seen any indication that she was under any kind of spell. She appeared ready to marry none other than Severus Snape. The man, the most unsocial staff member she had ever had to work with, had looked better than ever after the Three Wizards' Tournament.

Minerva's gaze slid over to the newest framed picture on the wall. Albus' favourite armchair stood behind his desk, but it was empty, as it had been for weeks now.

The Order and the Ministry had grudgingly heeded the artist's advice not to address Dumbledore before the oil paint and spellwork had dried, but Dumbledore himself had contacted them far too early. And what an unfathomable first advice had he given them? Each trusted member of the Order was to attempt seriously to enter Snape's office.

The hasty act had cost the late headmaster dearly. His bad arm had completely disappeared, and he had sunk back into his chair with a groan. For four days, he had slept restlessly, but on the fifth day, he had been gone. No one had found him anywhere in the castle, although the cleaning staff had been advised to pay special attention to all portraits.

Someone was approaching the stairs to her office with determination. It was Remus Lupin. She sighed. The normally so reserved man shouted the last three passwords at the gargoyles from fifty yards ahead, as excited as she had hardly seen him when he was Head Boy. He had a nattering girlfriend in tow, which had also never happened to him while he had been her student. A late bloomer? But why was he seeking her up so urgently?

Minerva opened her doors towards the stairs in pre-emption of a noisy entrance.

"Will you give it a rest?" the Metamorphmagus demanded in exasperation, her arms swinging dangerously close to both her sides. Minerva flicked her wand and Transfigured the spindly, wooden legs of her hat stand into massive cast-iron ones. The tartan-laden object swayed, but bounced back and did not fall.

"I cannot leave this, Nympha," Remus replied, his steps halting. "I need to investigate it again. Minerva should comment on it, too."

"What is it that deserves my attention so early in the morning before I have even finished my breakfast?" Minerva asked pointedly. Wasn't it possible at least once a week that she gathered herself before being called?

"I'm sorry, Minerva, this thought has followed me into my dreams," Remus answered.

"...and successfully kept me from sleeping." Tonks groaned. "He has this fixation about..."

"This isn't a fixation! Severus..." Remus tried again, but his girlfriend cut him short.

"Will you drop the rotten murderer, Remus? Think of Ginny, the poor girl. Her brothers called her a red tornado, and for a reason, too. I shudder to think what she'll be like when we get her back."

"Wait, love." Remus stopped her flow, lifting his hand. He turned to the headmistress. "I could not overcome the notion how utterly unfitting Ron's expression was. Severus, a *lecher!* I'm sorry, Minerva."

Now, Minerva stood, her brows furrowed. "Remus Lupin," she began, looking at him so sternly that he instinctively halted in his speech. "I'm neither an old spinster nor prudish or emotionally inhibited. I am, simply said, a teacher, and as such I need to execute authority, or I loose my battles with them. Believe me, my vocabulary expands beyond young Weasley's slip. If the worry about my state of mind brought you up here, it was thoroughly misplaced."

Remus looked at her in bewilderment. "Your state of mind? No, I'm not worried about that. I know that you have a private life. I did experience you as a colleague and not only as a pupil." He stopped, thinking. "How can I explain this? As a colleague, yes! You know Severus as a colleague. You know him much better than I do."

"I *thought* I did..."

"You *do* know his awkwardness in public and in personal relations. Even among the staff, he never dropped his guards. I initially thought it stemmed from our personal, unsavoury past..."

"...for which you have tried to make amends that he didn't want to hear..." Minerva noted, clearly remembering the many attempts Remus has made when they had both been teaching.

"...meaning that I have actually not achieved anything there," Remus retorted.

"You did achieve more than you think," Minerva started, but was interrupted.

"This is what this is about?" an outraged Tonks interjected, her hands clenched in fists on her hips. "You kept me awake with your prattle all night to clear your conscience against a *murderer*?"

Remus huffed and stepped away from them both to fetch the Pensieve. "I need to go in there again, and you're welcome to follow me if you take my directives."

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"We have time till we meet Severus," Remus told the women. With little patience, they went through Percy's transfer to the festively decorated hall and the minutes he stood there, next to Umbridge. As soon as the bridegroom and Nott came into view, they kept themselves as close as the memory would allow.

"Now, concentrate." Remus interrupted them. "Here, just look at how nervous he is. This just isn't like Severus Snape!"

"How would you imagine him to look on his wedding day?"

"I would never have imagined him to wed," Remus insisted. "He is not the charming lover. Even less a lecher."

"You have a point," Minerva said. "I certainly had more than just the proverbial eye on him when he started teaching. *Whenever* went for any of the female students, although quite a few tried in the first few years. Don't snort, Nymphadora. He did not teach N.E.W.T.s classes back then, and they hardly knew him. Some always take the challenge with a dark person, and he wasn't more than four years their senior."

By now, Severus had approached them and addressed Percy with a growl. "This is more like him," Minerva agreed. "He's comfortable when he can berate others since he need not care for their reaction."

Shifting from one foot to the other, Remus sighed.

When Percy accused Snape with, "You cannot be serious," Remus' eyes went distant. For a moment, he stared bleakly, unseeing.

"I am most certainly not, you impertinent brat!" Severus replied.

Remus snapped back into the present of this memory. "That's it!" he shouted. "The Severus Snape we used to know would hardly joke like this."

"Joke?" Tonks asked, "Where is there a joke?"

"Serious, that's your cousin, Sirius Black. He's not Sirius, he's Severus."

"So true."

The murmurs ceased, and everybody looked at the entrance where the brides had appeared. "Look at him, how he relaxes and yet shows anticipation," Remus exclaimed as the bridegroom's face sparkled.

They observed how the unknown personality in Severus greeted Ginny and then left the memory.

"I see your point, Remus," Minerva admitted. "Severus is acting as I have never seen him before. While he has learned from the Malfoys how to behave in their aristocratic circles, he is not at all self-confident when it comes to more private matters. At this wedding, he does not show the aloofness he usually does in these circumstances."

Tonks looked from one to the other. These two might agree on such a detail, but what that could mean for poor Ginny was anybody's guess.

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Thursday's breakfast was again a sad affair. *She*, as Severus internally referred to Ginevra, had a huge glass of grapefruit juice, a Muggle habit she had adopted quickly. Severus' stomach revolted at the thought of that much acid. She nibbled contently on the stale crust of bread that she washed down with two cups of strong black tea.

"Severus," she started, and he hated it already. Did she have to start each sentence with his given name? It was highly superfluous since there wasn't anyone else here she could address! "I need to go shopping." Well, that was all news to him, what with the kitchen as empty as his stomach.

"Mistress of the obvious?"

"Fine, *sir*. I know the way, just hand me the money and my wand. Lunch will be ready for Monsieur at twelve."

"You are not going anywhere alone. We leave in ten minutes, and I'm not going to spend more than twenty minutes in the dratted shop. I have work to do."

Half an hour later, Ginny found herself rushing through the shelves in high speed. She had made the scowling man get bread and a few essentials, but she would personally care for the fresh grocery, cheeses and meat for the next few days. On a hunch, she took two bananas and was already queuing at the cashier when Severus turned up with just a package of bread. His mind was elsewhere when he tossed the fluffy, white stuff into the carriage. She knew for a fact that he disliked this soft sort. She sighed. If he needed to make it difficult, then he should. She really had little chance to change it.

Back outside, Ginny handed him one of the two bananas. "Here, let's have them now to sustain us till lunch," she suggested, but Severus only scoffed. With a shrug, she stowed one banana in a bag, manoeuvred all of the bags onto her right arm and enjoyed her own fruit.

Severus stalked back purposefully, keeping himself three steps ahead of her. The wings of his light, short jacket flapped enough to imagine how the garment would billow had it only been long enough. Muggles fled left and right out of his ways like his pupils had done when he had escorted a miscreant to see the headmaster. *Only, there will be no headmaster to talk to*, Ginny mumbled to herself.

With his stomach rumbling like thunder, Severus tried to concentrate on the school syllabus, to elaborate curricula and notes on teaching methods while *she* went about the house, cleaning here, ordering there. "Sit down and keep still," he commanded.

Ginny took the armchair because the makeshift bed wasn't Transfigured into a sofa and sat down. Hands in her lap, she didn't do anything for a long while, just stared. Stared at him. Whenever he sent her a look, she would quickly avert her eyes from his, but he felt her gaze resting on him.

With a huff, Severus gathered all his parchments and retreated to the upper floor.

When, for the second time, a waft of the smell of food reached him, the complaints his empty stomach made became unbearable. He still had an hour before the meeting was scheduled. Slowly, he stacked his material extra-neatly and stalled before he went downstairs to make sure *she* would not wait for him, and he could eat in peace. He found her at the table, already scratching the last bits of her own lunch together. A tomato soup and some salad... not exactly filling, he thought, but he approached anyway. His stomach growled loudly as he took his place and ladled a soup of beef and noodles into his soup bowl. He was helping himself to salad when pain pierced through his left arm, and he dropped the cutlery. The Dark Mark was glowing and throbbing worse than normally, and his nerves stood on end. This was an urgent call.

Wordlessly, Ginny fished the salad server out of the soup and watched his hunched form on its way to the bedroom.

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Severus swore as he swiftly changed into wizard robes. He had assumed he had decent time for lunch, and the food looked well enough. No, it actually looked and smelled like a treat, and when taking in its scent and appearance, he had not regretted dismissing the banana before. Now, he would go hungry. *All her fault!*

Halfway out the door, he donned his heavy cloak. She stood in his way, reaching out a hand with a sorry excuse for a sandwich. "Here, Severus, at least take something, even if it is only cheese and salad."

The soft slices were already sagging from the dressing. "Keep the petty stuff for yourself!" he sneered.

As Severus rushed to the Apparition point, he nearly knocked down a tall, severe-looking woman with very short, greying hair. She admonished him with a stern voice and an unmistakable Scottish accent. "Do watch where you're going, young man!" Severus stopped dead as the image of his stern, elder colleague blended over the one of the Muggle-woman. Just what he needed!

Only this morning, a tall, red-clad, jolly character with a huge, false, bushy beard had smiled benignly at everybody in the shop. This had reminded him of Albus Dumbledore at a welcome-feast. Severus had nearly knocked down a stand of chocolates and got a disappointed look from Father Christmas.

And now her!

If Severus had had a knack for Divination...which he had not!...he would have assumed these two had come to berate him for his behaviour...and he did not think of the concrete causes of their critique, but the background of it: his impossible relation to the girl that had entrusted her life to him.

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The whole afternoon and deep into the evening, Severus' empty stomach commented at every other remark that fell in the reunion of the Inner Circle. They were discussing a new strategy to get at Potter, now that she had not been bait enough. The werewolves were represented by Greyback and two others he didn't know, who looked equally menacing. In the days before the full moon, they were randy, he recalled, and within seconds he had mentally run through the wards back home. Yes, they were all in place. His relief for her sake pained him.

In a break, Nott went to speak to the werewolves, inviting Severus over, but he preferred not to get too close. After all, he still had hold on the girl they had been expecting.

Returning to their seats, he commented to Paul Nott, "Greyback might have eaten me alive. Or at least he might have bitten me. I didn't want to risk that."

"Oh, yes, he *is* furious. But in his human form, he isn't quite as dangerous. You'd not be a full werewolf." Severus shrugged, seemingly uninterested at this information on Bill Weasley's state. His brother-in-law, damn it. Damn her.

Finally, they were dismissed.

Severus arrived in the trees close to his home, his insides rumbling, and his view blurring dangerously from lack of food. In the memory of today's disaster with meals at home, he checked his Muggle money. He altered his attire slightly and headed for the one Muggle place he frequented most these days: the shopping centre. The shop was incredibly crowded thanks to a special offer. Compared to the morning, Father Christmas had lost at least three stones of weight while gaining half a foot in length and two inches in beard length. The metamorphosis scared nobody off, though.

Luckily, there was a booth selling fish and chips, saving Severus from the crowd. Severus selected an extra-large fish pie and a double portion of what seemed to be fried sticks of potato. They came with vinegar, of all things, while the fish pie was covered in a rich, whitish sauce. Severus wolfed it all down before his taste sensors could protest.

Halfway home, Severus started feeling sick. The greasy food hung like a stone in his stomach. He belched a few times, but it did him no good. His father had regularly eaten at places like this, and after some years he had not been in such a poor state, Severus recalled. The Muggle remedy would be a strong herbal booze, a drink his father had taken up as well. No, he'd rather go for a potion. There better be something in his store since the brew took an hour at least.

Severus was greeted by a wonderful smell of a curry Indian style. *She* sat at the table, a salad of tomato, mozzarella and basil to her left, and the steaming beef curry to her right. There was even a cake for desert. Damn, of course; they had been shopping in the morning! The sight and smell made him nauseous. With quick steps, he went for the bathroom, but was not quick enough to escape her greeting. "Severus, good evening. You're just in time, sit down!"

"I have eaten," Severus pressed out through clenched teeth. He was close to throwing up, just never reaching the point. He rummaged in the apothec-chest and in the lab, but didn't find the stomach aid. Since he remembered his father as a drinker, Severus didn't have strong alcohol at home either, and wine would not do. He had to get through the night without, Severus noted and fell into the overstuffed armchair.

By ten o'clock, she had cleaned away her food and sat on the armchair, reading a book. She hadn't even looked up when he had entered from the lab, only shortly checked the time. A new behaviour, and certainly better than her futile attempts to make conversation. She checked the time yet again.

The time? It was Thursday...

Thu 10.04 p.m.

Indeed, now she got up, removed her clothes from navel downwards and without ever looking up at him, simply asked, "Your place or my place?" His burp wasn't the best of answers. "We'll delay it, if you are unwell," she readily compromised, looking at him with sweet eyes.

He would have preferred to do so, had indeed been about to tell her himself, but now that ~~she~~ she had offered it, delaying wasn't an option anymore. Yet, he feared he would make a fool of himself being sick over her in the act, or being over-anxious not to shake and thrust, he would fail in the act. Damn it all.

Severus undressed as in slow-motion, considering his tactics. He undressed completely, just to stall. Her bed was closer, so they went to his. He stalled further and used the time to undress her completely. Seeing her nude form did move the blood into the right direction, but the repugnant set-up felt so wrong to him that he needed physical stimulation to get anywhere. He needed strong stimulation this night.

What resulted was their first true act of lovemaking in their marriage.

Ginny had been cold and unattached the last times he had... yes, assaulted her. This time, she was yielding, bending, moving next to him in obvious delight. Propped on her left elbow, her right arm roamed over his scarred chest, his back, up to his neck and face. She avoided touching his lips, but she had no hesitation touching any other place. And she knew how to do it to make him react. Now, she went south, gripped his buttocks firmly and kneaded, pressing herself against him.

He burped again. "My apologies." It was out before he could stop himself. He wasn't about to give in *Oh, but you are! You are enjoying yourself!*

He was aroused now, which was all her doing. His hands had found places to settle on, and even if he did not look at her but stretched his chin up, he noticed how she reacted. Yet, he did not roll over her because he still feared the strong thrusts he would have to... *What was she doing?* Heartily, she had pushed him on his back and was straddling him, moving against him most efficiently. Mirroring him, she was sitting upright as if anxious to not let herself come too close to his face.

In a moan, he gripped her hips, and she gasped in delight when he lifted her up. She glided over him, her breath coming unsteadily now. Supported and guided by his hands, she started moving... and continued when his hands went upwards, to caress her breasts. No words were spoken.

After an exquisite and overwhelming bout of passion, they relaxed in the spooning form they had enjoyed before, only that Ginny took great care that her hair would not tickle his face. Severus' left arm fell loosely over Ginny's stomach when they both fell into slumber.

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I'm lacking the words to thank my betas as they deserve. Hollimel99 and Jingjingchiquita, you're doing a great job, thank you so much!!

No First Christmas

Chapter 13 of 35

Severus continues rebuking his young wife, and she rebukes him once again at a party.

No First Christmas

Severus awoke at daybreak, experiencing an uncomfortable feeling in his right arm. She was still in his bed...hours after the copulation. An act scheduled and executed just to fulfil the Dark Lord's dream. She was supposed to be away, out of his sight, out of his mind.

He prodded her awake and pushed her out, berating her for her tardiness in the matter. In the dim glow coming from the street, he saw her hurt face ~~As if she had a right to be hurt!~~

As soon as she was out, though, his bed felt empty and large. *This is what it was always like and you've survived for years. ... Do I still have to like it? ... You had better! ... So I will.*

For years, Severus had studied the negative effect women had on men. Like vile snakes, they lured men into believing in them. He had researched psychological...as well as magical...means of how women manipulated men, and he had seen too many examples of headless, love-stricken men to count them. If they didn't fight being ensnared, they soon found themselves incapacitated by the manipulative streak. Some women then resorted to making their victims look silly, while others became more demanding each day.

Severus had seriously underestimated the young Gryffindor. She had proven no better than one could expect from the average Slytherin tart. Ha, honesty and sense of justice were the trademark of her House? She must have hoodwinked the Sorting Hat, in this case, but she would not take in Severus Snape! He'd make this clear right away.

With determination, Severus left the security of his bed.

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Stubbornly, Ginny prepared breakfast for two. She had enjoyed herself last night, oh, yes. Had he? Yes, she was quite sure that he had! Yet, there was *but*...and it was a big one. He didn't like her enjoying herself. Certainly not during sex. He didn't even like himself enjoying it.

With a silent sigh, she observed Severus cross over to the bathroom, his mouth pressed to a thin line, his eyes cold and not sparing her even a glare.

Fetching spoons and bowls, Ginny thought over the previous day. Severus had had neither breakfast nor lunch. Her idea of tempting him to sit down and have a meal together had failed utterly, although he used to love the unpredictability of her curries. Coming home, he had not looked at the table at all, had even avoided breathing in the aromas.

The odour of cheap frying grease in his clothes, hands and hair could well indicate a cheap, unhealthy dinner. His belching, although she had found it sweet in a way, had spoken loud and clear.

In retrospect, he strongly reminded her of the ever-hungry Ron one night last autumn. After Quidditch had kept him from lunch, he had wolfed down a huge plate of chips and two pieces of cream tart at dinner, not bothering with salad or vegetables. For hours, Ron had hung in his chair in the common room, unable to think and unable to move for fear of throwing up. He had tried to puke, but never could.

Severus took a long time before he reappeared fully dressed. He passed Ginny on his way into the kitchen. "Good morning," she tried. "Do we eat there or at the table?"

"Stop speaking out of turn."

"Severus, how long..."

"It is enough that I provided your entertainment. Keep your gloating to yourself!"

Ginny's knife hit the plate with a bang, and her hands were shaking. She felt her neck turn scarlet as she started speaking, "I've finished. Leave it for me to clean it all away so I don't get bored to death in here." Her stomach growling, she left for the sitting room, the only place available, except for the cold bathroom.

Severus had gone hungry too often in his life to leave food untouched. He had not had grilled, smoked kippers for a while. Suddenly ravenous, he decided to enjoy the meal. He silenced the door and concentrated on nothing besides cutting, biting and chewing. He took his time.

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Searching for an outlet for her rage, Ginny stripped their beds and pondered over Severus' words. Entertainment? Gloating? Severus still took a stand ~~that~~ was the one offended and hurt by *her*. It had to be *he* who set the rules. The previous night, however, Ginny had made decisions, and she didn't regret her actions. Wistfully, she remembered bathing in his tenderness, but Severus seemed to have no problem re-interpreting it as maliciously enjoying his weakness. Later, she had broken the unspoken rule to leave immediately after 'the act', and Severus had no problem to make it her fault once again. She had supposedly used the fact that he had been tired, although Ginny could not quite grasp what additional advantage she might have had there if his presence did not count.

She had made a point nevertheless: She *had* touched almost every part of him, and she had demonstrated how much she *had* liked it. He could not smoothly return to the

"I revolt you" attitude he had had previously. Hopefully, he will soon consider it worthwhile to search for another reason for her refusing a kiss.

Ginny needed an outlet for her frustration. A wild ride on a broomstick was on her mind, but that was a dream she'd better bury. Fred and George would cause a few wild explosions and drive their mother wild while they themselves calmed down. Charlie used to chop wood the Muggle way when things didn't work out; Bill had cleaned the chicken coop at times. Both of these had pleased their mother. *Mum, what would you do in my place?*

Mum would undoubtedly turn to the endless list of household chores, to something that required forceful stirring or wild wand movements. Ginny went into the bedroom and dragged the duvet out of its cover. She ripped the thin, greyish bed sheets off the old mattress, nearly tearing a hole into them. Scooping the laundry, she wiped her face with it, not caring whether the moisture had been tears or snot. The fact that she was far from relaxed these days was as unimportant to this man as the fact that he had snuggled next to her in contentment, that he had draped his arm around her, held her tight. Well, during the latter, he had possibly been drowsing off already, Ginny mentally conceded. However, how easily does a spy fall asleep?

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Severus had only a few hours to prepare the curriculum for Salazar's Academy because it was Friday and Draco would be coming for training. He heard Albus' words replay in his mind: *Severus, you must ensure that Tom will not get hold of the children. Do not allow any institution to become a cadet school. Children are so easily seduced, as you well know, Severus.* Severus huffed. Yes, he was determined to craft lessons to their lord's satisfaction and yet be as academic as possible. He would need all his wits and as much time as he could spare. He rushed out of the kitchen.

When he flicked the concealment open to get upstairs, she was on her way to the bathroom, a bundle of bed linens over her arms. The image resonated painfully with one of the few non-violent images of his childhood. With the paltry pennies desperate Eileen Snape had made by magically washing, ironing and starching for the bourgeois class in town, she had just barely paid the expenses for Hogwarts. He quickly made his way upstairs before bad feelings got hold of him, seeing his wife as a young widow in the same situation.

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Severus headed for the kitchen through the sitting room, parched. He only then saw Draco. Already clad in his track suit, he was giving Ginny an embrace, which was a rather new behaviour. Severus wasn't sure he liked it. "Hi, Ginny," the boy said. "You look refreshed." Severus noticed too late that he had been so engulfed in revising lesson plans that he had missed the chance to give *her* directives before his previous charge appeared.

"Oh, thank you. I'm indeed feeling better today," she answered with a wide smile to Draco that hardly faltered when she turned to Severus, bidding them both to sit down at a table nicely decorated and offering tea with fruits, cheese and crackers. They would skip a proper lunch for the sake of the run, but the refreshment was welcome. Conversationally, Ginny asked, "Are you going to spell the house before you go? It's a bit overdue. We didn't manage it yesterday."

"We didn't even try. You don't know how it is done," Severus corrected her with a sharp note of finality.

"Severus, we..." she started.

But he interrupted her with a sharp, "Stop it."

Draco, who had just felt relieved, was nonplussed. "What is going on here?"

"Our normal pattern of conversation." Ginny informed him in resignation and left for the kitchen. *We have agreed to play nicely in front of others, haven't we? Why doesn't he today?*

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Draco carried the remainder of the snack to the kitchen. He purposefully left the door open, and spoke louder than was necessary. "We will spell the house now. It is quite nice outside; want to join us? You look as if you need to get out."

Apprehensively, Ginny checked her husband's reaction. He stood there like a statue...unreadable. She inhaled deeply before admitting that she would like to learn the spells, or at least watch them, and that she had hardly been outside during the whole week. "Yea, that reminds me," Draco picked up the thread. "Severus, wasn't Ginny to start the chase, now that she isn't a captive anymore?"

Heat rose to Severus' face. They were going too far. He was about to explode, when she said, "I'm not sure if it is a good idea, Draco. Yes, we had been thinking of it, but I would be a nuisance for you, wouldn't I?" Turning away from them both, she added with resignation in her voice, "I'll just make dinner in the meantime."

"Come outside with us and see the spells." Severus heard himself say before he knew it. Annoyed with himself, he went to change into his Muggle track suit.

Returning from his bedroom, Severus surreptitiously handed Ginny her wand that he still kept confiscated most of the time. She was in her track suit as well. They had magically adjusted one pocket to run down the length of her right thigh, and Ginny stashed her wand there as if she had just picked it from her pile of clothes. *Good for her not to let Malfoy notice where the wand came from,* Severus noted with satisfaction.

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Severus could hardly miss how thoroughly she observed them. *Eager to prove herself worthy? Ridiculous! Hoping to find a fault? Even more ridiculous.* Draco explained their first round of spells, and, admittedly, she asked only a few...but very reasonable...questions. For the next two rounds, she did the commentary, and did it correctly, or almost so. Draco explained the differences so poorly that Severus corrected him with annoyance. Had the boy not listened?

The spells for their last two rounds were derivatives from the ones on The Burrow, and she commented and asked for details. Not realising how it had happened, Severus found himself in teaching mode, explaining why he did it differently, pros and cons depending on the size of the house, its material and the power of the inhabitants.

"Severus, do I see correctly that Dad should use your spells on the uppermost floor, but can't because we've got the ghoul in the attic and because the top of the west wall is wood-clad?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if he knows."

"Certainly."

It had been their first dialogue in how many days?

Both men were worn-out after the house was re-spelled. Their chase-run in the forest would not be up to their normal standards. Since Draco would stay for dinner, Ginny promised to prepare something nourishing and did not look up to check how Severus took that in. She would not look for acknowledgement! For meals without a visitor, her tactics to keep Severus in the dark about the what or when had worked well enough. She had no intention of changing her nonchalance.

After they had returned, Draco used the time while Severus was in the shower to grill Ginny about their life. He was most concerned. "And he doesn't talk with you?"

"Barely more than commanding me. He's still hurt from the ceremony."

Draco looked at her more carefully than Severus did these days. She did not lie. "Ginny, why won't you tell me what has gone so wrong?"

She violently shook her head. "You would tell him, and I can't have that. I need him to trust me. He could simply ask, and I'd tell him, honestly. He must not be pushed into the facts. Please?"

Draco didn't like it, but conceded. "Well, you must know what you want."

"I think I do. Please promise me you won't do any research on the matter?"

Draco tilted his head shortly. So there was something to research. He would not have much time, and neglecting his duties would never do, but maybe he could adjust his bedtime reading to include such matters. He stalled with an answer until Severus left the bathroom, purposefully ignoring the girl's frown.

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A light soup with croutons, a huge amount of spaghetti with minced meat and a tomato salad left no one wanting more. Draco casually asked for their weekend plans, and Severus had to tell about their invitation to the Mulcibers'. Ginny dropped her fork in shock. "Goodness, what luck you warned me in time, Severus. What sort of acquaintances are they; do you regularly attend their receptions?"

A hard-pressed, "NO!" was all the answer she got.

"Severus, please. I need to know how to dress, how to behave..."

"Like my loving wife, I suppose, will do," he answered in such a biting tone that Draco jumped from his chair.

Ginny retorted quickly, with no edge in her voice at all. "This is who I am. There is no need to pretend. Do you have any suggestions for how to dress, or what style they expect?"

"Anything that takes you less than three hours."

"Fat chance I could exceed that," she murmured. She then retorted loud enough for Severus to hear, "It would help to know when we leave and by what means."

"4:25. We Apparate."

Ginny turned to Draco, asking if they would meet there, but he said he would not be there. "We are not socialising with the Mulcibers," he pointed out, trying to provoke a reaction from Severus, who, however, was fully concentrating on wrapping spaghetti around his fork. Ginny looked more than disappointed, almost desperate. "Theodore might be there," Draco offered, feeling uncomfortable.

Severus made sure they finished dinner without delay. When Draco had hesitantly bid them goodbye, Severus swiftly converted the sofa back into a bed, snatched four books from the shelf, and retired to his own room without another word.

With sad eyes, Ginny followed his retreating form. She had not found access to him yet, and he looked just as sallow and pained as she felt. Why could the man not trust her enough to ask? *He has always handled everything by himself*, she repeated to herself, *and he is hurt*.

She perused the shelf of Muggle literature for a diversion, but could not stop thinking of him. *He has left marks in so many of these books. Which ones would I like to see?* Her view fell on a section she must have overlooked so far. One spine there looked oddly familiar to her, and she smiled. How odd was the notion that Severus Snape would own Winnie-the-Pooh?

She set her forefinger on the top of it and pulled, but this shelf was so crammed that, accidentally, two books toppled out. Ginny rapidly stretched her foot and softened their fall. She froze and listened, but Severus' door remained closed. Only the springs of his bed squeaked lightly, indicating he was turning around, trying to find peace.

The Pooh-book was in much better shape than Ginny had ever seen the Weasley copy. However, the bear in Severus' book stuck his nose in the honey-pot forever, and Tigger didn't bounce a bit! This had to be a Muggle edition. These two figures reminded her of the heated discussions between Fred and George, who favoured Tigger, and Ron, who had always loved Pooh most of all. She wondered if maybe Eeyore would have been little-Severus' favourite rather than one of the cheerier characters?

Riffling to the front, she found a dedication:

To our dear Severus,

Wishing you a Merry Christmas,

December 1963,

Nanny Margaret Snape and

Grandpa

It was neatly written in blue with a Muggle pen. The second signature was penned with a hard hand and pressed through two more pages. Ginny tried to decipher the name; possibly it read Erwin Snape.

As Ginny bent down, the other book caught her attention. It was a sad leftover of a photo album! The first three pages were totally destroyed, and of the rest, half of the pictures had been torn out and their text struck out with a fat marker. The remaining photos were of Muggle origin, often uncommented or simply supplied with a date in the '60s. They showed a thin, dark-haired, boy in bulging, worn trousers frozen in his interaction with a hook-nosed man who didn't look as if he accepted arguments or even opinions. As Ginny turned page after page, tears started dropping down her cheeks. The boy that was Severus looked subdued if not downright frightened. Only four pictures showed the boy together with a sallow-faced woman. The elder couple to be seen on two Christmas pictures must have been his grandparents Snape.

Noise in the other room made Ginny hurriedly stash both books back into the shelf.

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Over breakfast, Ginny asked who else might attend the function that evening, but didn't get any answer. Clearly, Severus wasn't fond of the invitation, a notion far from encouraging for her. Then again, Ginny mused, how would her days pass without any kind of interruption? The prospect for even an unpleasant evening was better than nothing at all.

Severus escaped into his lab as soon as he was finished. Ginny had to clean the table and was then left, once again, with nothing at all to do. She took up her Muggle book from the day before. Later, she switched to her Potion studies again. Her husband hadn't forbidden her learning; had in fact given her parchment, quills and ink...before he had become her husband.

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All morning, Severus brewed the standard stocks for the Dark Lord as a side occupation while he mainly focused on the last ingredients for the improved Wolfsbane. The two test persons had been well and under control the last time, but their re-transformation had been torturous. For two days, they had been under enormous pain as their wolfish spirits fought with the human ones. Neither their eyes nor their sense of smell had reverted properly yet when he had met them. Their tails had remained for almost a week, well hidden in their trousers. Their hands had also been reduced to paws for longer than normal, a feature that had inevitably shown publicly and had even earned praise from Greyback. They had had a hard time arguing they didn't know how they had achieved it. Together, they had schemed excuses because Greyback had them research the matter.

Thinking of Greyback brought Severus back to his own problem. *Greyback is still challenging me for her, for my... wife. The overwhelmingly exciting time before our wedding; the humiliation and disillusionment after.* When Severus exchanged the stirring stick made from horn to a glass one, he almost broke the stick in his fury. He needed to wipe her out of his mind while working on potions!

By using glass tools, Severus hoped for even less interaction with the tricky ingredients. He needed minced ray gills and had started using the harmless Thornback Rays and Blue Skates since they were native fishes easy to come by. As he proceeded fine-tuning the potion, he compared the viscosity of the wobbly masses with minced gills of some hard to get, but highly poisonous, South-American River Stingray he didn't know to classify further, and also the poisonous Bluespotted Ribbontail Ray. Those two fishes were completely round and flat. It might give the potion more balance, but it could also render the drinker disoriented.

What about the gigantic Bull Ray? One specimen would provide potion for all of Fenrir's pack.

Severus even thought of replacing ray gills with gills of other Rajiformes, maybe starting with certain Guitarfish?

Adding essence of Mandragora, the shape restorer, to certain samples, he hoped to see which would react strongest or weakest. The trouble was he didn't even know which of the two he wanted. Theories for both were imaginable, and his feeling brought him only so far.

He heard the chair upstairs scratching over the floor. She might be preparing lunch now? Immediately, Severus had Draco's memory in his mind, himself lightening up when she called for a meal. He had been standing at this very place, looking up to the very door! *No, don't go there!* he berated himself. *You've been acting like a randy teenager even while your Queen of Hearts has toyed with you.*

Simultaneous to his secret project, Severus had a batch of Endurance Potion and a batch of the revolting Ludwig's Lust in the making. As always, he added tiny amounts of dromedary dung soaked in Kneazle blood to the Endurance that were not mentioned in the directions.

Contrary to the formula for Ludwig's Lust, he added a ground dragon eyeball. It didn't affect the potion itself, but...as with all parts of the highly magical dragon...it would cause liver malfunctions similar to high alcohol consumption. Severus had no mercy for the drinkers. Whoever felt the need to stimulate himself with this disgusting brew didn't deserve any better. They ought to be glad to have a wife and enjoy her as much as nature allows them... With an ear-splitting clatter, the stirring stick met its end at the far wall. *"Evanesco"*

Down here in his lab, thoughts of Ginevra persistently wormed themselves into his mind; he could not help it. Mostly she tried hard to please him. She did not ask too many questions, and those she did ask had been reasonable ones. But he could not forget how humiliated he had been. Severus Snape, the laughing stock for one hundred and fifty Death Eaters. He still heard them laughing in his mind, and when he closed his eyes he could see their sneers. Fury welled in his blood, and he swallowed on automation. He relaxed. Never shall the emotion of a spy redden his face!

Meticulously, Severus continued slicing and cutting, stirring and grinding.

"Severus, we could have lunch any time now. I can keep it warm for 15 minutes."

The memories this announcement triggered nearly made him slam the cauldrons against the wall. Breathing heavily, he sat down. This was no good...no good at all. If a similar déjà vu happened in a battle or if the Dark Lord found him in such a state, he would be at risk!

The emotions experienced after domestic rows was one of the reasons why he had never really understood the Dark Lord's wish to marry his Death Eaters off. Now, he was caught himself!

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Before Severus could leave after their common lunch of delicious soup and sandwiches with a mouth watering filling, Ginny spoke. She told him matter-of-factly, "Severus, I've been going through my hand-me-down witch-dresses. Taking them as such, I will look like a hag of one hundred and thirty years. I can pep them up into something nice and even a little Christmas-like. But I'd need my wand. If you want it really fancy, I would have to go shopping for some accessories, too."

He considered her shortly. Their marriage was a farce, but his problems were not the business of those people! Trust her to look like one hundred and sixty years if he refused. "You are to look fresh and happy."

"Just look it, Severus?"

"These people are no Legilimens." Bloody hell, he was glad to have found that retort as he went to the bedroom, where he kept her wand hidden. Banging her wand on the table, he left the room again.

Hours later, emerging from his enclave downstairs, he found her freshly bathed but dressed in her track suit, reading potions texts and making notes. It was after four p.m. already. A dark-green dress and matching stockings lay on the sofa.

She looked transformed when he returned from his shower in a fresh black frock of his standard attire. The golden leopardess played gracefully in a neckline that emphasised her bust, but was not revealing. The skirt was wide and fell softly. Severus' hands reached for the close-fitting fabric in between that so gracefully accentuated her slim waistline. He checked himself and declared, "This will do."

Wordlessly, she returned her wand to him, and he stowed it away without further thought.

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The party was a loud and superficial affair. Paul and Brenda Nott were the only guests Severus could remotely associate with. To his relief, Theodore was there, too. He could thus let *her* go to the younger people...later. First, she was to be his wife, on his right side *I have to be bored why should she not be as well?* He thought, trying to avoid yet another toast with the extremely sweet mulled wine. Ginevra had taken the non-alcoholic Dazzling Dimple-berry juice, he had noticed with relief.

"Let's move outside before it gets too cold and dark," their host suggested. "The young people might want to let off some steam."

They had torches levitating up over a pitch that was easily twice the size of the Weasleys' and surrounded by trees towering much higher inside than they appeared from outside. Each flyer was given a torch, too, and several of the elder guests expressed their regret that they didn't have their brooms. Merrily teasing each other, they flew in formation, formed circles, and later chased each other, cursing the slow-down charm that was laid upon the field. Eventually, Theodore came down and landed in front of Ginny, not even puffing. "Have a go?" he asked her, holding his broom in his outstretched hand.

"*My wife* does not fly for frivolity," Severus stated icily, his face hard and devoid of emotion.

Ginny had already taken half a step towards Theodore before she registered what Severus said. She thanked him with a wistful smile, remarking that her dress wasn't suitable for flying. "Had I known, I might have prepared myself better. Thank you for the generous offer, anyway, Theodore," she said, purposefully using the Slytherin's first

name. He answered with a shy grin and soared off.

"Ah, I'm sure Severus'll find most charming ways to compensate for your loss," their host said with a smile as sweet as it was false.

"Certainly," Severus answered smoothly, looking down at her, daring her to fall out of her role. She did not!

"Oi, Severus," she squeaked positively, clutching his arm, looking into his eyes in affection. "Don't you *talk* about such things here with everyone listening." Goodness, she almost blushed while Severus felt blood drum in his ears and elsewhere.

A roaring laughter erupted. "Well done, Severus," Mulciber chimed in. "This list at the Dark Lord's will get another star tonight. Pity it doesn't reveal any details. I'm sure it would be sparkling and jingling tonight!"

Ginny had not averted her eyes and noticed with a sweet smile how Severus was at a loss for words. Their eyes locked. She wanted so much to reassure him of her feelings for him. She took his arms and held them at the elbows, leaning on his chest. He bent down, focusing on her mouth questioningly. *Oh, no, not a kiss. Why would he try?* Quickly, she disentangled herself from him.

Returning inside, she said, "I didn't know that they all follow this list. Disgusting!"

"There is more that is disgusting me here," he declared with such an icy voice she almost cried.

"I can explain..."

"Oh, shut up!"

The Mulligatawny soup had no flavour, neither had the roast beef.

After a creamy, too sweet dessert, Theodore asked Ginny over to the group of young people, and this time Severus preferred not to interfere. He sat out the rest of the meaningless discussion at his table with a stony face.

They were among the first to leave around ten, accompanied by suggestive remarks from all sides.

"In half an hour," he declared when they arrived. Once again, he would NOT ask for an explanation. Unasked, Ginny would not break the subject either. They were back to where they had been after the wedding disaster.

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Now that Severus' mind was once again cleared from the sentiment-besotted, simpering state of three weeks prior, December 25th would not be any different from the fifty-one other Thursdays in the year 1997. The only reason to celebrate could have been that he was free from watching over Potter and chaperoning senseless Hogwarts events, but she had destroyed even this benefit. There would be no garish red-gold-green decorations, no candlelight, and he had not bought any presents.

Ginny had had no occasion or mood to arrange anything either, and they passed the day in the same icy atmosphere as ever. Draco visited them on Boxing Day for the men's run. He brought a few delicacies, and he did look around wondering, but he did not dare comment on anything.

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On the following day, their master called for Severus and caught him by surprise as he rapidly pried his mind open. Severus could not show him any seasonal cheer, and even if he rapidly glossed over it, he felt cold sweat gather on his back. The Dark Lord looked at him in a thoughtful if not even *concerned* way. Severus was more disgusted than ever.

Whenever Albus had showed interest in Severus' private life, Severus would not hesitate calling him an old meddler, but for the Dark Lord, this fatherly gesture was more than disturbing. It frightened Severus to the bones. Thankful that the other minions were examined likewise, Severus backed into the circle and awaited his orders.

They were once again supposed to track down Order members. Severus, officer in charge, kept himself in the background. Reasoning that he had to observe his charges, he surreptitiously misguided spells from his colleagues and sent Death Eaters to the ground with well-placed deflection shields. Glad that he had a chance to make a difference, Severus failed to notice that their side made an all too weak impression in the process. They lost a great number of the younger crew that had nearly finished training.

Reporting their failure to the Dark Lord wasn't a new thing to Severus. When he arrived around tea time, he knew well enough that he would be punished.

Severus had a few excuses at hand that he hoped would allow him to stay in his master's favour. But this time, he had gone a step too far.

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A/N:

A toast to Angelika for inventing the non-alcoholic Dazzling Dimple-berry juice.

Another toast to Sorceress-Sarah who insisted that Severus would have owned Winnie-the-Pooh.

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All these fishes are cartilaginous fishes of the order Rajiformes (true rays and skates) in the class Elasmobranchii (sharks and rays). I collected the data from the web and can only hope I got them right.

I mention the following species:

common or blue skate = *Dipturus batis*,

Thornback ray = *Raja clavata*,

Bluespotted Ribbontail Ray = *Taeniura lymna*,

Bull ray = *Pteromylaeus bovinus*. The name is ambiguous; I mean the species that lives around the coasts of Europe.

I also mention two families,

Guitarfish = *Rhinobatidae* and River stingray = *Potamotrygonidae*,

but I don't mention genera or species.

Not Sleeping, Not Awake

Chapter 14 of 35

Ginny cares for her completely incapacitated husband, who has far more time to think about their relation than he wishes.

Not Sleeping, Not Awake

Dressed in red silk and black velvet, the Dark Lord sat comfortably in an oaken chair, nibbling a biscuit. Two elves served him steaming tea, bowing every so often. As Severus and his men stood there, plastered in mud, sweat and blood, their master waved shortly, and the elves busied themselves with erecting a smell-barrier.

Pacing on the safe side of the barrier, their master scrutinised each and every member of his diminished troops. He flexed his spindly, white fingers.

All participants had to report their particular problems in detail. Two reasoned they must have been fighting against the sunlight for too long so that the sun had blinded them. Two others reported feeling sick from sudden heat attacks. So close to the mid-winter solstice, it wasn't a good excuse, even if Severus knew that their master could find the confirmation in their minds. Tripping over a rock they hadn't seen in time was not received any better than being Stunned by Order members. Flint and another three fighters argued they had to retreat into the brushwood to Rennervate the fallen ones without the risk of being Stunned themselves. Severus, remembering that Draco had provided them with laxative drinks in the morning, knew they had had very private reasons to retreat, too.

The stench-block did not in the least bit moderate the effects of the curses the Dark Lord applied to his men.

Draco himself had an excuse no better than the others, and he fared no better either. Severus worried how the boy would make it home and hoped fervently that he had the potions he would need.

As one after the other had nothing more than what he called "insubstantial excuses", the rage of the Dark Lord went beyond reason.

Paul Nott and Sinclair Boston, being the second league in charge, were submitted to Cruciatus and flaming spells that were severe enough to reduce them to bleeding, panting heaps.

The curses their master threw at Severus went beyond measure. He topped the general pain of a Cruciatus up with a knife-cutting curse, and he didn't stop at that. Severus experienced visions of blinding, yellow light, alternating and overlaying with drumming sounds threatening to tear his tympanic membrane and driving his mind to madness. His garments were Banished, and his bare skin was assaulted with aggressive nettle-burning charms made worse by the fact that he was already wriggling and tilting in pain. In its wake, his deathly pale tan changed into a sickly green. *Do not fall*, Severus repeated to himself. *Anything else, just stay upright*.

Voldemort finished by throwing two more hexes at the swaying man, whirling his wand dangerously. The first made Severus' hair stand on end, and all over his exposed skin he grew small candle-like lights emitting sparkles that again fell on his already burning skin. Shouting, "*Immobili Continui!*"...a curse that none of the bystanders had ever heard of...the Dark Lord finally felt his wrath satiated. For several seconds, the curse formed a crimson orb around Severus, drawing up his right foot and pulling the left elbow and lower arm into the orb to surround him completely. Inside the orb, Severus barely succeeded at remaining standing.

"Take the bungler home to his oh-so-caring *wife*," their master ordered. "My little replacement of a Christmas present keeps him unable to move for a week at least. He will be as able to think straight as his addled mind allows him normally. Mind you not to drop him; he isn't stiff after all." With these words their master left.

The orb slowly dissolved, and Severus collapsed on the hard ground.

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The chimes at Spinner's End announced two visitors together with the return of the master of the house. Then silence. Surprised at their delay, Ginny carefully peeked out of the kitchen window.

Draco, shivering terribly, kept himself upright just enough to hitch Severus onto his left hip, pulling Severus' arm over his shoulder. A single cloak covered their backs, but in the front, it openly showed Severus' bare body. His face distorted in pain, Draco was close to collapse. With a rush, Ginny opened the door wide and took hold of Severus, who then hung limply at her shoulder. Without hesitation, she led her husband to the bedroom where the blood-smearred body slipped on Draco's coat and fell from her grip, nearly landing on the floor.

Nott hadn't exactly been helpful so far, but he had accompanied Draco for moral support. Now, he jerked forward and caught Severus' shoulder, shrieking in pain himself. Ginny kicked the duvet aside, and they carefully lowered the non-responsive man onto his mattress.

Ginny's training with the Aurors made her quickly close the entrance door and repel the house before she checked on the two weakened escorts. "Draco, sir, oh Merlin! Thank you for your help. What has happened; what should I do?" She again checked on Severus, wincing at the greenish skin with its many blackened marks from his burns. She moved to straighten his leg, but then hesitated to do so. Wheezing miserably, Draco pressed out that Severus was not in immediate danger.

Ginny nodded fearfully, straightened Severus out of his awkward position, and gently stroked strands of lank, filthy hair out of his face. His breathing was shallow, but steady.

Thereafter, she came out to her unexpected guests. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Indeed, Nott asked for a restorative potion, and Ginny opened their apothec-chest "Of course. Here is a set of Severus' Cruciatus-remedies."

Draco selected what he might not have at home; Nott followed, but he needed explanation for some. "These two are to be massaged in, and this you drink tomorrow night, not now. Phials of Pepper-up are there as well. Here you go."

"Take anything you need," Ginny called out to them from the kitchen where she busied herself with making tea. "I have two sets left for Severus. But he doesn't look to be suffering from the Cruciatus, or at least not only that curse. What has he been submitted to? And *why* for Merlin's sake?" she asked when she returned with the tea, cups and glasses plus a jug of pumpkin juice diluted with water.

Parched, they helped themselves to the drinks. With carefully selected words, Draco told her what had happened and how the Dark Lord had punished her husband. Ginny was able to read between the lines that Draco and Severus had plotted part of the failure beforehand. Nott didn't interrupt at all, but listened most carefully, so that Ginny

restricted her questions to the curses Severus had received.

"As far as I understood, the last curse didn't do anything more than paralyse him," Nott told her, still exhausted and in pain. "For a week or more." Ginny's face went white in shock.

Draco continued, since Nott was too weak to speak. "The typical cures against the Cruciatus should be applied as he is used to. He certainly got his share! A normal painkiller would do for the knives. Do something extra to soothe his skin. He's also been blinded and assaulted by noise."

"Probably it is best if I keep his eyes shut and wet and dim the light. No extra noise, either; maybe a Silencing Charm towards the street?" She was speaking in a lower tone now as she went back to close his eyes, feeling her stomach churn.

Draco nodded weakly. "Send me an owl tomorrow, Ginny." He promised to come around immediately if needed, but at the latest in two days.

Paul Nott felt like promising the same, but Ginny waved him off. "You need to recover first. Feel free to send for more potion, sir." The man departed with silent nods of regret and gratitude.

"Draco," Ginny whispered as he was about to leave. "You had better open the lab for me, too."

Raising an eyebrow, the boy complied, his face contorting in pain as he removed the wards. "Do call for help, Ginny," he insisted as he left.

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Severus awoke in his bed, hardly remembering how he had ended up there. His left arm was numb from lying on it. The rest of his body felt strangely dull and sore as well, which was disturbing as such, but bearable. He started to roll over, but he found that he could not. He wanted to lick his dry lips, only to notice that this didn't work. He could not even move his eyeballs or open his eyelids. Furrowing his brows in concern... he found that that didn't work either. *What is going on here?*

Gradually, his memory of their report to their master returned, including the traces of mud and blood, the stench of body juices and fear and the incredible pain he had been in. The thought alone covered him with sweat once again. That was when he noticed that he was clean and lying in a fresh bed. But this was not Hogwarts where the house elves would permanently fuss about him. Severus was at Spinner's End, in front of the window that overlooked the tiny backyard. He must have fallen asleep, because when he pondered more, he had been turned around and was now facing away from the window. It gave his closed, and yet burning eyes a welcome rest, but how had it happened? More flashbacks pulsed in and out, and Severus recalled how *she*, Ginevra, had cared for him. *Of course, she will care for an injured man*, he thought. *Even if she must be revolted from my looking like a Christmas tree, it would be better to bear when I'm not swimming in my own juices.*

Shuffling steps approached his door, which opened slowly. "Hello, Severus. You might be awake; I cannot tell. Look, we have a little bit of decoration here," she said, tenderly opening his eyelids. She directed his gaze to the cloth she had draped over the chest of drawers. There were three candle stumps from his storage, burning without smoke. It looked terribly similar to himself under the Dark Lord's spell. But it also had a warm, homely touch. *Mother used to... No, forget that!* Ginny lowered her head so that her eyes met his. "I'm glad you're a little less... pale today." She stroked his hair again, and her eyes looked so gentle, as loving as before the wedding. Or, rather, like at the dratted party at the Mulciber's, just before she had snubbed him again. *What is she up to this time, exploiting the fact that I'm so completely incapacitated? She's talking all the time, now that I cannot stop her.*

"Let's turn you around, shall we? Goodness, I'm rambling. I'm sorry."

Severus thanked the gods that she kept herself quiet for a long time. He would have preferred to follow her movements as she fumbled about his body, but he could not.

She closed his burning eye and after some time carefully opened the other one. "I'm sorry, love, if I'm doing it all wrong. I don't even know if you're awake or not. Now, let's check your skin, shall we?"

We? I cannot stop you, so let's assume you shall. Did you warm that stuff that you intend to smear all over my skin?

She applied the skin ointment once again, carefully covering every part of his skin, with no exception. Her hands on his body felt soothing and... good. No, actually... exquisite. Severus felt like closing his eyes and exhaling deeply and cursed himself again for not having control over himself. Instead, he was damned to look where she dictated, which was her face. She worked slowly, very slowly. He could hear her humming a tune. *Does she enjoy this? She betrayed me; she mocked me; I'm not falling into this trap again! She's enjoying herself at my cost.*

Ginny used a folded piece of tissue to moisten and grease his dried lips with yet another ointment. Severus wondered if they had also turned green or if they sported blotches or blisters. From what he could feel, they were no different than usual, yet she painfully avoided touching them.

Severus felt more tension leave his body under her application until even certain muscles relaxed. It didn't take more than a swish of her wand to remove the puddle and clean him. "I'll move you over to my bed again, will that be all right?" She took a deep breath. Panting, she levitated him there, letting him sink slowly and gently onto her hard mattress, although she could have saved herself much effort by just dropping him. The journey was surprisingly short, and Severus realised that his bed had been repositioned towards the door while the sofa now stood very close to the door on the other side. "Just a moment," she said and stroked his cheek. She tucked him under the covers... a gesture he only remembered from his earliest years at home when his grandmother had still been visiting.

Between his lucid moments, where Severus could analyse what was happening, his mind drifted off again and again, and he spent precious time fighting back to reality. Often his anger about her betrayal ruled. Other memories seared through his mind, leaving a sense of guilt too difficult to overcome. He saw Albus repeating his request to care for any youth that fell into his responsibility. He certainly had ensured Ginevra stayed alive, but that was not what Albus had had in mind, and Severus knew it all too well. Severus had failed to fulfil the most urgent demand his mentor and saviour had pressed upon him.

With swift movements, she had his duvet cleaned. She took something extra out from his mattress as well. A layer of... Severus wasn't sure what, but obviously it had prevented the lower layers from getting soaked. The realisation struck him that she was all too experienced and prepared. "Again", she had said.

At Spinner's End, there had been far too many days where he had lain in his own excrement, and in his memory, cleaning afterwards was one of the worst actions in all his career as a Death Eater or a spy. Now, a sixteen-year-old girl had to do it. Despite her young age, she was even married to him, former head of Slytherin house. Infuriating as well as embarrassing!

In normal circumstances, Severus reminded himself, a young witch like Ginevra would enjoy a spectacular ride on a broomstick or maybe watch a Muggle film in the arms of a shy boyfriend. Severus found he could not stand the image of someone else snogging her, and he hated himself for it.

Like every teacher in Dumbledore's service, Severus had never honestly questioned the elves' responsibility for the cleaning, also in his private rooms, although he had never again treated them the arrogant way he had so quickly adopted as a student. Two years ago, their tasks had once again included the care of his damaged body when he returned to Hogwarts injured or incapacitated after the Dark Lord's calls. Thus, for Severus, Ginevra was now doing the lowest of the elves' jobs.

Ginny used a very long spoon to pry open his mouth for all the liquid food without touching him. By now, she had also learned the swallowing spell perfectly. Instead of plain tea, he got a thin soup today. It was a time consuming task, and she inserted a sentence every few gulps. "... A little stomach aid first; here you are... Yes, it is bitter. Let's neutralise it with juice, not grapefruit, not to worry... You'll have only chicken broth with a little starch to give your stomach something to do... I've added thyme to the broth; you love that, don't you?"

Eventually, she closed his already painfully dry eye, and she didn't open the other one this time. "I truly hope you can taste this, Severus... We'll head for a porridge soon; that will give you more substance." He was asleep before she was finished, but she could not notice it. She continued feeding and making him swallow for a long time,

having no other guideline than an educated guess of the need of a male, parched body with damaged digestion.

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With a shy but friendly, "Good morning, Severus!" she entered his bedroom. She approached him slowly, humming a tune as if not to startle him. But he had been awake for a while, waiting for... something. Dinner, he had thought, but he seemed to have missed it. She touched his upper shoulder tenderly first, but her hand grew bolder quickly.

"Actually, it is not a good morning. It is dreadful outside. It's rainy, stormy and cold. Oh, and it is Monday today, the 29th." A pause. "I'm sorry, but I think I'll keep the window closed." She pushed him gently so that he was on his back. She took hold of his neck and shoulders, circled, rolled and pressed his skin between her hands. Proceeding to his previously lower arm, she declared, "You smell that? I've found a simple jojoba oil and added eucalyptus, silver fir oil, and geranium for the mornings. That should make you feel fresh." She went around the bed to reach his other side. "I didn't use rosemary because I'm not sure if you have epileptic symptoms."

Silently, she continued, massaging his lower arm, hand and chest. "I'm quite sure you're awake now. Let me open your eyes." The first thing he saw was her face. Friendly, warm eyes, speckled brown and blue, her cheeks just a little red as if in excitement and her mouth full and red. But she moved away, and he saw nothing more than the drawers of his cupboard.

They had finished the morning ritual: washing, massage, the replacement for a toilet. This time, Ginny had been prepared for what would happen and when. She had held adequately shaped collecting dishes at the ready. She had purposefully encouraged him to let go at the time she knew he was close, although she didn't know how much he perceived from his surroundings or what he could influence. Severus wished it would be less he had to experience consciously.

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Heavy steps crashed about in the sitting room, waking Severus from deep sleep.

As promised, Draco had come to check on them. Ginny made him go to the bedroom, announcing happily, but not too loud, "Severus, you've got a visitor." She opened one eye and moved Draco into the line of Severus' view. "Bend down a bit, he cannot move his eyes."

"Is he even lucid?"

"Well, I cannot say for sure, so we *will* treat him as if he were," Ginny said in a chastising way. "You can help me now to turn him around. He's been on his back until the end of the night, on his right side in the morning, so it is the stomach now. Severus, I know you're not fond of this one, but for half an hour, it will have to be. We'll turn you again then, all right?" she asked.

"Why do you ask him?" Draco snorted.

"A general politeness, Mr Malfoy. You'd want to know before someone grabs you," Ginny commented. "You take his feet," she ordered, not trusting him with the valuable end. She arranged Severus' head most carefully, supporting his forehead to lift it. He didn't get a pillow for his head to prevent it from blocking his nose, but he got a small pillow under one shoulder. "I actually don't know if that is needed, but you see, I don't want his windpipe to be too tilted. Percy always needed this pillow when his back hurt. He almost suffocated with his shoulder flat, so I prefer not taking the risk."

Severus heard Draco express what he himself had just thought. "Amazing what you remember from your family."

"Comes in handy at times like these," she replied, and Severus had the strong feeling of being scrutinised. Eventually, Ginny knelt down and smiled into Severus' open eye. "You need rest, Severus. We will leave you for a while." She gently closed his eyes. Turning, she told Draco, "He still cannot communicate at all. I tried this morning. Nothing! I only hope I'm doing it sufficiently well. Oh, Severus, I hope you know I'm trying."

Draco considered this. "It could be his right foot and left hand that wake up first." He explained about the red orb, and Severus eagerly hung to his words. Yes, the orb had been a bit too small to hold him completely.

Ginny nodded and summarised: "If the spell had to pull those two body parts into its realm, that should have weakened its effect on them."

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After they left Severus lying on his stomach, Draco followed Ginny into the kitchen. He asked how matters were, but for a long time he got only vague answers on inconsequential household affairs. "Ginny! You know what I mean. What is...or was...going on between you and Severus?"

The direct question hit home. Ginny didn't know where to keep her hands or her eyes. "Nothing," she finally said, her tone as unspecific as the word itself. At Draco's further prodding, she stood and ranted. As if he had put a needle in a balloon, she let out air. In her agitation, Ginny took hold of the back of the chair, clenching it till her knuckles went white. How he didn't talk to her but in commands, how lonely she was.

Draco considered her: now he was getting somewhere. When she took a breath, he inserted, "I still don't understand. Maybe if you told me..."

Taken aback by her own outburst, Ginny collected her thoughts. *He still doesn't know? And since when do I confide in a Malfoy?* Her strange, private encounter with Dumbledore's portrait had led Ginny to the conclusion that Severus could be trusted, and Severus had made it clear that he trusted Draco. But that went only as far as the operations against their current master were concerned.

Sobered, she declared, "It isn't your place, Draco." She checked the time and was glad for the distraction. "Let's turn Severus round. I've a bad feeling about letting him lie on his belly for too long, even if the skin on his back heals well." They went to the bedroom.

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Lying awkwardly on his stomach, knowing Draco was in the house, Severus could not rest. He reflected on the morning and what must have happened the days before.

The girl was so considerate and much quieter in her actions than even Draco, whose noble grandfather had never tolerated any racket in the house. Severus hadn't seen her flinch. Even the more revolting aspects of care hadn't disturbed her. Severus was furious that he did not have his elementary body functions under control, and the fact that he depended on her was incredibly humiliating. He felt marginally better that today he had not caused her so much work. She even addressed the issue quite openly.

The day before, she had spent some time just sitting with him. Probably more than he remembered. Certainly for a meal or two he had completely missed. He did not want to admit it to himself, but he liked having her at his bedside. At times, he was ready to forget the humiliation she had caused at the wedding and the distance he insisted on keeping. She certainly didn't keep any now that she was allowed to come close.

Now, Draco was there, and Severus was anxious and... yes, he was jealous. It should be him speaking to her, asking about her day. *Oh, but you wouldn't, remember. You would be in your lab, in the forest, upstairs. Anywhere but near to her.*

He must have dozed off for a while because they were suddenly back in his room. She caressed his shoulders and neck. Gradually, her strokes and circles became a bit more forceful, made themselves noticed on purpose. Now, her gentle, soft warm hand stroked over his cheek, into his hair, back to his jaw. Her movements became distinct but never harsh. Her voice matched the gesture. "He might be awake now. Severus, we are going to turn you to the left side now." And so they did.

Admittedly, they had less trouble together, but Severus didn't like Draco being there. Not at all.

"I'll be right there," Draco said loudly to Ginny when they were about to leave. Her soft steps faded, but Draco didn't head for the bathroom as Severus had assumed. Instead, he heard Draco's harsh voice from very near. "You might want to listen now, you obstinate git."

Draco cast a spell Severus could not follow and drew the door, but left it slightly ajar. Severus heard his steps head off, but they didn't fade away. The kitchen door opened, and a chair was moved. "Bread and cheese? Now?" he heard Draco ask. Despite the distance, the boy's voice was clear, and other sounds were easily distinguishable, too.

The cutting sound of a knife. "I'm not sure if it is lunch time for you, but I take a meal or a snack whenever I can," she explained.

"Oh, thanks. I'd like some fruit at least. They're from our orchard in France." They were eating in silence for a while before Severus heard Draco again. "How can you stand this life, Ginny?"

"Drop it, Draco, please. Just drop it. It isn't your place, nor your problem."

"Oh, yes, Ginevra Snape, it is. It was *me* who came up with the idea you should wed. I was under pressure that day, but believe me, I did not want this. This is no life." The bang accompanying Draco's statement rang on in Severus' hypersensitive ears.

A pause. Then Draco started in a most personal tone. "When we brought Severus in the other day, the makeshift bed was made. Ginny, what is the meaning of that?"

For a long time, Severus heard no answer. Then suppressed sobs. A chair was pushed back, then a few steps with Draco's shoes. "Ginny, oh, I'm so sorry. This is your normal bed then?"

Silence for a while. Wasn't there a hole that would swallow Severus? Some flesh-eating monster plant that would digest him whole?

"You're only together when you... uh... make love? Twice a week?"

"We don't make love." Severus heard her beaten voice. *What did she mean?* He would jump up, if... if he could move. Why would she discuss this with Draco? *Because there is nobody else who listens*, he berated himself.

Draco must have had the same problem. "No? But you've got that obligation upon you..."

Severus heard her huff in disgust. "That is not making love, Draco!"

She was right, and it was Severus' fault alone. Whatever her reasons, she hardly deserved the treatment he had given her. The truth cut like knives and was harder to bear than a Cruciatius. If his body had allowed it, he would have stormed over, taken her into his arms. *No, you would not have gone. Admit it, at least to yourself.*

Her voice had been a bit muffled. Possibly she was in Malfoy's arms right now, and with a Malfoy one was never sure *What are they doing there? Will the boy console her or exploit possibilities? I bound him thoroughly with an Unbreakable Vow, but did I cover this unlikely situation?*

"Oh, Ginny, I'm so sorry!" Feet shifted on the floor, and Severus felt a pang of jealousy in addition to his self-loathing. Again, it was Draco speaking. "How can you stand this?"

"We've had some good times, you know. I try and remember those."

"He doesn't deserve you! And you certainly don't deserve such a treatment!"

"Stop it, Draco. Please." She was pleading now. "Survive it, and I still hope..." Her voice faltered.

After some pause, Draco asked quietly, shyly, "What is your... eh... schedule, Ginny? I mean when do you have to..."

"Tomorrow night, before ten, if I understand the rule." She appeared surprisingly composed as she replied.

What? Is it true? Oh, I can not. How will that ever work? Damn the mission, Voldemort and his punishments Severus nearly missed the next words.

She was silent for a while, then asked, "Draco, do you know what happens if we delay it?"

"You don't want to know."

"Tell me!"

"It was the answer Flint gave me after he tried to delay it. Serina, his wife, blanched and trembled in agony at the memory alone. I don't know more." The boy sounded as if he was truly sorry, not a common streak of the Malfoys.

Noises mingled as Severus was not able to concentrate any longer.

When he next was aware of his surroundings, it was lunchtime, and Ginny was telling him how so much better his skin looked. He stayed awake all the afternoon. She went in regularly to turn his non-cooperating body around. Her breath came heavy after each movement, and when she passed by his angle of vision, he found her eyes circled with black rings. How could she sleep deep enough if she set up spells all night to awake and turn him around? And what by Salazar's sea serpent was she planning?

In the evening, she sat at his bed, musing. "I'm not sure if you're bored or stressed. If I read to you quietly and you've got your eyes closed, you can drift away freely." She selected a book of individual stories. "It is worn out, and I've seen you with it already. Seems you like it." And she read with a soft voice, slowly and with smooth intonation. At the end of each passage, she let the words sink in for a short while before she continued with the phrase Severus knew was coming but was most eager to hear from her.

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Severus must have missed the start of today's morning rituals, for she had already explained the oil she was using. "I'm sorry, Severus, if I repeat myself, but I don't know when you can listen." For most of the morning, she left him alone, eyes closed. Severus had a lot of time for thinking. Too much maybe, for he found that the thwarted attack and other aspects of the Dark Lord's activities did not hold his attention. It inevitably drifted away. It drifted to her, how she nursed him more tenderly and kindly than he might have assumed even a month ago. Certainly not mirroring how he had treated her in the last weeks.

The soups weren't as nourishing as he might have wished, but she delivered them like a menu in a five-star hotel. After another long-lasting lunch, he slept again.

What he next heard were voices outside his room.

"... Ludwig's Lust. I can do it," Severus heard Draco say, adding in a lower voice, "I'm sorry if it sounds like peeping, but I can help... otherwise, whatever you need." Severus wasn't sure if the heat in his face stemmed from a genuine blush or if all his body provided was only the sensation of it. *They wouldn't dare!*

"No, Draco!" Her voice was determined. "Thank you, but no. I'm certainly able to handle my matrimonial duties without bystanders."

A little more shyly now, Ginny continued. "All right. Then it is tonight. Don't worry, I'm prepared. Besides, Ludwig's Lust is the last thing I'd push Severus through!" Draco must have shown a face as irritated as Severus now felt. "Think, Draco! I cannot possibly manipulate Severus with that dratted potion. He'd lose all his pride. Just imagine: me, a sixteen-year-old chit who doesn't even have her O.W.L.s yet, raping Severus Snape, one of the most powerful and proud wizards in Britain."

Severus wanted to bury his face in his hands in shame. His pride. It had been the start of all this. He couldn't bring himself to ask her. Just ask. But he could not. The frustration over his inability to swallow his pride and ask had made him hate her, misuse her.

Next, he heard Draco again, sounding desperate. "I feel so helpless about your problem with the kiss. If I hadn't come up with such a plan, you wouldn't..."

"No, Draco. Your plan kept me alive. I would be dead had he sent me to those motorbike guys. I might still be alive, but I wouldn't be like I'm now with Greyback either!"

No, but you should have been faring better, so much better with me, Severus' mind provided before he could stop it. According to Draco, the problem is a kiss?

A chair scrapped over the kitchen floor, as if someone had stood up. It sounded very close, so Draco had applied that spell again. "I'm alive, and I can handle it. Eventually, it might get sorted out. I could curse the plump cow, but what could I turn her into that is worse than a pink toad?"

She blames Umbridge? What makes her do so?

"This has to stop, Ginevra Snape! Your miserable git of a husband must be brought to his senses."

"No, Draco." She paused. "Look, I cannot blame him, not absolutely. He was so hurt. Think of it. I believe he really felt something for me. After so many years of isolation, he dared to open up a bit. He had made such an effort, even thought of an engagement when he gave me the pendant. He had arranged all kinds of small things that were beyond fulfilling the promise to keep me alive. They were quite out of his normal behaviour. And then I rebuke him. Worse than a cold shower."

She understood. Not only could she reconstruct his thoughts, but she really got his feelings right. Yes, he had made an effort for her, had thought that for now there was someone for him, even if he could not believe in something permanent.

"... expect Severus to do?" Oh, drat, Severus had missed some part of the conversation. Their voices were low, and he was tired again and couldn't concentrate well.

"Do what you are doing right now. Look at me for a change, ask, and stay to listen to my answer. That's all, but he doesn't seem to have the guts. Yet."

"You could simply tell him now, when he cannot run away."

"No, I won't. It is tempting, but I won't press myself on him. I've got a bit of pride left, Draco Malfoy! And besides, he could not react in any way." True, following this discussion, Severus' emotions were high, and he felt his physical bonds stronger than before. Tiring bonds, too.

"What do you think his reaction will be when he g...?" Draco asked carefully. Severus, weak as he was, wished he could concentrate on this last answer, but Ginny's voice faded in and out.

"... worst case..."

"And the best case?"

"Dunno. Maybe shag like bunnies?" Severus might have misunderstood this last one as he drifted away into a fitful sleep.

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Someone poked him and called his name harshly. His skin and ears protested strongly against the assault. Severus noticed he was lying on his back when he finally awoke. It wasn't Ginevra gently calling for him; it was Draco, and he wasn't gentle either. He rolled Severus around a bit more. "Wake up, you, I haven't all day."

He unceremoniously opened one of Severus' eyes, sending a stab of pain through Severus' head. "One eye is enough. Listen now, you mule. I hope you heard us this afternoon. Or yesterday morning. You've got ample time to think about it. If you don't change your behaviour towards her, you might regret it. She is a lovely girl and deserves better."

"Draco?" Ginny's voice came from near the bathroom. "Oh, you've gone inside already? Saying good bye?" She came closer and gasped. "Draco!" she hissed, louder than any sound Severus had heard from her in days. "Look at his skin; what did you do? Why can't you be the least bit careful? Go now; just go! I've got a lot to do here now."

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Floating

Chapter 15 of 35

Severus is forced to silently observe his wife. Draco and Nott pay them a visit.

Floating

Hungry and concerned, Severus was waiting for his wife. There was not a sound from the kitchen or the sitting room! Where was she? Confined to his bed, he alternately became anxious and angry until the alarm announced her arrival and the door opened.

Minutes later, Ginny was stroking his limbs with cool, tender hands, whispering, "How are you now? Hurting? I'll use a bit of neutral oil on those parts Draco touched so unthinkingly. Just babbling so that you're pre-warned. In case you can hear me," she added with doubt in her voice.

Soon he relaxed under her soothing ministrations. Her care went far beyond his medical need, or indeed anything he deserved. It was effectively melting his shell of coldness. The scented oil stimulated his senses, and Severus had to remind himself that he'd better not succumb to an illusion that just could not be true.

"You'll have soup again tonight...what else could it be." She sighed. "I hope some new spices give you some variation, and I put in buckwheat flour for a change. We'll open

one eye at a time again so they don't dry out."

As on all these days, eating was a slow-going process for Severus. The broth-based soup tasted of beef, tomato, onions and basil today, and it was thicker than before; almost a porridge. Again, she provided huge amounts that she re-warmed twice in between.

"I've talked a bit to one of the neighbours, Maud, a girl about my age who lives in number seven. She seems rather nice, but a little lonely. She said she had noticed you and Draco running. Some of the others have, too. Now, she was irritated that I was living with you, because the street has decided you are gay!" She giggled, and Severus found for once that he didn't mind this girlish streak. "Well, you two don't pass for relatives, so this was the first idea they came up with, I assume. She was shopping, like me, and she showed me a really nice Pakistani shop that sells vegetables and Asian food for about half the price of the supermarket. The shop is run by a real shop owner and has always some relative as an assistant...nice people. Reminded me of Diagon Alley. Some customers reminded me of the Patils; you know, the women dress differently. And each came with lots of kids." She halted for a moment. "Some of the English women passing by stared at them disapprovingly. I wonder if that is how Mum sometimes felt."

After a moment of silence, she added hesitantly, "Maud showed me a different way back. It is shorter, only a footpath in parts, but it passes through a rather dingy street."

Severus' mind jumped in alarm, but his uncooperative body showed nothing of it. This road went along an abandoned mill where a gang of the local Muggle youths gathered. They were a frustrated, hot-tempered lot, not motivated to seek their ways into a brighter future. He had a hard time hiding the fact from his master. If he knew about this group, they would soon find themselves recruited to his services. Severus would either get the unwanted new task himself or, and this was equally unwanted, he would get nosy Death Eater neighbours entrusted with this task. How was he to make sure Ginevra would not use this path again? The best way to hide these hooligans from the Dark Lord was hiding them from every Death Eater's mind, too.

Lost in these thoughts, Severus did not pay attention to the rest of her talk. The weight of his stomach pressed him reassuringly into the mattress, but it wobbled dangerously as she turned him a little to the side before she left.

Severus noted with satisfaction that she hadn't used her wand for warming up the food just adequately; Moody must have trained them well. He felt drowsy like a contented infant, but would be ravenous again within hours. He'd be longing for breakfast once again. Severus abandoned the negative thoughts, reminding himself that he did not have any better idea how she could keep him well fed. The girl was already nursing, cooking and cleaning around the clock. He'd eat his tongue before asking her to make five or six meals a day. Well, she could drop the onions!

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Her light steps returned. Severus expectantly wondered which book she might be carrying and imagined how her voice would convey her surprise at what she read. She had started reading the different people in their own tone of voice, using a low rumble for older men and nattering when women exchanged gossip. Would he ever be able to read the books again with a different image in his mind? How would she react when the good guy suddenly turned out to be in league with the other side?

Instead of reading to him, however, she hummed and hawed uncharacteristically. *All right, you're bored and you'd rather spend the evening on your own. Just spit it out,* Severus thought. *I'll survive.*

Ginny drew a deep breath, stared at a spot on the floor and told him in one rapid flow, "It has long been dark outside; it is about seven o'clock. We have three hours left. I'm really not feeling good about putting you through this, but Draco said it might be very bad if we don't."

What it? A deadline in three hours? She cannot believe I could ...

Ginny took another breath and stated more matter-of-factly, "Me for one, I can do without extra pain. I've been researching all day; we'll manage."

Fury filled Severus, making him waver in his recent decision to accept the young witch into his life. *Are you going to pet and grope around my privates and degrade me to a love machine? A non-functioning one, mind you! You'll waste your energy, and simultaneously you're going to break again what has healed. Excellent, just what I need.*

"Maybe the Dark Lord would not punish you given your state, but I have no idea how the spell works."

The dratted charm must sense physical inabilities. Probably nothing will happen. Just take your hands off and leave me alone!

"Now, here is a powerful tissue fortifier that was always in Bill's first-aid kit from Egypt. The Order produces it now as well. It will coat your own body tissue, but hardly heal it; therefore, you shouldn't drink this regularly, but it helps temporarily. It will last for two to five hours, your book says, depending on the damage it needs to cover. This is why I selected it. You'll drink it now. Here we go."

And Severus drank, for she made him swallow. Admittedly, she was a bit more thoughtful than he had feared. He drank more, recognising the specific taste of smoked African elephant ear. A strong tissue fortifier, that one, and thankfully it was correctly brewed! *All right, chit, you didn't bugger it up. If you now kindly enough let this potion distribute over my whole body, it will probably support my stamina once I am aroused. But how do you want to make this happen? By smiling at me and talking sweet nothings?*

Having set down the empty beaker, Ginny merely looked at him for a while. "An hour's wait to let it spread and work, they write."

Being able to read a book and a clock doesn't exactly qualify for a mediwitch! I might not die immediately, but your groping will still not be crowned with success. At least you will not tear me apart, and I probably should be relieved you had that much foresight. Kindly leave me alone to gather my wits how I can provide for your amusement.

Ginny massaged his lower abdomen. "Now, let's get the er... normal body functions out of our way. Will you relax? I know you can control it a bit! You've started blinking as well... Come on, love, it is fine... Get it all out..."

Severus hoped his body wasn't showing the hot blush he felt as her coaxing once again achieved its goal. He inwardly flinched at the noises and was glad he could not see the container she carried out. How he hated being manipulated!

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Eyes closed, Severus was left alone. The infuriating prospect of her manipulating his body in THAT way was disgusting. Severus couldn't do anything about what was going to happen...or not happen. *With some luck, I'll just fall asleep. You would not even know, girl.*

The potion was being given time to do its job, and when Ginny returned from the bathroom, Severus could bring a little tension to his biceps. This exciting news had thoroughly ruined his resolution to fall asleep.

She apparently set the three candles up in mid-air and extinguished all other light. "Now, we'll see, and you will feel... I hope."

Oh, sure, be my guest!

She straddled his chest and moved a pillow behind his head to have him look at her. With all four fingers of each hand, she moved onto his scalp, had them perform circles, loops and figures, finding spots to press that had him forget everything around. Severus could not understand exactly what she was aiming for, but together with the artificial tissue-cover, her massage felt encouraging, relaxing and something more.

I might benefit from the stimulation after all?

Slowly progressing, she drew patterns on his bare shoulders and chest, completely ignoring the criss-crossing scars, where the sensors in the skin could be anything between hypersensitive or non-existent, depending on the weather and the magic exercised in proximity. Tonight, they eased under her massage, and Severus with them.

When she finally teased his nipples till they were hard, Severus looked directly into her face, not only because it was the only place he could look at, but because it kept him spellbound. Her hair was still damp from the shower, her forehead and eyes relaxed, but watchful, and her cheeks shone rosily.

Such devotion, such care for my body...does she mean it after all? Why are women so difficult to interpret?

When she removed her hands, he wanted to groan in disappointment, but he couldn't. She undressed them both fully now and cast warming spells on them both. This time, thankfully, she was using her wand.

Again, her fingers went to his scalp and massaged his forehead, leaving Severus an interesting view indeed. Then her thumbnails drew along his nostrils until finally her flat thumbs moved in a circle around them. She looked into his eye. "I must pay attention not to touch your lips. You know that." Her thumbs carefully went under his nostrils.

Severus felt her fingers scratch over his growing beard. For all the care she had given him, she had not attempted to shave him.

He smelled a breeze of eucalyptus and maybe horseradish opening his nostrils wide. Breathing was so much easier now, and he tried with all his mind to inhale deeply. A tiny smell of patchouli, cloves and sandalwood reached his nose, and wasn't there ylang ylang as well?

Ginny moved down and sat on his thighs. With some cream or oil that he could not see, she massaged his member, rejoicing and encouraging. Not long and he felt blood gathering and hardening it. Oh, it felt good; it felt quite genuine, even though his brains did not want to believe it. Ah, she did find interesting places to tease it. *How on earth has she managed that?*

To his frustration, she stopped and moved a pillow under his buttock. "Adds some stability," she explained, caressing him. She set his feet a little apart and moved his right hand to the side as well. Indeed, this did put him into a much better position.

"Draco said your left hand will awake first. So you might feel most in your left hand." With these words, she picked it up and used a rather sloppy gluing spell to fix it on her left breast. Rocking down again, she sat on him and started moving over him.

Gradually, she wound herself up, re-gluing Severus' hand to her right breast at some point and closing his already burning eye to open the other one. After a moment of disorientation, he noticed that her movements made his left hand follow with a delay, actually stroking her. She rocked and caressed him in turns, and Severus tried to squeeze by himself, but wasn't sure if he achieved anything. For sure he felt her hard nipple. Whatever she was doing, she reached her goal of arousing him. His breath came heavily now, a sensation he had not had in days.

Hold it, girl, pay attention to just how much you achieve!

Wait a moment, did she get this far indeed?

Eventually, Ginny bent down again, seeing and stroking him. "Gods, Severus, you're wonderful. Oh, I so love it," she gasped, finally lowering herself over him. She was soft and warm and so lovely as she rode him to get her satisfaction and his as well.

Severus' body jerked up once, and he heard himself grunt. These were first signs of life after their master's wrath had hit him, and he did not care for the pain that accompanied them. His body was functioning. There was hope.

Smiling, Ginny covered both their sweaty bodies with the duvet. *Nox.*

She arranged for him to lie a little on his right side with his knees bent. She closed his eye and finally, making them spoon, she let his left hand hang loosely over her stomach in the same way they had laid after all their proper love makings. *That's three or four times out of how many?* Severus berated himself.

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Severus awoke in the dark and registered regular breathing at his side. His memory of the evening returned with a bang.

He replayed the whole event in his mind. How endearing she had looked enjoying herself with him. Her eyes had been wide open and even without active Legilimency, Severus was quite certain there was nothing false in them. Whatever it was that made her keep the distance, it was not repulsion. She had done what she thought right and she had succeeded without humiliating him. It was about time that he asked her for the reason why she behaved so oddly at times. He would do so as soon as he could master his voice. If only the bloody spell would wear off soon.

Her tissue fortifier had done wonders. Vessels, cell walls and membranes would have torn beyond repair when his damaged body had snapped up. She had chosen it well. Too bad, that this variant wore off so rapidly, leaving no actual healing behind. His left hand felt much less cottoned, and he would so have liked to stroke her, just the tiniest bit... **it worked!** He was able to move his fingers!

For a while, he stroked her bare belly where his hand suspended from the wrist just to feel the sensation. She gave a soft moan and relaxed, making Severus aware that he was actually touching her, caressing her. Encouraged by the fact that she did feel him and did not jump away, he grew bolder. Slowly, to not wake her, he moved his hand over her body in caterpillar manners. Twice it fell in the process, but finally he was where he wanted to be: on her right breast. Her firm, small, juvenile breast that he had just started to get to know. Slowly, he stroked over its softness, enjoying his tiny bit of freedom, as much as her reaction. She still slept, but her breath came deeper now, and then she stirred and stretched herself. "Hmm, Severus!"

Slowly and softly, he continued. She groaned and stretched lightly under his arm that fell limply down. He had to caterpillar up again until he found the rounded flesh. So sweet!

With a gasp, she woke up and probably realized what she had been dreaming. "I'm sorry, love. I don't want to disturb you." Helpless as he was, he had to let her go back to her makeshift bed in the living room.

An hour later, Severus still lay wide awake. It occurred to him only then, that she could very well have moaned another man's name. But she had not! *ve been a fool!*

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The alarm announced the arrival of Draco when Ginny was about to empty the chamber pot and bottle in mid-morning. "Just a moment, please wait, Draco," she shouted through the entrance door to stall him.

Severus' ears drummed at the assault with noise, making him realise just how quietly she seemed to be talking and moving about all times. But this moment of physical pain was easier to bear than imagining Draco seeing...

When Ginny opened the entrance door, Draco entered with concern. He verified several times that she seemed indeed well.

"Oh, stop it, we are fine. Come in to greet Severus," Ginny finally called for manners.

"Did you... uh... manage?" Draco asked, sniffing the air.

You're searching for Ludwig's Lust, Severus reasoned. Ha, you won't find any trace!

"Yes, Draco, we did. Stop worrying. We'll be clear until Monday." Her answer came dismissively.

With an inward smirk, Severus noticed that the bewilderment did not leave Draco's voice, even when he now asked for their everyday routine. Yes, he was told, Severus' general muscle tension had improved, but she didn't mention his left hand at all. Had she not noticed it, or was she not willing to share this news? She went on with Severus' skin, and how thin he was, then asked Draco what strengthening food he could imagine.

"What kind of food? I don't know."

"Have the elves always come up with something?"

"Yea, I suppose. I've really never paid attention. Just fill him up, I guess."

"I hope I never end up depending on your care, Draco Malfoy. Would you suggest using a funnel? What diameter?" Severus smirked inwardly, deeply regretting that he could not turn his head to see Draco's face.

The young people left the bedroom after Ginny had gently closed her husband's eye and stroked his cheek. "Have a rest, Severus."

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Outside, Draco told Ginny a little bit of what was going on in the field. He had evidence that Charlie Weasley had been involved in a skirmish. "I cannot possibly ask myself through your family, but they had to admit that 'the blasted dragon-lover' got the better of them." It wasn't much, considering, but it produced a smile on Ginny's exhausted face.

With trepidation, Ginny asked him about Hermione, and Draco informed her that she had not been participating in open operations. "That's a relief. She is better around an abundance of books anyway, researching, drawing conclusions and maybe scheming and plotting." Ginny glanced fleetingly at all the shelves surrounding her. Seizing a chance to get another piece into the puzzle, she went on. "But, Draco, I've been thinking about the time that you captured me. You were supposed to go for her, and surely there were plans on what would happen. You caught me instead, and everybody seemed so utterly unprepared."

Draco's face turned to stone and looked distant, but Ginny pressed on. "I stayed here undisturbed for four days. You cannot make me believe that this would have happened to Hermione, too."

"Would you have wanted to meet our master earlier than that?"

"I've said nothing like that. But you were at a loss with what to do with me. There was no bed, cell or anything prepared for me. You had to rearrange your actual work..."

"We managed, didn't we?" Draco asked sharply.

"Yes, you did, and very well. I needed the time, too, but..."

With finality in his voice, Draco cut her short. "Fine that we agree. Do you wish me to help with something in the house?"

"Don't change the topic, Draco Malfoy! Why did I not simply get the very same treatment that would have awaited Hermione?" Draco's eyes were cold as steel when they bored into hers. Most carefully, Ginny asked, "What would they have done with her?"

"Be glad you were spared her fate."

"What, Draco?"

"You don't want to know."

"You've said that before."

"This is different. I don't know myself what happens when a couple misses the obligation other than that it is painful. This time, I know." His voice became softer, and he looked at her. "Ginny, please. You're under enough stress as it is. I'm amazed. Let me help you where I can and not destroy you. Please understand."

"Draco! I see right through you, and... oh, Merlin! No!" Without a warning, her stomach heaved up her little breakfast and showered his soft, silvery robe, the exquisitely silk-embroidered waistcoat, his tailor-made alpaca pleated trousers and the elegant, pitch-black, dragon-calf boots with it, before she bolted on to the bathroom.

Draco swore at his own fault, shrugged out of the smelly robe and had Banished it before he knew what had hit him. He gained his self-control then and cast elementary cleansing spells over himself and the floor before he rushed to follow her, throwing his waistcoat into the tub. Shirt-sleeved, he supported her forehead, speaking gently to her as she bent over the sink and rinsed her mouth and nose with chilly water.

When she looked up to thank him, Draco turned around and swallowed at the pile of washing in the tub, but didn't say a word about it. When Ginny's retching turned into sobs, he gently held her.

"Ginny, calm down. Gra- she is now so well protected that we don't even get the same task anymore. I do believe that our master has given up this plan."

"Are you sure? I don't want to hear a lie."

"I suppose. Severus never lied to you about his influence and knowledge or the lack thereof. I can tell you that the Dark Lord had been asking about her even after we had you. Our people kept reporting that the Order has her under uncompromising protection. He has stopped asking as of recently, so I deduce that he has given up on the idea. Trust that we would not act differently than we did last time."

"Thank you. Maybe you were right that I didn't want to know, but I've been having too much time to think."

They turned their attention to domestic matters. Draco insisted that the pile of washing went with him before they proceeded towards the kitchen.

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A sharp sound and Ginevra's strict voice woke Severus up. "Howdare you, Draco." *What can have put her in such a rage?* "I can't believe you suggested such a thing!" She sounded angrier than Severus had ever heard her since she had come into his house.

"Look. It is just an offer out of your desperate position, Ginny!" Draco hissed insistently. "Do you know how bad I feel about this? I wished there was another way. I want to rectify something. I certainly don't want to imply..."

She must have composed herself, for she spoke slowly, but she sounded even firmer now. "All right Draco. It might be a way out for some, but I won't think of it." Severus strained to hear her next sentence, but when it was said, his chest churned, and he almost wished he had missed it. "It would break the last thread to Severus that I might still have."

Draco's voice was hard and provocative when he replied, "I don't see much that could still be destroyed." When Ginevra didn't respond, the boy huffed and said, "Then

don't. I will leave you now." Severus heard clothes rustle and finally the door open and close.

For a long time, the young witch paced the floor, stepping determinedly in her anger and making him angry, too. *What has the boy suggested? Has he badgered her?* Eventually, her steps faltered, and silence fell. He did not hear anything from her, no steps, no sound. Severus' mind was racing. *What is going on? Has Draco offended my wife?*

After long minutes, she poked her head in, speaking in a soft voice that, however, seemed to cost her much concentration, "It is almost lunchtime, and for once we have rather fine winter weather outside. Let me tuck you in and open the window for a while before we eat."

Severus revelled in the fresh, midwinter scent. For a moment, the sun was strong enough to cast shadows of the bare twigs of the tree on the wall opposite the window. One of the few positive memories from his childhood was about climbing the tree, enjoying the freshly plucked apples. It had been a Muggle experience, and so Tobias Snape had not interfered. Ginevra did not even know their little back garden. He would have to show it to her as soon as he was able to.

First, however, he would have to make up with her, try to re-arrange an understanding between them that he had so foolishly broken. He sincerely wanted to treat her with the respect she deserved, although it could never undo all the harm he had done. He would strive to honour her, maybe come to love her, even if she could probably not reciprocate such feelings anymore.

"All right then. Guess what, you'll have soup today!" Ginny announced with overdrawn, ironical joy that did not allow Severus to analyse her actual state of mind. "Chicken-curry, this time." She was hovering a tray with food beside her. She placed it on the chest of drawers, pushed the window almost closed, warmed Severus' shoulders and arranged for him to assume a half-sitting position.

One of his eyes was opened and directed to her. A shelf was quickly emptied from books, and with a deep frown on her face, she Transfigured it into a makeshift table over the bed. She declared, "I'll be rude today, Severus. I'll eat first. It is too hot for you yet. You can enjoy the smell first. Hopefully it makes you really greedy, for there is a lot of it."

Severus watched her eating and looked at her worn features. Her eyes had been dark-rimmed already for days. She could not get enough sleep, what with all the turning him around every other hour and cleaning him all too many times. So he was glad to see that she tucked in heartily. He wished to inhale the smell deftly, but even deepening his breathing was out of his control. How could he make her use the ointment for under the nostrils again? *Maybe I can catch her eyes long enough to allow Legilimency?* But she had not attempted it before, why would she do so today? For the first days, Severus had been thankful she had not pried into his mind, for it was straining and would have been most painful to his sensitive eyes. Today, he would have endured any pain if only she would contact him in the way she could.

The soup was creamy and delicious. Every now and then she added mashed chutney to the spoon, and she allowed him a moment more to taste it. True to her word, she had made a lot, and his empty stomach gladly welcomed it. Dessert was a fruit salad for her and a corresponding fruity drink for him. She took care that he had each mouthful on his tongue for a while before she made him swallow, although she probably did not know that he indeed smelled and tasted what she fed him. She spent the time in case it actually made a difference for him.

She locked her eyes with his open one a few times, but too short for him to have a chance to break through to her. Severus wanted to scream out in protest when she closed his itchy eyes again, but he could not.

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Paul Nott and one of his charges visited them to make a report on the Crimson-Orb curse. They asked Ginny about Severus' progress, and then took all kinds of strange measurements. She could not tell them more than his other injuries have healed. "I am still waiting for a reaction," she admitted.

The young man's face looked indifferent as he noted, "Interesting. Do you think he might be permanently damaged, sir?" Ginny blanched and nearly missed the table with her hand as she tried to stabilise herself.

Paul Nott chastised his companion for his inconsiderate behaviour and did his best to convince Ginny, his warm hand on her shoulder stabilising her. "Mrs Snape, listen. Our master needs Severus," he reasoned, speaking in a rational tone. "He has always put great hopes and responsibilities into him and now into your marriage. Yet, his magical powers are... impressive. He might have overdone it, yes, but not to such an extent. We are here to assess the effects of the curse. Why would he bother, if he had abandoned your husband?"

Unable to even verbally protest, Severus was completely at their mercy as they manhandled his uncooperative body, tilting and turning him, taking temperature and the acidity of his skin at places he would never even display to Madam Pomfrey. Thankfully, Paul had sent the girl out before the humiliating procedure, and he put a foot down when the young upstart wanted to be extra-thorough.

Severus swore sweet revenge at the greenhorn's audacious prodding with his wand and his enthusiastic declaration. "This is most remarkable, sir. His magic has retreated to the magical nodes."

They left with an encouraging remark to Ginny, but her face hardly cleared up. Feeling stronger every day, Severus wished hard he was able to wipe away her desperation, but he could not.

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Propped against two pillows, Severus enjoyed his near-upright position. Even if he could only stare into the direction his nose already pointed to, the sight was more interesting than from any lying position. Since the window was wide open, Ginny had tucked him in very carefully indeed and not at all realised his paltry attempts to move his left hand and fingers or his right toes.

Eventually, she drew the curtains closed, cursing herself for not heeding his potentially still hurting eyes. Severus was well aware of her daily routine and found that she had every right to see a bit of the nice day. He had enjoyed it more than suffered from the headache due to the light.

She explained that she would be gone for quite a while to care for dinner and his ointments. Severus sighed inwardly. He was causing her a lot of work. She cupped his cheeks, fingers deep into his greasy hair, and stroked his upper arms before she made him slip under the duvet again without looking at his left hand where his fingers made minute moves.

When would she realise he could move it? Would she come up with a code to communicate with him? What would he want to tell her? That he was sorry. That she did a wonderful job with him and need not worry. That he wanted to hug her, caress her. No, he reminded himself. *Don't get your hopes up. She will hardly appreciate it.*

If she did not ask him the right questions, he could hardly form a message in finger movements. In no ways could he ask her to use Legilimency on him.

For hours his thoughts seemed to circle around this problem. Consequently, he did not get a proper rest and was less and less able to create images he wanted her to see.

Bouts of shivers ran through his body, weakening his senses. Then again he felt hot, and sweat beaded down his temples. In his lucid moments, he faced different sides of the room, and he might have felt cold, damp cloth cover his forehead or calves. To his frustration, she never popped in while he was awake. When would this end?

::*:*:

"getting worse... nights' massage... oil with hop..."

"move left arm... right arm... not yet. Strange, actually... I had thought..."

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Severus woke up properly after the sun had already set. His eyes were closed...damn. She must have been in the room a few times, but he had missed it. He felt very warm; his skin was not aching, but damp, and considering his huge lunch, he wasn't full at all.

Swearing would have been a relief now. He had missed her administration of the oil! The one moment where she certainly looked over all his body and would have felt the tiniest of movements. He had missed the best chance to move his foot or hand in her hands! Vaguely, he recalled now how she had asked for it. In his fatigue he had not reacted. Damn again.

Despite the soothing smell of the oil, he tried to stay awake now. Would there still be an occasion to contact her tonight? Would she slide in under the cover with him like she had done last night? Fat chance!

Ginny appeared after he had been lying awake for what must have been ages. She brought him a big bowl filled with porridge and a carrot mousse. Her own dinner was on a small plate, and Severus thought it was far too little to keep her strong.

She sat reading for him afterwards. Joyful as it was, he would have preferred being unpacked and examined.

Eventually, she left to return with his toothbrush. Avoiding any direct skin contact with his lips, she gingerly manoeuvred it inside and brushed around. "I thought you would need it after the chocolate drink, but this really isn't worth much. Hermione would be shocked. Can't be helped; you'll have to do it extra carefully again once you can." After brushing through his hair, she bade him good night and left for her own bed, leaving a frustrated man behind.

He was not any more successful the following day.

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I'm forever grateful for the help I received from Hollimel99 and Jingjingchiquita. You're the best!

Reconciliation

Chapter 16 of 35

Severus seeks contact to his young wife.

Did I ever tell you that I don't own the characters of the Harry Potter universe?

As for making money: nope, you won't get any when you leave a review. But I promise that you'll get a reply!

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Reconciliation

Severus felt fully awake one morning, and the fever was gone. This time, he did not miss any part of the morning ritual, learned with a shock that it was already 3rd January, and could hardly wait for the moment when Ginny would reach his left hand. She spent far too long on his shoulders and upper arm. When she proceeded below his elbow, his mental tension was almost painful as he willed her hands lower still. Finally, finally she came to his palm and the back of his hand. With all his might, he concentrated on gripping her hand.

"What?" she almost shrieked. "Sorry, Severus, I didn't want to startle you, but this was unexpected. Do it again..."

She positioned his hand on the bed sheet and named his fingers one by one. He could move all but the little one.

"Oh, this is so wonderful!" When her head came into his view, she was all smiles, and the realisation that her tension had lifted washed warmly through Severus' body. "Let's see if you have enough control to communicate. Move the index and then the ring finger." He complied for a few such commands, noticing how taxing these small movements were. He hoped fervently she would start asking questions instead.

Ginny sensed as much. Was he in acute pain...no. Was it too hot, too cold...no. Did he feel hungry or thirsty...a little. Was the medication correct...mostly. She tried to probe deeper here, but she didn't get an idea.

Severus had more and more trouble concentrating and getting his fingers into motion, and his last replies came slowly and weakly.

"I wonder how difficult it is for you to move your fingers. Move your index if you have trouble and move your middle finger if not... index. All right, Severus, we must see how we can ease it."

After a little experimenting, they changed into Ginny gripping his hand and receiving pressure rather than movement.

His hand in hers, actively searching contact, was a sight Ginny had missed for ever so long. For some time, she could only close her eyes and feel their joined hands, the little pressure assuring her that he meant it. Slowly, her breath evened, and she could open her wet eyes without losing a tear.

When Severus shivered slightly, she made haste to finish his massage. She discovered with joy that his right foot could push against her hand and his toes could wiggle a bit. But generally she would concentrate on his hand.

The "bathroom tasks" were accomplished without any communication. Ginny closed his eyes according to his request when she went to make breakfast.

"You'll have egg and bacon today. Can't have only porridge, can you?" She had indeed made scrambled egg with fine-ground bacon. It smelled and tasted delicious, although Severus personally would have added more salt and pepper.

Severus did not remember dozing off, but it was lunchtime when he was lucid again. Another soft, porridge-like meal of vegetable, potato and probably some meat. She placed his hand into hers and asked for general needs. "More to drink?" got a YES, and quickly she fetched warm tea as well as the bottle to catch it afterwards. Severus

noticed it with less embarrassment than previously.

"Severus, if you're strong enough for moving your fingers, I'm wondering if you would agree for me to use a light Legilimency on you. I promise I will not go deeper than you wish. Grip twice for a yes! One grip for a no!" *Finally*, he thought and gladly gripped twice... and yet another two double-grips. She smiled with relief. "Oh, this will be so good! I will have a chance to help you much more efficiently this way!"

Tenderly, she positioned him adequately in a light place, but without bright sunshine into either her or his eyes. She was about to cast the spell when the house alarm announced Draco. "Oh, b-blast," she exclaimed, expressing what Severus could only formulate in thought, although he would have used stronger words.

Severus waited with his patience growing thinner, but it took her forever to get rid of the boy. Finally, Draco was convinced that she didn't want to take a walk to the shops herself, and he asked her for a shopping list. She accepted his offer gladly. She discussed only a few things with him, which meant he would be back in no time.

Ginny rushed back into the bedroom again and repositioned herself opposite the patient. She asked him to think of his physical needs first.

"*Legilimens!*"

Severus showed her a peaceful scene first and felt her hand relax. Then he thought of a certain, well-read medical book and its place on the shelf. He searched for a way to express 'tissue fortifier', but couldn't think of more than the main ingredients and the creamy, orange, final product. "That's it," he signalled.

She rushed out and returned with the heavy tome. She flicked through the first chapters that Severus knew to hold pictures of skinless bodies in motion where the joints, the muscles and tendons were highlighted and people stripped of some flesh so that their magical nodes showed as they were casting spells. She soon reached the second part full of medical potions. Her eyes sparkled in the prospect of a cure.

"We'll find it, and we'll give you some relief. Hmm, let me think. I'll run my finger along the table of contents, and when I reach its chapter you grip me." She arranged his eyes and awkwardly hitched the book on her hips to bring it in line with his view. She positioned his hand over her lower arm. "Test: grip twice if this works!"

Soon she had the sub-chapter and the potion within. "Timothy's Tissue Treat, you mean. Stronger still than what I applied the first day, and not as short-timed as the one I used on... our day." She received a double-grip for confirmation and smiled. It was the first smile to Severus that showed more confidence and hope than apprehension and despair.

As she perused the directions, however, all her faith in her skills faltered. "The potion causes kidney dysfunction if some of these fresh ingredients are too old or the stirring pattern is altered and..." she was shaking, her face white as the bed sheet "...it could turn fatal if the obsidian crystals aren't balanced well enough. Severus, I've never even learned how to determine that. I'm not risking poisoning you. There is no way I can brew this! Show me a person who can brew this, and I'll owl them. Draco maybe?"
"*Legilimens!*"

Severus indicated to close the book and shelve it.

In her exhausted state, Ginny was suddenly in tears. "I'm failing you, I'm so sorry." Quickly, he pressed her arm again and didn't let go of her until she looked into his eyes once again. He showed her a pacifying landscape picture she didn't know and stroked her hand until her blurry vision had cleared and she sat steadier. Then he showed a calendar, ticking off days. "You mean it will take longer without the potion?" Double-grip. "Will you be in pain in the meantime?" He loosened his hand up as much as possible. "No?" Double-grip. And another one. Her shoulders sagged, and she let out a breath in relief, trying hard to keep her composure. But it was as if she blew out the last control she had kept.

With a weak sigh, the young witch collapsed onto his bed, her shoulders falling heavily onto his thighs, and did not stir for long minutes. Severus' arm and hand were trapped under her, and all he could do was keep still. Eventually, she breathed deeper again, and he deliberately splayed out his fingers as far as he could and drew them together again, hoping it made a difference to her.

A car drove by, brakes squealing, and Ginny jerked up. She focused on her patient again. "Will you heal completely without it?" Double-press. "Should I try the general tissue fortifier again?" His double-press came as the alarm announced Draco. "All right then. It is easy to brew, and I'll have it tonight. I have so many questions, too many to go through. Let's see what Draco has to say."

Draco read the directions of said potion with increasing alarm and burst out, "What were you thinking asking her for that?! Goodness, this could have gone so wrong down there in the ill-illuminated lab. With the herring scales, I shudder to imagine how you might have ended up! A botched warts remover is not exactly the same as a thoroughly failed tissue strengthener, Mr Potions master. I've been brewing with you for quite a while, and I readily believe that Ginny isn't a Longbottom either, but *this*? Honestly, Severus, back at Hogwarts even you would never have let us use such a brew on ourselves."

They were right. Now that he saw his dangerous misjudgement, Severus had problems explaining it to himself *Have I started idealising Ginevra? She is not a Potions genius with years and years of training. She is only sixteen years old, even if she has skills I will never have. She is my wife, but we're not interchangeable. One's weakness matters less if it is the other's strength. We must arrange ourselves so that we complement each other. IF we ever manage to arrange our lives, considering our current dispute*, he grudgingly added.

"No, Ginny," Draco was saying as Severus concentrated on them again. "Who cares if you dropped the book; Severus has enough of them. You're doing amazingly well, and if this mountain troll here cannot approve of it, then Merlin help him." The boy moved towards the door. "Come out of here now, let's have a chat."

"I'll close your eyes, love. Have a nice rest. I'll open the window for you." She tucked him in again, and he was alone with the additional burden to have set her into alarm.

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"Severus, are you awake? Let me close the window, and I'll try for a little chat again."

Severus had already been waiting for her. Now he would tell her! She suggested a timetable: first dinner, then reading, a massage, then some dessert. "Is this an acceptable plan?" Double-grip. "Are you hungry?" Double-grip and another one. "It wasn't enough?" Her voice got a fearful edge, and Severus stroked her hand with his thumb, which was all he could do to drive away this idea, even if, truth be told, he was ready to eat a Hippogriff. "I'd like to know what you want, but we cannot put this in your grips now. Is Legilimency all right?" Double-grip. Severus showed her a cow and tried for rice as well. He then cast some imaginary onions into the bin. "Beef stew with rice, no onion?" Double-grip. Silence. "You love them, normally. Is it... because they cause flatulence?" Even with the lightest double-grip he could give her, Severus cringed at the pained expression on her face. "I have totally missed that point. Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry." He stroked her arm gently with his thumb, once again swearing to himself for his incapacity. How was he to tell her she did fine?

With the practised yes/no double-grip, she successfully checked through a few vegetables and turned to go to the kitchen. Glancing back with a smile, she told him, "This reminds me of Saturday nights at Hogwarts. Colin came up with a game, and later Dean joined, and a few other Muggle-borns: One thinks of an object and the others must guess. Only yes/no answers allowed. They were normally much better than us pure-bloods when it came to producing really helpful questions. They would have found out all this without Legilimency! Now I'll start, and you make up a dessert!" Seconds later, she returned again, noting, "I'll close your eyes now, so they don't hurt." Severus moved his desire to regain the blinking reflex to the top of his wish-list, so that he could look at her whenever she was near.

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"The stew is simmering," she announced, draping his hand around her lower arm. "Want to tell me about the dessert now?" No grip. "I'm sorry if I rushed in; are you awake and ready for a chat?" Double-grip. He could see the concentration in her face. A true pure-blood that she was, it took her a while to find out how to continue. Eventually, her face brightened. "You want to talk, but not about the dessert." Double-grip and another one. "Eager to talk?" Double-grip.

"If it's not a concrete task related to your illness..." double-grip, "...I'm quite lost. Draco? No. Something I must do? No. Oh, but yes, we should've reinforced the wards. I'll owl Draco on this. But this wasn't what you wanted. Hmm, you say yes to a negative question. Yes, that it wasn't? Good." her brows furrowed but eventually she said, "I'm not good at this game, can I enter your mind again?" She received two double grips for this.

Severus tried to think of the wonderful moments with her. He managed at least two pictures of himself stroking her cheeks and her smiling at him, but he could not bring across his regret for the loss and for his foolishness. He tried with other images, their engagement and a fairly passionate kiss they had shared when making lunch, but all in all he failed at expressing what he really wanted.

His young witch panted heavily when she withdrew from his mind. "There you are, unable to move and this is what you've been thinking about?" Double-grip and another one. He would have pressed more often or firmer, but his forces were limited.

"Is it important for you?" Double-grip. She hesitated to go on, and her turbulent emotions reflected on her face. After she got a grip on herself, she declared, "Severus, this can go so utterly wrong if I draw wrong conclusions!" She stood and left the bed to pace the length of the room. Damn, he had lost her again and could not even see her anymore.

When she returned, she took his hand into hers. His tiny stroke reassured her. "No, not now," she insisted. "A time will come to discuss this. I'm ready whenever you are," she told him, cupping his chin. Looking into his eyes sincerely, she added with shaking voice, "I appreciate your attempt. It... it means a lot to me." Then she hastily closed his eyes and left for the kitchen.

Her eyes were red when she returned with the blended stew in one bowl, a normal version in another and a spoon for each of them. "Now, while this cools, what about pudding? We could have custard cream, fruit, hmm, chocolate wasn't a good idea and all the rest suffers too much when minced or blended. It is those two then. Fruit? No. Custard? No again? You've another idea? Yes. Then I need to look into your eyes again. You know, I feel like an intruder."

She was more than taken aback by the picture of herself, naked, straddling him, rocking in ecstasy. "Oh, Merlin. I'm sorry. I should not have gone there."

Severus forced all strength into his arm and kept a grip on hers so that she could not take up her dinner. After a considerable time of hesitation, she conceded, but warned him to send her images she could not misread and pried in once again. *The rune for home and family life? Our wedding rings?* He let her go, exhausted.

Knowing that Severus' face was void of expressions these days, Ginny didn't feel generous enough to have him see her emotions yet again and leaned away. She lifted her left hand, fingers splayed, and turned it to look at her wedding ring. She felt, if he sent her such signals, that he better be stable enough to know just how that affected her. Clearing her throat, she put hardness into her voice. "Just so you know: this is the first time I have looked at it. It has been so pointless."

Indeed, there it was: the rune for home and family life, next to the rune for... "Hope for a future, Severus?" It explained a lot. "The hope was destroyed, and the future with a family in a real home appeared impossible," she mused and stood to pace again. "I don't quite know what to say."

Not allowing him any further interaction, she started feeding him, taking her own dinner at the same time. She didn't speak, didn't let his left hand touch her, but she allowed him one eye open at a time to take in the scene.

After the massage and 'toilet', she returned with three books to have him chose from and read for an hour before she yawned and excused herself. "It's been a hard day for me; I will retire. I'll be back with a tissue potion and toothbrush."

It was his last chance for today, and he used it, holding on to the sleeve of her shirt until she opened his mind again even if she said that it was against her better judgement. He asked her to move him a little to the side and lie down next to him, spooning again. "You want me to sleep here?" This time Severus forced four double-grips through the stiff joints, although they signalled to his brain that he might never be able to move his hand again if he didn't stop.

With a trembling lower lip and a wavering voice, she said, "You make me very happy with this, Severus." This time Severus was glad he was unable to move. He would not have known where to look, what to do with his hands, his head, in short what to do with himself. As it was, he felt his intestines churned and wrung, tilted and stirred.

He was still in turmoil when the girl that was his wife crawled in next to him. She was shivering with cold, or was it anxiety, fear, hope? With the warmth of each other's body, they slowly relaxed and found sleep.

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Severus woke up in the dark, strengthened by the tissue healing potion, feeling more than a little reckless. A pillow between his chest and her shoulders, prevented their heads from touching, but his left hand was sloppily hanging over her belly, as he had asked for. Like a caterpillar he worked his fingers over Ginny's sleeping body till he reached her collarbone. He stroked leisurely at first, then more determinedly. When she was stirring and waking up, he paused.

Fully awake Ginny immediately tried to disentangle herself and leave, but this time he would not have it. He stopped shortly, his hand flat on her chest, as if in question. When she stroked the back of his hand, he continued as much as his incapacitated body allowed him.

Eventually, Severus moved to her breast, circling around the centre of one and the other, just to make the point that their difference did not matter to him. When Ginny's breathing became heavy, Severus stilled his movements. This was not about passion, but making her comfortable. He moved his hand away from where they could send ambiguous signals and caressed neutral areas instead. All too soon, his hand dropped down on her arm.

Our case is not lost, was Ginny's last coherent thought before she curled away from his head to avoid unwanted contact with his mouth and dozed off.

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It was a very happy Ginny indeed who opened the door for Draco on Sunday morning. Without any details, she reported that they had arranged a means of communication and that her patient would be getting a weaker, but safer tissue strengthener every evening.

Outside, Draco swore. "Oh, damn and blast, the wards have modulated."

He mused about what must have happened. "Of course, Severus will have tuned them to himself and to his state. Now, that he is weakened, they are very strong against ill-wishers. That's clever. But," he panted, gripping his resistant wand with both hands and forcing it to describe an exact circle, "they are as rigid as a dried Lobalug spout and hard to get a hold on."

He contemplated some more and gave Ginny an appraising look. "You're to try that second layer, I should think."

Draco marched her through the spell, and although Ginny had never tried casting these particular wards, she eventually found out how to handle them and made her way once around the house.

Still, the two of them lacked Severus' powers and routine, making it draining work.

After a hearty lunch, Ginny insisted on going shopping.

"I might not be here when you come back," Draco told her, clearly not comfortable with the thought of her wandering into town alone.

Draco had just minutes to spare, and he used them for a monologue with his mentor. "She was good with the Repellopravus. Don't kill me for letting her out alone because she truly needs it. She's a lot better today, I'm glad to see," he started but then moved to business. He had news.

The new school would start on 13th January, and it was to be a boarding school for five nights and the four days in between. Weekends were going to be school days so that the parents pursuing a regular profession would be freed to serve their master's orders. "I do get the impression this is the main goal, Severus. Our education seems secondary. They are going to hold N.E.W.T.s in the beginning of February and O.W.L.s a month later. I do hope you are going to allow Ginny to take those." A double-tap on the duvet answered him.

"Ah, is this the yes?" Another double-tap. "Now I understand what Ginny told me. So: will you be teaching? Yes. Potions? Yes. Good. Even if you hate it, I prefer your strict regime with the inevitable Longbottom among us. Theodore came close enough in year five. There won't be a choice in subjects; all students will take the same ones. Theo has been at my place to catch up with year six, and his father has been teaching us lots of great charms, including some really advanced illusions. You'll see Theo mutilating beetle eyes again. Happy? No 'yes' for that, I can imagine. You teach all years? Yes.

"Up to O.W.L.s level, all children of Death Eaters will attend. Not the last two years, though. Vincent and Gregory are to continue field education rather than head for N.E.W.T.s. There is a similar restriction in the seventh year N.E.W.T.s class. You're spared Ariana Atcluft. Or any married girl, er, woman. Ginny's education ends with O.W.L.s as well," Draco noted sadly.

Continuing in this manner, he learned that Severus would be teaching yet another subject. It would come close to Defence against the Dark Arts although the 'against' could be replaced with a 'by use of'. They weren't happy about this, yet both preferred Severus teaching to other possible teachers.

"I've heard traditional Ravenclaw families are setting up an institution of their own. Non-political, they say," he reported with a huff. "They invite all first to third years from all houses to some primary school. Based on their marks, the elder ones can join their Upper Sorcery School. Flitwick is said to teach there, but no other Hogwarts teachers. I don't envy the Ravenclaw Death Eaters. The Dark Lord is going to be furious!"

Draco was about to tell him of his assignment the day before when his Dark Mark started glowing and hurting. "I'm off, Severus. Behave," he reminded his mentor and left. On his way to the forest, he passed by Paul Nott and nodded in relief.

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Severus spent all of his time alone exercising his body. Ginevra had thankfully abandoned the belly-position once his skin had healed, but she frequently turned him to lie left, right or on his back. He often asked to be laid on the right side, facing the room.

Yet, when the two testers arrived on Monday morning, he wasn't really co-operative. Ginny was wise enough to not reveal much to them either, while they once again prodded parts of his body and measured, and the youngster scribbled down observations, commenting on them freely. "His magical nodes are less balled, and I dare say he should have his magic back to his fingertips. If there was such a thing as wordless and wandless magic, he could... Ouch!" He rapidly withdrew his hand to observe the blue halo.

"Never underestimate Severus Snape!" Paul Nott declared with a grin.

Paul Nott observed the girl's mood with satisfaction and made no effort to hide the fact from Severus. However, nothing of it entered the report he dictated. With a last reminder for Ginny about her wards, he called the other man to leave.

"You can scare people again, Severus? You must feel so much better," Ginny commented sarcastically.

Severus' left forearm and hand were stronger; as was his right foot. Catching his right hand with his left, he started moving it, but didn't feel any improvement. Instead, he noticed he had instinctively tilted his head a bit, and weren't his eyes able to move in their sockets? Yes, definitely! Already this morning, he had felt his tongue helping the swallowing spell along. So he trained these three parts, loosening them like a massage loosens strong kinks in one's shoulder.

Whenever she was out of the room, he trained his jaw and neck and also tried humming. Swallowing went easier with each meal, and his right foot bent and stretched the left one under the cover whenever Severus remembered it.

"You have built up much more body tension today," Ginny confirmed to him at the short evening massage.

"Severus..." she started after all evening routines were accomplished. "You realise that we should..." He pressed her hand as firmly as he could. Yes, if even in his poor state he could give her a little pleasure he would not try and discuss otherwise.

Inhaling actively, Severus observed her carefully. If only he could use his tongue on her! One of the few parts he was able to move was the most flexible and sensitive one he had. But it was forbidden by something of which he still had no understanding. As it was, he approved of doing everything as last time. Moving his liberated eyes over her body, he regretted all the more how very little he could stroke her, please her and yes, enjoy her.

Ginny was not aware of all these thoughts, but this time she knew that she had his consent, and she remembered his effort the days before. She could enjoy the awkward arrangements a lot more than last time.

A very much relaxed, but exhausted witch cuddled close to him, pulled his arm over her to interlace her fingers with his and drifted off to sleep.

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In the morning, Severus tried to train his muscles for the toilet-business while the task was up, but stopped when he noticed he might cause a mess Ginny would have to clean afterwards. She wanted to move him to the sofa, but he asked to stay for the morning, pretending to need rest.

Instead, he spurred himself into motion as soon as she had left. His left hand inched along the bedspread and over to the bedside table. A small and a larger flat glass jar of ointment stood there, along with a phial containing the tissue strengthener. The pots were unlabelled (he'd have to scold her) and too tightly closed for his one-hand operation mode.

"Severus, what are you doing?" She rushed over to him and prevented the pot from falling when he lost control at her sudden exclamation. "You managed to get it all by yourself? This is excellent!"

He motioned her to open the jars, tell him what these were. Blushing, she told him quietly, "Don't drop it. We'll still need it, I'm afraid." Severus still assumed that the copulation control was disabled (otherwise the greenhorn would have mentioned something), but if he managed to please her again, she need never know that, he decided. He pointed at the ointments and drew a question mark on the bedspread.

Severus recognized the smell from the smaller jar, but was still unable to identify more than horseradish. Inhaling deeply, he got enough air to force out two words "What, where?" Blushing heavily now, she opened the wider jar, put it in his reach and left. He did not think he had ever smelled or brewed this one. It would have its yellow colour from ymbglidegold or calendula, a plant to soothe irritated skin. He found notes of pickled Doxy wings which had very little effect when working through the skin...but then the skin in question was thin and sensitive and blood vessels ran directly underneath.

Ginny returned with two small booklets. "From your impressive collection, but *not* from the section you forbid me from."

It was Severus' turn to blush, and he was sure he impersonated a beetroot. She had found *A Pimp's Primer for Porridges and Brothel Brews*, the booklets he had bought after he had once found himself succumbing all too easily to one of the dubious ladies.

"You find this embarrassing? That's a bit rich, considering that I found them in *your* possession. Academic interest only, I'm sure," she smirked while she showed him the pages of the brews. "Good thing though, for I shudder to think of Ludwig's Lust and related stuff."

The nose ointment was only partly for what he had experienced, enabling one to breathe more freely. It increases your sensibility also for certain fragrances, the erotic ones which were listed below. On his question Ginny pointed to two she had used in the massage oil. "They work on both sexes, and I used that ointment myself." Severus asked to get the ointment at his disposal to help his breathing.

The other oily salve, Celia's Coax, was for near-to-impotent brothel clients. Applied... well, locally. In contrast to your ordinary lust potions, it was used by the women and preferably furtively. The man experiences his performance enhanced without realising why or how. "Praise him as further encouragement; the male pride craves for it," he read. Damn true!

He recalled why he had bought the booklets. To identify the threat and weaknesses he might have and find tactics how to steel himself against any seducer. Truth be told, there had been little risk. *Twenty-odd years later here is she, Ginevra, my wife.* If he didn't repeatedly formulate the thought, it was still unbelievable.

"Already the smell of Ludwig's Lust is so disgusting," she prattled on, "that I would not want to be with one who uses it. It is for show-offs searching to over-perform and boast with an achievement that isn't even theirs. The smell betrays how artificial the encounter is." A shudder went through her shoulders.

"I... I felt nothing wrong with what I used. Other than that I could not get your approval," she added shyly.

"Was fine," he said, wishing he had the strength to confirm it to her more adequately. She had managed not to hurt his feelings, a consideration he had not deserved after how he had treated her. No, the message could not wait. "Wand," he asked. Used to switching his wand hand at times, he managed to write down these thoughts in large letters of green goo on the bed sheet.

"I'm glad you see it like that, but now off with you to the sofa for this bed needs cleaning," she said, eyeing the murky substance suspiciously. *Evanesco!*

When they retired together in the evening, it did not feel as much like a sickbay anymore. She continued reading the book to him, and he coaxed her into his bed once again for the night, stroking her belly tenderly just because he could but without rising passion.

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Wednesday after breakfast Severus demanded not for the first time an explanation on the no-kissing issue, but yet again Ginny dismissed the topic. "You will be furious one way or another and want to be able to move and speak and act freely," she told him. "I'm glad we are on speaking terms again. This can wait."

Later into the night, Ginny and Severus sat on the sofa regarding the little garden and the shabby Muggle quarter they lived in *It isn't anything to write home about*, Ginny thought. The literal meaning of the expression brought tears to her eyes. Isolated as she was, *everything* would be worth writing into a letter home.

"Think... home?"

"Of my family, yes."

He held her tight with his left hand, while the right still needed some support from Ginny to stay at its place.

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The days passed in quiet consensus. Severus tired rapidly now that he moved much more, and they kept up the massage...mutually at times...as well as the tissue healing potion and the nose ointment. Ginny had to brew them, since he did not trust his own reaction times yet. In parallel, Draco used the lab to provide the Death Eaters with their rations of healing or motivation potions. Together they also stocked up on remedies against the devastating Cruciatus curse and such simple things as a headache cure.

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On Saturday, 10th January finally, Severus stood firmly and walked around in the house, albeit slowly as if under a fading Reflex-Lax. He was fully able to speak and to attend to his body.

Nott and the other man visited him to make a report on the Crimson-Orb spell, and Severus fell into the staccato-speech of days before. "Can't walk or move well yet. Spellpower almost full. Bored. Could use Ollivander... help... second wand," he told them while they noted down the strange measurements the Dark Lord had ordered them to take.

For a moment, Nott left the sitting room to help Ginny in the kitchen. He closed the door carefully and leaned against it, observing her. "How are you doing, Mrs Snape?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Mr Nott." Ginny answered nonchalantly while he scrutinised her.

"You are quite an actress, not unlike your mother. Did you and Severus have a talk? Have you clarified a few things?" he asked. She did not as much as look at him when she nodded, and he added in a strict tone, "I'm not taking a sloppy 'yes' for an answer, young lady. *Have* you explained matters to him?"

"Uh, ah, do you understand our problem, sir?"

"Indeed, I do. Draco has visited us frequently. I should have realized it immediately. I'm so sorry." His voice had dropped, and he really looked it. "You are to be commended that you noticed it in time! So, have you explained it?"

"Not yet, but he has been asking." Upon Mr Nott's questioning expression, she reasoned, "He is persistent, so he will ask again. I will tell him; of course, I will. Once he has enough body control and power to smash a dish on the wall, run away or... I don't know what he might wish to do, but something physical, I'm sure."

Tilting his head, Paul Nott considered this and nodded in agreement. "I'm very glad for you. You will find a remedy." He smiled and opened the door again.

When they left, Nott seemed very willing to agree to Severus' idea. "We'll bring Ollivander around first thing tomorrow morning, if this suits you." Severus nodded and bid them good bye.

In the afternoon, Severus started exercising in ways Ginny had never seen. He stretched and bent his body and worked his muscles. "Join me," he suggested and conjured another soft mat. Strange as this pastime was, they had an enjoyable afternoon and repeated the session the next morning. A competition in making wry faces with the ever-stern professor!

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With the prospect of having a guest the next day, Severus once again brought up the subject of his concern after Saturday's lunch. "Ginevra, I want this kissing-ban explained before Mr Ollivander arrives. It has tortured me for too long. I am well enough recovered, and if you wait even longer, I will be on a mission before I ever know. Notice that I will use Legilimency before that happens."

She nodded and took a deep breath before she rushed off. "Umbridge made a terrible, terrible mistake in our binding. I noticed it last thing before you kissed me, and I just couldn't react more sensibly," she added, having his full attention. "She bound us not only to wizardry laws but also to *our pure-blood traditions*, remember? She sneered at you because you naturally don't have any. But Severus, *I have!* I told you we usually have fidelity charmed, lifelong binding weddings. That is what she did, she submitted us to that!"

Severus jerked his chair back best he could and looked down at her. "She's bound you not only for the next few years, but for as long as I live?"

"Severus, *us*. We could be bound. The traditional spell is the so called Stimufidelius. It manifests itself with the first *kiss*. It remains volatile until the fourth new moon after the wedding. If we don't kiss before that, we don't bind ourselves. We can do anything else, Severus but NOT KISS!"

He was flabbergasted. *Has she behaved reasonably in the end? And yet, why has she?* With all the vitriol he could currently add to his voice, he asked sharply, "But this is what you wanted? Second thoughts after all?"

Ginny didn't miss the harsh tone, but Severus had no power to frighten or intimidate her. "No, Severus, I did not," she answered purposefully calmly. "I do not want to trick you into anything unknowingly." She looked into his eyes, searching for understanding. When she saw a flicker of nervousness, she breathed, "Never unknowingly."

She waited for him to acknowledge her. He swallowed hard and nodded. "This alone would have stopped me from letting you kiss me."

"For four months, Ginevra? Our... relationship or whatever it was, was broken... no, I must correct, *I broke* our relationship within seconds, and had it not been for this Crimson-Orb spell, nothing would have changed for weeks to come!"

Ginny looked at him sadly. "Maybe not." She stood to get on level with his eyes. "Although shortly before the frigging Christmas invitation we were closer, weren't we? I was hoping several such occasions would have brought..."

"... me to my senses."

"... you around to finally ask and listen. And understand. Like you do now," she added, her eyes almost overflowing with tears. "Do you?"

Severus stood stock still. He had wronged her, and she wasn't accusing him, but asking him. Asking him for approval of her actions? "... yes, I... you did right." He exhaled deeply. He had managed the closest to an approval he could. It wasn't an apology though.

"But Ginevra, the pain I submitted you to. I cannot remove the pain, ever. I can say I'm sorry, for I am, but... what good does it do?"

"It does loads of good, Severus! I have told you, I understood. You were pained as well. Bad circumstances that you would ask for a kiss again at the Mulcibers!" He huffed in frustration. How many such 'bad circumstances' could there have been? Each one would have driven them deeper down because of his stubbornness, his inability to ask for an explanation for her action. Until... somewhere mid March?

Severus took his time to analyse the news. "I have never heard of such a strange spell," he opined. "Kissing causes a binding, but... having sex without it does not."

"That was how Mum's great-grandmother defined the tradition. Times were hopelessly romantic. We children have indeed entertained the idea... I had never thought it possible," she murmured. Serious again, she raised her voice. "But Severus, there *is* a connection!" She pulled him out of his thoughts. "The kiss manifesting the spell stimulates a desire for physical love, for immediate consummation. I am not sure how strong, but we might not have made it to the foyer of the wedding hall or into hiding at the Mulcibers'. Imagine the humiliation. Anything was better than that." In a resigned way, she finished, "I should not have shrieked like a banshee, but I didn't have time to think more strategically."

Severus' face lost all colour. He turned to leave the room. He felt like running, but all he found himself able to do was tossing a chair at the wall where it hardly left a mark. At least a leg cracked. His inside was in turmoil, in pain, due to the injustice he had submitted her to.

Pacing from the sitting room to his bedroom, he forced himself to a speed that added physical pain to go with the mental one.

He shuddered at the thought of being lust-driven in a throng and was infinitely grateful for her attention. Why had he not trusted her? Would behaviours like this repeat themselves? Could he be a partner if he did not show more consideration, if he rushed into conclusions without asking? She had been more mature than he was. He felt agony in body and soul.

From the sitting room, Ginny observed him apprehensively. Now he stopped at the far end of the bedroom. He moved his hands to his temples, turned. Slowly, he looked up. Their eyes met, he was pleading for... absolution? *Snapes don't plead, do they?* She made a single careful step in his direction.

Exhausted, Severus widened his arms to welcome her in his embrace. It was all he could force his body to, and his mind didn't feel like being creative right now. What would she do?

Ginny made another step, and when his face lightened up, she rushed over and used her physical advantage to push them both on the bed.

Raising his head to avoid lip contact with her, Severus realised that she had saved him from falling from sheer exhaustion. And she did not withdraw. She held him, temple on his chest, allowed him to hold her. Both of them closed their eyes, concentrating on feeling the other, hearing their own breathing, although their faces had to be averted. With a minimum of caresses, they tended to each other's nerves. Minutes passed in the most peaceful silence.

Eventually Ginny looked up and realised that his cheek was wet. He had silently lost some tears. "I spoiled your special day, then I mistreated you in the worst way imaginable," he said hoarsely.

"Severus, Umbridge did that. She has the brains of the toad she resembles. Or she knew and was extra malevolent. One never finishes a wizard wedding with this stupid Muggle idea of *kissing the bride*. Certainly not one with fidelity traditions, but I cannot know if she knew about that; it is more of a Gryffindor-thing. I don't think she did that to the pure-blood couples. She mocked you."

Ginny pushed herself up to look at him. "You know her; you've worked close enough to her. If you had not created any reason for revenge in a whole year's time, I would be very disappointed with you."

He laughed heartily, and she held him close again. They snuggled comfortably. Pulling himself back just a little, Severus asked, "Can we truly do everything else but kiss?"

She stroked along his cheekbone. "Yes, everything. You've noticed this already."

A tentative smirk crossed his features when he asked mischievously, "Can we test it, my love? Right now, for example?" Ginny's heart lost a beat or two at the address. They certainly could, and they did so most thoroughly.

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With her head on the place where his arm met his shoulders, Ginny stared up to the ceiling. "Severus?"

"Hush, don't disturb this moment," he mumbled, and she snuggled closer, carefully turning her head just a bit to not touch his chest with her lips.

A few minutes later, Severus asked, "What was it, Ginevra?"

"The kiss..." she started. "Now that it is clarified..."

"The Stimufidelius kiss... Ginevra, we should not, I cannot..."

"I accept," she interrupted him, not willing to endure an explanation she didn't want to hear. "I accept your reasoning. But I want to be with you...all through the night, I

mean. Even when we can both move. We must not bring our lips into contact with any patch of the other's skin. At least this is what I think, from the story of my grandaunt's wedding... Anyway, long sleeves will do, maybe gloves. But our faces?"

Soon they perused his vast library with this strange problem. They found a lot of interesting spells and became creative in where to apply them. More than one would be usable for their purpose, but none appeared comfortable to apply every night for three long months.

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I'm in eternal debt to Hollime199, Jingjingchiquita and Angelika for their help as my betas!

Getting Closer

Chapter 17 of 35

Ginny and Severus have a little time for themselves, and they discuss wands with Ollivander.

Getting Closer

It was Sunday, and school was to begin with a dinner on Wednesday, January 14th.

Itching for something meaningful, Ginny checked through their stocks in the kitchen. She closed the last cupboard with a nod; they had everything. No need to go shopping, but no chance to go either. Restlessly, she bent over the kitchen table to take a look at the sky through the small, low window. The tiny patch she saw was of the same depressing grey she remembered from the bedroom earlier this morning. After breakfast she had frowned at equally grey clouds from the sitting room.

Before an oppressive feeling could grip her, Ginny rushed out, glaring menacingly at the table when her hip connected painfully with its edge. Feeling Severus' eyes on her, she turned with vehemence.

"What?"

"We will have to find an outlet for your energy. But," he added, pointing to the bathroom, "right now we need to tend to this bruise."

She snorted but followed. An egg-sized bruise wasn't anything beyond regular when one grew up with six elder brothers.

Severus opened a jar, and Ginny recognised its pungent smell from the normal stocks in the Weasley household. Ginny had often helped her mother brew it. Warm hands freed the patch of skin from clothes and applied the ointment. The gentle massage did wonders on her nerves too.

Severus dropped the shirt and stood up. Both hands on her hips, he was holding her close enough for a kiss that she knew would not come. She leaned her forehead on his fully-clad shoulder, face outwards to not accidentally contact his neck. Warmth seeped through her body, and her heart found its way back to a normal pace. Above her, Severus cleared his throat and after confirmatorily pulling her close, he dropped his hands.

He held her back once more, saying, "Remember that Mr Ollivander is our master's prisoner. No open compassion, whatever pitiful state he will be in. He is not a very good Occlumens."

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When Mr Ollivander was brought into their house, Ginny couldn't suppress a scream. His head hanging listlessly, the old man walked with short steps, careful not to overtax his emaciated body. Yet his tormentors had seen fit to gag him and bind his arms as if he were ready to go berserk at any time.

Gregory Goyle, a mindless grin on his face, stomped past the prisoner, nearly knocking him down.

Ginny caught herself when Severus shot her a warning look but was taken aback seeing his stony, neutral face. *How can he be so detached and cold again?* Used to her family's very physical reaction to anger, Ginny had instinctively checked his neck and ears...not a hint of red! She reminded herself that he would not be alive anymore if he had not perfected this ability. *The same will hold for me now.* So she swallowed hard, ignoring the bout of sweat running down her spine, and greeted the party curtly. The minimum twitches in Severus' finger ceased, and Ginny wondered if it was her fairly calm action that had made him relax.

Goyle's stupid grin intensified. He taxed her with his eyes moving up and down, stopping at every curve she possessed. His nostrils widened dangerously with each breath he took. She shuddered, feeling very ready for a shower.

Swiftly, Severus positioned himself between his wife and the lusting teen, feeling heat in his head. He threw menacing glares at the massive bundle of muscles and hormones that was so obviously not equipped with the brains to curb them in. *What is the boy thinking, openly lusting for the wife of his former teacher, an officer in the Death Eater army? Not thinking anything at all,* Severus concluded.

Meanwhile, Goyle Senior banged the old man's bare head and slim shoulders on the table and shelves. He had pushed the prisoner to the chair, prodding extra hard with his artificial arm.

With rapid swishes of his wand, Severus released Ollivander from his physical restrictions while Ginny played the host, offering drinks. She served them in ready-made coloured glasses, which allowed that Ollivander got a nourishing potion instead of the water his guards received. Unfortunately she didn't know of any nasty liquid stored in the kitchen.

Neither of the Goyles ever hid their special interest in Ginny until they left the house. The junior's lusting glare made Ginny cringe, but the open hatred radiating from his father had been equally threatening. He was far from forgetting who had lost him his hand.

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As Severus ushered the unwelcome company out, Ginny bolted for the bathroom. The cold, bare place never invited her to stay for more than was necessary, but she splashed a few gushes of icy water onto her face and over her arms to get rid of the oily, dirty feeling that Gregory Goyle had caused. She patted her face dry, frowning at

the tarnished mirror that could not help her with the task.

Even when she returned to their guest, Ollivander had not stopped fidgeting with the worn-down, sweaty and muddy clothes he wore. His eyes focused for short moments only, and then his face showed a wary expression again.

"Severus, why don't you help our guest to freshen up while I prepare an early lunch?" Ginny asked, chastising herself that she had cared for her own needs first.

With the help of a stomach aid potion, Mr Ollivander ate even more than Severus, and Ginny quickly created an impromptu snack of cheese, fruit and biscuits. Both men were obviously tired afterwards, so Ginny suggested that they take a short rest. As they slept, she retreated to the kitchen, preparing an extra-large dinner, including what had been meant to be eaten during the next few days.

Refreshed, the men sat down to discuss the use of two wands. Severus invited Ginny to join them, which Ollivander took in with a curious look.

Eventually, he even wanted to inspect Ginny's wand, which she handed him reluctantly. His pale eyes might have lost their capacity to fix you with a simple stare, as Harry and Ron had described it, yet, this was him, the most famous and respected wandmaker on the British Isles. "A fine, old piece you've got there, young lady. Undoubtedly my grandfather's making."

Ginny swallowed. She did not need a reminder of just how Albert Flint had laughed at the old-fashioned funnel-shaped handle and all the scratches. She still considered it a friend that worked wonderfully for her. Mum's grandmother had given it to her personally on her deathbed. Ollivander continued, "Ten inches, cherry wood. With a core of Unicorn hair." He swished it and procured a bright-blue cornflower. "Ah, it's Spanish, hand-tamed Unicorn. The wand is well kept, too. Yet, after all these years it will benefit considerably from soaking in lion kidney grease and polishing with soft cotton cloth," he advised her. "Then it will be in a fine state to start school. I will be there on the first day. The first-years get wands at school. I've been producing a lot for them these days."

Shaking his head, he related the meagre work conditions he had at the Goyles'. "Take dragon heartstrings: they need to soak between three and over four hours, till they just turn blue. But these ignorants hardly let me investigate the process. Yet it is of course my fault if ingredients are wasted or hexes swerve or suffer astigmatism, when wide blocks tend to wobble or twirl."

"What else goes into wands, Mr Ollivander? Mine has Unicorn Hair, as has Charlie's old one that Ron used as well."

"Your brothers' wand had hair from a Siberian herd of wild Unicorns. Gives a very different temperament than what you have here. It was snapped, I heard. What a barbaric act, snapping a wand!" Despite his weak state, he managed to berate her for her brother's deeds, piercing her with a look so that she cringed. Maybe he had not lost his edge after all?

"It was not deliberate. The Unicorn hair was showing already anyway," Ginny said. As his eyebrows lifted in question, she felt an urge to defend her family. "It is really no surprise considering what this wand had gone through. Its first owner, my father's great-uncle Baldwin, wasn't known for being a caring person. Charlie, our elder brother, has always been an outdoor type and gave it hard times, too. Mum once admitted to Dad that it was amazing what Ron pressed out of it in his first year."

"Not that I ever sold any polish or wand grease to any Weasley," Ollivander said sardonically.

To lead the discussion away from her family, Ginny rapidly asked, "If the Unicorns differ so much, do you also prepare their hair differently to make a wand core, sir?"

Ollivander took the hint and roughly sketched out how to prepare Unicorn hair, what he did not like about Veela hair, and what a pity it was that the last mummified founds of the extinct Magic Brown Swans had been exploited in the 18th century. "Their thigh bones were said to make for fine wands, especially filled with hair of the mane of a Manticore. Manticores' tails also deliver stings which are often said to go well with tropical nut trees, or even peach. Yet, I've seen Scandinavian wands combining Arctic birch with Manticore tail-stings, an interesting combination of temperaments. But my own experiences are limited."

"There are wand shafts not made from wood?" Ginny leaned forward, eager to hear his answer.

"Oh, yes," the wandmaker said and named magical animals whose horns were known to provide for shafts.

With growing interest, Ginny followed the statements and explanations of the old wandmaker. So many steps to prepare a wand core and so much to consider for the shaft...wooden or animal! Trees cut in the waxing moon make for stiffer, brittle, but strong wands. If the tree was cut shortly after the full moon, the wood was best processed to become bendable, even swishy, and the wand suited extremely well for Charms or Transfigurations. A tree cut in the last quarter of the lunar cycle was useless for the wandmaker.

Ollivander looked from one of his hosts to the other, then rested his eyes on Severus as he continued, "Trees felled and splintered by lightning provide us with wands of amazingly short reaction times, but they sense the mood of the caster, requiring them to temper their caprices." He sat stiffly as the implication of what he had just said was slowly sinking in.

Ginny mentally noted that this would be the ideal type of wood for a warriors' arsenal of wands.

She turned to see Severus frown and say, "I assume no one asked you for such details when Narcissa went off to purchase wood for you."

"They did not," the old wandmaker replied, sinking back into the armchair as tension left his body. He turned to Ginny, saying, "Your brother Charlie was destined for such a wand to work with dragons."

"At the Dragon sanctuary, they recommended that he switch to a dragon core," Ginny mused. "I didn't know anything about the new shaft."

Silence wrapped each of them in their own thoughts.

"I do have a few such wands, if you want to have a look, sir?" Ollivander noted after a period of deliberation. "It need not shy away from comparison to the two you have. Box tree, I assume, would suit you, juniper possibly, or a nut. I was also wondering if the young lady could use a secondary wand of waxing moon wood. She might be the type for rowan, birch or maple. A wild Unicorn, but from a warm place, South American, maybe Central African. Or Bornean," he mused.

Severus did not reply or move.

"Sir, why has the Dark Lord never changed *his* wand?" Ginny asked to steer around this suggestion, which clearly was uncomfortable for Severus. "After his rebirth, when he could not win against Harry, he would have tried, would he not?"

"He would have gladly. However, a wand of phoenix feather does not easily tolerate a second wand. Phoenix feather is a very strong and peculiar wand core. Using such a wand for years, tens of years in his case, trains your magic in special ways. You cannot expect to benefit from abandoning this wand type and taking up another one."

"Once phoenix feather, always phoenix feather, sir?" Ginny asked, noticing belatedly that Severus would have had a comment as well.

"Indeed. I am myself of course able to work basic magic with almost every wand; this comes with my profession. But I would never try to defend myself with phoenix feather. With each powerful spell, the phoenix feather binds its witch or wizard even more to itself. The Dark Lord could not use any wand other than one from the same bird. As we know, the only such wand in existence is not available."

Every little bit the old man told her just made Ginny just ask more. "Don't other wand cores do that?"

"Apparently not, or to a much lesser extent," the old man mused.

Severus stroked along his own wand. Ginny smirked at him, knowing full well how he still blamed his wand for not accepting a brother.

"Dumbledore had a phoenix as his familiar," Ginny murmured more to herself than the men. "A Unicorn is not ready to make a familiar, and Charlie's stories would only encourage Hagrid to try with a dragon. Are phoenixes after all more affiliated to mankind than the other two?"

Ollivander cocked his head and stroked his chin as he regarded her. "You have a sharp mind, Mrs Snape. This could be the reason, although we have no proof of it."

Why was the old man giving them all this information? Could they trust him and assort it to the information they would forward to the Order? Or was he lying deliberately? Ginny would so have liked to hear Severus' opinion. But she preferred not asking now if all of this had been new to him, or if possibly he had discussed it all with Dumbledore or the wandmaker before.

To keep the agreeable talk going, she asked for more details on wands, and the old man was glad for an attentive audience. The ordinary wood polishes were grease- or wax-based. The latter were, however, not used for swordfish wands or Unicorn horn. While kidney fat, especially from lions, was usually a good choice, the core of Manticore tail-stings forbid grease of felines since the Manticore is a cursed, lion-related creature. Likewise with a core of Hippogriff feather.

Ginny had never heard that such cores could be used at all, and she said so. Surprisingly, now Severus cleared his throat, but since Ollivander was ready to reply, he did not interfere more.

"The material for cores can come from various beasts," they were told. "But the Hippogriff has to give his feather deliberately and preferably donate it personally to the future owner of the wand. This means that I cannot stock such a wand, but I *can* make one on special order. It leaves me with guesswork as to which wood to use for the shaft, and I have made some mistakes when I was young, producing wands that no one could operate. The last person I made such a wand for was... ah, maybe I need not tell you."

Severus exhaled loudly, and Ginny smirked at him, not shy or reserved in the sight of his discomfort. She took in his glare with a nonchalant shrug.

Looking pensive, Mr Ollivander added that the best results were achieved from a donor beast with the same colour as the hair of the wizard. Sirius Black's hair had greyed beyond his age in Azkaban, which had served him well for his wand.

After the digression to his arch-nemesis, Severus put a halt on the discussion, and the two men finally focused on the practical work with two wands.

Ginny retreated to the bedroom, once again with only books to keep her company. She snuggled on the bed that was finally really their common place, propping her head on her arm, and wondered at the chance that had transpired earlier. Was it a chance at all? How could they convey this information to the Order? The members of the Order, especially the dearly-missed, redheaded ones, filled her head that was suddenly too heavy for her arm. Before she even opened her Muggle novel, she had succumbed to sleep.

A high whistling sound and a bang brought Ginny back from a strange dream about wands and unicorns and Charlie. *Agumenti! Scorgify!* came Severus' impatient voice from the sitting room, accompanied by a smell of scorched leather. As she opened the door, Severus was concentrating hard on Vanishing the chair he had smashed the other day with his new wand. It flickered as if challenging him, but when he regrouped and chanted the spell again, the rickety old thing was gone. *He's still hanging on O.W.L.s level*, she noted, passing behind him.

Ginny perused the shelves on Herbology until she found *The Magic in Trees and Bushes*. The book was not focusing on wand making, but Ollivander had also referred to magical properties of the base material. Once again sprawled on the bed cover, Ginny found background to the wandmaker's observations and even more streaks of trees he had not mentioned in their discussion.

Did he know all that and consider it in the process of manufacturing his wands? No, having worked with the material for decades, he would intuitively assess the material as his hands worked on its raw shape. All the abstract, academic knowledge would merely support his experience. He had only known her for minutes when he had suggested certain shafts and cores for her, and he might not have more time with a customer either. Ginny wished she had seen the tape measure that had so annoyed Ron and startled Harry. With a smile, she remembered Percy looking scandalised that Fred and George had made it measure around their joined heads and from Fred's knee to George's armpit. 'How will you ever be able to work with wands that aren't *perfectly* adjusted?'

Most likely, Mr Ollivander had not relied on such data at all, even if Percy had noted down his own and tried to make sense of them.

Ginny imagined the wandmaker in his shop, serving excited first-years. Would he detect in what house they might belong? Were Muggle-borns different from pure-bloods? Probably each Muggle parent reacted differently when their excited offspring suddenly made a stick of wood emit sparks or even flames. With a giggle, she imagined Mr Creevey's face when Mr Ollivander had to Rennervate Mrs Creevey.

Would Ollivander imagine the future owner when he soaked the Dragon heartstring or carved the shaft wood?

As Ginny re-entered the sitting room, she burst with questions, but whatever she asked, she could not get more than a raised eyebrow as a reply. Both men were adamantly sticking to commonplace topics.

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When the same boorish guards crashed into the little house to fetch Ollivander for the night, he walked steadily and was more energised so that even Gregory Goyle lost his immediate interest in Ginny. His father looked from Severus to Ollivander in a mix of apprehension and fury. He slowly opened his mouth, giving Ginny a lot of time to wonder what he might eventually say.

Severus beat him easily with a vehement remark. "From now on, Ollivander is to get three square meals a day. Fresh water at his free disposal and three cups of warm tea and two pieces of fruit. He takes this potion for the night and sleeps seven hours consecutively. You know that I will see him on Thursday morning, and I don't recommend that you deviate from this order."

Goyle growled something about Severus' right to direct commands at him, but he averted his eyes while doing so.

"In a dry, clean bed, warm cover, fresh air circulating, you understand?" Severus said in addition. "We want the man to work meticulously with a steady hand, if you know what I'm talking about."

A vein throbbed at Goyle's temple, and he bolstered himself against every word he received, as if he could defy them like a storm. While Ginny wholeheartedly agreed with Severus, she shuddered at how much his reprimands infuriated both Goyles.

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Finally alone, Ginny asked, "Severus, why do the Death Eaters need Mr Ollivander alive? He has thousands of wands in stock, hasn't he? It's what Ron told me about the shop."

"He had. Past tense. Each and every one of them was spelled to go off five days after being stolen. Some of them perforated the hands or even less valuable body parts of their illegitimate owners with needle-sharp splinters, and the rest caused mayhem in the Sands' and the Parkinsons' cellar, providing us with toothpicks to last a century."

Ginny almost grinned at the sinister joke, but Severus' face halted her.

After a deliberate pause, he added, "It had been almost too late for Ollivander to survive. He would have been dead had our master not suspected him to be in the Order

and had him questioned."

"I suppose the Ollivanders had planned to be dead at such a moment," Ginny noted drily. Severus merely raised his eyebrow in confirmation.

"Why did Goyle call you an 'ungrateful git'? What does he expect your gratitude for?"

"You."

"Oh, Merlin! Severus, be careful and watch your back when he's around."

"I hardly need the reminder."

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They went for a long walk that same evening, and Ginny could not help dancing around Severus like a young dog. She easily made three times the number of Severus' straight, measured steps, and she did not care much for the puddles in her path. Her trainers and trousers were soaked when they returned. She charmed them dry and clean in the bathroom, happily warbling a tune by Celestina Warbeck, the Singing Sorceress. Severus regarded her with an unreadable expression on his face, which she blatantly ignored. At the passage where the backup banshees tune in, Ginny shrieked two octaves higher than was comfortable to her own ears and didn't even start when the air rippled from the magic of a sound-blocker and the bathroom door slammed shut.

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Very early on Monday morning, Severus woke his wife, insisting it was a wonderful time to rise and providing a quick but hearty meal.

The day was just dawning when he Apparated them into the heart of a misty woodland. Ginny, only half awake, clutched her arms around herself, shivering in the fresh air. She frowned at the lone path that disappeared somewhere in the haze in both directions.

With the same mock-cheery voice he used when revealing a specially complex and tricky potion, Severus suggested, "Let's follow this trail and give you some meaningful exercise."

He headed off at a brisk pace.

At its first hairpin bend, Severus left the broad and moderately sloped path to take the direct way up. After a few steps, he invitingly gestured upwards. "After you."

The rough terrain became so steep and rocky that Ginny had to pull herself up using her hands and knees, constantly feeling Severus' challenging look on her neck. Reaching a small ridge, she straightened herself and inspected her reddish palms. With a pop, Severus Apparated to her side, smirking.

"You're cheating," she protested.

"I'm still recuperating, and I have to secure the terrain," Severus countered nonchalantly. However, he reinforced her shoes with doubled soles and thicker, longer shafts.

When they reached the top more than three hours later, Ginny's knees protested as she stretched, and her arms sported several scratches. However, the morning sun had dissolved the mist, and the clouds granted them a few moments of bright light. Quietly working her shoulders, Ginny took in the magnificent view. She sat down for a moment to gather her thoughts and overlook the sea of mountain tops, gleaming in the light. Severus joined her, naming a few of them, pointing out that theirs was the highest in the area. Their route had made ascending Stoatshead Hill a relaxing walk, but then there had not really been a reward on its top either.

Almost an hour later, a group of young Muggles in garishly coloured clothes sporting lots of drawstrings and pockets arrived, frowning at them in disbelief. Severus scowled back. He quickly pulled Ginny up and led her around a high rock from which they Disapparated.

Once showered and fed, Ginny felt a lot less edgy than in the previous days. Having filled her lungs with fresh air and exercised her whole body, she collapsed onto the sofa.

"I don't mind if you clean your shoes, but refrain from wearing your vocal chords thin, if you could." Obediently, Ginny trotted into the cold bathroom, her soaked, dirt-encrusted shoes dangling from tired hands.

All too soon, Severus had to answer his master's call, and Ginny's heart constricted in anxiety. He calmed her down, assuring her that the Goyles would not be present for the meeting. Together they reconfirmed the wards before she installed herself in the sitting room for an undetermined length of time. Despite her anxiety, she fell into a restless slumber.

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When Severus returned, he strode directly to the bedroom, not looking left or right. He slammed the door closed without a look or a word for Ginny.

Now, this will not do, I will not bear his temper. Determined, Ginny stalked over and rapped sharply. "Severus! Open this door." There was no answer, but Ginny would not have this. "Open *now!* I've had *enough* of you ignoring me to last a lifetime!"

With a click, the door opened slightly, and she pushed it wide. The man before her looked almost sorry as he stared at her, his arms hanging down as if they had no purpose.

"Severus," Ginny started more calmly, reaching out a hand but not touching him, "tell me: was it *me* who annoyed you so?" He merely stared at a point on her shoulder. "Then *I* don't deserve this treatment, correct?"

He minutely cocked his head to acknowledge her and motioned her gently to the sofa, where he burst out, "I was his lab Kneazle for this spell for the simple reason that my magic is so strong. He had calculated I'd withstand it, whatever power he applied. And he knew that you would be the most loyal and caring wife!"

"Well spotted," she noted with biting sarcasm, lifting her chin.

Severus' anger rapidly melted at this reply so pregnant with meanings. "Yes," he softly confirmed. "You were and are loyal and caring, although I cannot understand why. All the more I admire how you managed."

Good, but now that you're there, you can do better, Ginny thought and tilted her head expectantly.

"Thank you."

She offered him a wide smile.

"I should not have let out my anger on you."

"Severus," Ginny started, lifting her hand to his chin. "I know that there are plenty of things you cannot tell me. Please, don't close me out when there isn't a need."

After dinner, they arranged themselves on the sofa again, Ginny leaning onto his chest. Looking over her head into the full moon, Severus asked, "Does your brother have

a house of his own? Where does Lupin live?"

Ginny stared at the silver orb as well. "I cannot answer either question, but Tonks and Remus are finally living together. We met them at Headquarters or Hogwarts only." He nodded. The less a single member of the Order knew the better. "Bill and Fleur were still searching for a home."

"Remus and Bill are out there this night, and maybe even Frederic had to join," Ginny continued sadly. She felt Severus' features stiffening.

Tears welled out of her eyes but she kept silent. Eventually, however, Severus seemed to notice, since he sneaked his arm around her, saying, "If they have a place that is not under a Fidelius Charm, we can send them potions next month." She relaxed a little, and Severus decided to tell her more since he already relied on her abilities in Occlumency. "You might as well know... The two men...no names!...are testing my improvements for Wolfsbane. I firstly want to reduce the sheer amount a werewolf needs by concentrating it and making it dissolve more slowly in the body. I'm hopeful I can eventually get werewolves down to three applications a month. It seems I end up with a jelly rather than a liquid."

With each sentence, more of her tension left until Ginny felt soothed. Despite his bony frame, she snuggled into her husband's arms and laced her fingers with his in comfort.

For good measure, Severus took the last tissue-healing potion as he went to bed, although he grimaced at the sweetish, sticky mass.

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The pair wanted to spend their last free day simply enjoying their renewed health and companionship. They paid the Muggle town a visit. For the first time in her life, Ginny visited a Muggle museum. She learned about the town's history and the development of the Muggle society. One section explained the long road from the arbitrary brewing of a medieval alchemist to the systematic work of modern chemists. Severus studied the explanations with glee in his face.

Outside, Ginny voiced her thoughts. "Now I see why Colin and Hermione often say wizards are living in the middle-ages. Five hundred years ago, all literate people used quills and parchment. We still use quills and parchment, but Muggles have developed things further. We use fire extensively, but we haven't tamed it, as they called it, and we dropped out with eceltricity completely."

Overlooking her problem with the word, Severus corrected her reasoning. "The Hogwarts Express uses a steam engine, which counts as tamed fire, but mainly you are right." His calloused hands scratching harshly over the stubbles of his beard, he considered her. "My question, or maybe my answer, is: How much of what they have is worthwhile? How happy does it make them?" When she did not quite understand, he added, "Does it solve problems or does it create new ones?"

"We've got a bunch of problems as it is," she could not help retorting before she became silent, considering the questions in earnest.

They passed a fast food store reading *Deli* and selling very, very long sandwiches.

"This looks good. Shall we?" Severus asked nonchalantly, enjoying Ginny's utter surprise far too much for her liking.

"It's not where you ate some weeks ago? Hmm, I'd like the goat cheese and dried tomatoes. Do you have... Coke? Err..." Ginny had to search for the word of Dean's favourite drink. "Diet Coke?" She was more than a bit shocked at the colour of what she received. What edible fruit could possibly be this brown?

Surreptitiously, Severus wrapped his wand in a handkerchief to dry a bench in a park, and they watched children hunting pigeons or riding a variety of vehicles of which Ginny could name only bikes. *This world is so foreign to me. How often does Severus enjoy such Muggle things? How does he feel eating out of paper, without table or fork?*

Cars drove by, and the more monstrous they looked, the louder they roared. Suddenly a car behind her sounded familiar, and Ginny jumped up to see a Ford Anglia, polished to make it shine like a new pin. She wistfully followed it make its way around a corner. Seeing the scowl on Severus' face made her laugh. "Are you still angry that they weren't expelled? Their trip was far from funny, you know," she said. "Baked in the sun, their tongues sticky from toffees and nothing but clouds to look at."

"Hm," was all Severus had to say.

After the first few bites, she took up their conversation again. "What did you think of the different classrooms in the school museum? Muggle teachers don't look down on their pupils from a platform anymore. Dean always suspected that you hide something behind your high lecterns. The students also do a lot of group work, and they learn to lead and to work together in 'projects'. We didn't do anything like that."

Severus looked around before he replied, "Group work in Potions...Merlin forbid! Two on a cauldron was enough of a mess even if one of them could actually read. I shudder to imagine Mr Creevey, Miss Sands plus two more dunces arbitrarily throwing badly ground beetles' eyes and chucking a whole pipette of crocodile gall instead of two drops into the *same* cauldron where a slop that should have been nicely diced toad liver has already thrown the brew out of balance. Half the amount of cauldrons, but sixteen fold the potential for an explosion...this sandwich isn't bad, but the coffee's a disaster! Defence was not suitable for group work either. Imagine three Slytherins on three Gryffindors...what's that you're drinking?" he added and took her paper mug. "If allowed, the whole group takes aim at one and the same opponent, and I can haul him to Madam Pomfrey...ugh, too sweet!" He returned the drink and focused on his tuna sandwich.

After a while, Severus continued, suddenly pensive. "As for leadership skills, you might start learning this all too soon. Or, rather, obeying a leader how so ever questionable his commands and his motivation," he added in a low voice.

"We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control," Ginny quoted the song that had played in the museum.

"I do remember that one. Had it come up ten years earlier, my Muggle peers' parents would have accused me of distributing inflammatory thoughts," Severus meditated, violently creasing up the empty wrapping and chucking it deftly into the bin. He turned himself to face her, holding both her shoulders. "The song has a point, though. Remember it, Ginevra." He checked left and right before he rubbed his cheek on hers, lips twisted sideways to avoid touch. Head held up again, he whispered into her hair, causing little shivers to run down her spine. "Take the education of facts, but strive hard to identify where the border to thought control is. And, Ginevra, this is *very* important: keep your thoughts to yourself at all times. Close your mind! Spinner's End is safe. I've spent a dozen or more years on spy reflection around it. The Academy, however, will have walls with ears and eyes. *Nothing* is secret there. The same holds for the grounds." He looked into her eyes, then drew her closer again. "Trust your privacy in a bathroom or our privacy in our quarters least of all." Forcing her to stay seated, he made sure she digested the advice as well as the sandwich.

They passed a huge building of glass and concrete with wide stairs in the front...a sports centre. Excited, Ginny hopped on her toes asking, "Can we have a look, Severus? I've seen all these gadgets and equipments in the shop, but I have no idea what they are used for. Please?"

They peeked into several large courts with two people using different rackets and balls. Severus knew the principle of these games, but he was at a loss at their variations. Red floor, green floor, wooden floor. In one game, the walls reflected the ball. The players used balls in different sizes, mostly round, but one game required an oddly slow, funnel-shaped gadget with feathers.

Next was a room with equipment that didn't look much different from the torture chamber of the historical museum. Well, these instruments had more padding than those in the museum. Mostly men were in there, sitting or lying, pushing or pulling enormous weights up or apart. Their heads and necks were swollen with strain, and most of them had a rather dangerous look on their sweat-dripping faces. The bare shoulders of some must have been greased the way they shone. A few yards away from the door, Ginny murmured, "I don't want to meet one of those in a dark corner, and even less without my wand. I wonder what Muggle women do."

In a square hall with padded floor, people in white, loose-fitting garments and coloured belts artfully threw each other around. Ginny stood transfixed at the smooth movements. Here were mostly women, and Severus told her that these kinds of training were advertised to women for self defence. "Look at her! See, how she pulls him

further and manoeuvres him over her shoulder? That way she can cause a stronger, larger man to fall using his own momentum as a start. But I agree, keep your wand ready all times." *Better even, stay with me*, he added in his thoughts.

Turning to leave, they met sweaty basketball girls talking and giggling on their way to the dressing rooms. In another room, a group of teeny girls in very short skirts and light shoes flashed around. Their exercise required hot music on...at least for Severus...a maddening level, and they bent their bodies gracefully...or shamelessly, depending on who you would ask. Ginny could not detect any competition element in what they did, but was she mesmerised at their synchronised, fluid movement. The trainer interrupted them every so often when they lifted and threw each other, giving them quite a dressing-down at times, but every time, they regrouped and tried again.

"Well, I can see that they're doing a good job there, but what's the purpose of it all?" Ginny wondered.

Severus shook his head. He appeared to be quite embarrassed at so much exposed flesh and eventually drew her away and out of the building where he deeply inhaled the fresh winter air. "We'll have to stock up on ink," he said and steered her to a smaller-than-average shop in a small alleyway.

"We're looking for calligraphy ink," he declared to the elderly assistant. "Two pots red, one black, and one sepia."

When Ginny took a curious look at the expensive quill-like writing implements in glass drawers, the man beamed at her. "Are you devoted to the elegant art as well, young lady?"

Severus, a smirk on his face, replied before she could. "She is doing her best. While she masters a fine and regular roundhand with modest flourishes, she isn't too much devoted to orthography, which, you will agree, does disturb the eye."

Ginny scowled at him. The dozen or more spelling mistakes in almost every essay she had delivered had certainly cost her a few points in Potions, and him half a pot of ink. Professors McGonagall and Sinistra had often admonished her with a stern face, but the other teachers had been less insistent.

"That's the film-age and the computer-age, sir. I see it with my own girls. They can hardly be bothered to read...how could they develop a feeling for spelling? They aren't bothered either, because their PC flags most of their mistakes.

"Anything else, sir; nibs or ink pens, papers?"

"Another time, maybe."

"Very well, sir."

A tailor was next on Severus' shopping list, and Ginny noted with shock that he had ordered a set of his very familiar teaching robes. Severus paid the irritated, elderly Asian man correctly, then flicked his wand, "*Obliviate*."

Finally they had a look at the local library. Severus found interest in a book on Chemistry and one on Molecular Physics. From one of his pockets that Ginny knew to have been empty, he drew a stiff card that the woman accepted easily.

Ginny took two cooking books home and one on astronomy. "Enjoy your books, but remember to return them by February fourth."

Back home, they stashed their purchases away.

"I'm not fond of returning to a classroom of twenty dunces behind bubbling cauldrons," Severus admitted. Ginny only touched his arm in reply. She easily guessed how he had hated the lessons at Hogwarts, and especially grading the essays.

To celebrate their new understanding, they visited a cosy Indian restaurant for dinner, where Ginny was soon fascinated with a bizarre moving waterfall picture on the wall next to their table. *Hasn't Dean said that Muggles have stills only?* She moved her head to look at it from different angles, and she prodded to cause a reaction that didn't come. In fact, there wasn't any animated soul, human or animal in the picture and the monotonous flow of water had a soporific effect, if any, but every so often her eyes were drawn back to the tacky thing. Severus tried his best to conceal his annoyance but became monosyllabic and finally fell silent.

Back home, Severus looked somewhat apprehensive, his face expressionless, but his twitching middle fingers showing his nervousness.

"What is it?"

He fidgeted a little longer before he softly asked, "Did it feel like a date? At least a little bit?"

"It was a most wonderful date, Severus," Ginny confirmed, making sure again to have body contact. Severus liked being touched, but he wasn't giving it freely and he would never be asking for it.

"I... was not the best entertainer."

"*What?* I saw and heard so many new things. Why would you think... Oh, you mean the restaurant." Her voice fell *Damn, I have broken the charms there. How can I make amends for that? What sort of approach to use with this quiet, reserved man, who is just about to thaw when we're together?*

The direct way, she decided. It was a Gryffindor approach, admittedly, but then at least she would behave as he would expect her to.

"I should not have stared at that odd waterfall the whole time. But I understand a little better now what you asked, whether it makes them happy or not. It did not, in the end, give me anything. It only distracted me from you, for which I'm sorry. This was all so new to me.

"A fine day it was!" she added with feeling.

"There are not many to come in the near future."

"Let's treasure this day then."

Leaning back on the settee with a glass of elf-made wine and pumpkin juice, respectively, Severus and Ginny had a look at their Muggle books. They could not take these books to the Academy. "Oh, but Severus, what books will I need for school? I will also need robes, parchment, quills, and all Potions essentials." How could she have ignored that?

Severus calmed her and noted lightly that certainly none of the Potions material would be a problem. "Draco is to come tomorrow morning. I will have him stock us both on stationary. I'm running low myself, and I have no clue what the Academy will provide. We will have to find a solution for your books, though. I do not even know them," he admitted. "I'll speak to the teachers. I do have a good feeling about the teacher of Defence and Potions."

"And here I thought he is an especially strict one."

"In some respects, he is." His eyes had got a strange sparkle at her baiting. He held his hands out, and when she took them, he pulled her up. "At the moment he feels the need for a bath, but does not feel like enjoying it alone," he declared, gently starting to tug at her sweater.

"Severus!" Ginny tried for an indignant voice, but at the same time her hands reached for the collar buttons of his shirt. "Your Muggle clothes are more handy than your

wizard attire, I dare say!"

"I will be properly dressed in the Academy, make no mistake!"

"Pity," she answered, slapping his chest and then, with a smirk, his yet to be undressed buttock.

"Mrs Snape, some more decorum if you would!"

Merlin, it felt so good to be on friendly terms again!

:.:.*.*:

Obediently, Ginny waited outside the bathroom. She fetched their nightclothes and deposited them next to the bathroom, because the sitting room was the only one that was permanently heated. Upon Severus' call, she quickly disrobed and entered the room that was warmer than ever. The mirror and the tiles had steamed up. He lifted his witch into the clear water and suggested, "Let me wash your back first." He stepped in as well, took up a flannel and knelt down.

Ginny was delighted to note that he had foregone his harsh soap, but used hair shampoo for this intimate ceremony. His hands were doing magic on the tension in her shoulders and along her spine. Kinks she had not even noticed dissolved under his caress. Ginny lay perfectly still, supporting her forehead with her arms, eyes closed and humming one of the hits she might have heard in a shop. Strong fingers held her hipbones as his thumbs ground into the small of her back. After he had reached her lower cheeks, he started working himself up again and continued on her collarbones.

Severus leaned out for his wand and repeated the warming spell on his bare chest. "If you would turn round now, my lady," he ordered and added another two inches of hot water.

Ginny felt as if her warm and soft body could not possibly muster the strength to rise and turn, but as her torso met the cold air, she rapidly obliged, turned and descended back into the warmth, facing him and shivering in the anticipation of what was to come.

However, Severus stared at her and did not move for a long time, although his chest got all goose-pimply. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You are crying."

Indeed, his gentle touches had called tears into her eyes. "I'm relaxing, Severus."

"And that makes you shed tears because..." When she did not reply, he completed the sentence himself, staring into the room. "... you have not been relaxed for weeks."

Ginny reached up for the cloth, but Severus had caught himself already. "No, today it's your turn."

He gently washed her right arm from fingertips, via the elbow to her shoulder, and Ginny closed her eyes again. He did the same to her left arm before he continued over her cleavage. As Severus gently washed her unequal breasts, her humming broke, and soon he shifted sideways to hide his body's reaction from her, although she had not opened her eyes again.

Severus continued downwards to her hips and thighs, purposefully staying on the outer side, keeping away from the intimate region. A groan of frustration answered this sin of omission. Severus' breath hitched.

When he reached her knees, he lowered his upper body into the warm water, too. The tub was not really big enough for him, and the problem of avoiding lip contact did not make it easier. Yet, Severus did not stop until he had cleaned one toe after the other. Ginny opened her eyes again to stare at him in wonder.

"You're all clean now. Please give me a minute. It's been too long that I was deprived of handling my own body."

"Give a moment for my hair," Ginny replied and reached for the shampoo. Feeling goosebumps erupt on her arms, she did a quick job lathering it and dived under to rid herself from the foam. She knelt and rinsed it with the shower, using as little of the remaining warm water as possible.

"Here's the shampoo, Severus. It *does* do a better job than your rough soap," she hinted with a smirk. She stood, froze and left the tub rapidly. Grabbing a towel, she promised, "I will have tea ready when you come."

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On their last morning off duty, they went on the forest hunt together with Draco. Severus had grown stronger every day and was almost back to normal. They returned panting and sweating, but oddly satisfied. As Severus had expected, his master called for him just after lunch.

Meanwhile, Ginny and Draco talked about the prospect of starting life as pupils again. School had not been a topic for half a year now. It would be hard to go back to sitting on benches, listening, writing, forcing one's brains into receiving, sorting and memorising academical information.

"There are no houses and no house feuds," Draco said, appearing relieved by the thought.

"Won't you be bored?" Ginny teased lightly.

"I doubt it. The academic achievements are all that counts, and they are setting high standards. Theo has been cramming his brains with Potions theory for weeks. His nerves stand on ends."

Draco had already met the new Herbology teacher, a witch not to be crossed. "I bet she has her own ideas of which plants are worth learning about at all. We've been swotting up on last year's topics together, but I heard that Durmstrang is far ahead of us."

"Durmstrang?"

"Haven't you heard?" Draco stared at the floor as he explained, "Some of our, er ... most active parents had their children educated over there to avoid certain influences, but now they will transfer to the Academy. They have been assessed because it wasn't clear where to include them. They, at least, know English."

"What do you mean?"

"Others transfer as well. A set of like-minded people from the east of the continent have also joined our master. To prove their loyalty, they were *encouraged* to transfer their children to the Academy. Some parents were most eager, even if they hardly understand what they're told. How can their children follow our lessons?"

"Those who visited three years ago..."

"... were seventeen and still had trouble when we spoke normally. They sat with us, remember? Some of these transfers are eleven. In lessons, they're supposed to understand every word, not just grasp the general topic."

"Oh, I'm sure they'll manage. English is easy, not like French!"

"Have you discussed this with a French?"

Ginny huffed. "Like who? Fleur?"

Draco didn't reply.

"Well, whatever you say. I'm myself worrying mostly about my own status. I've hardly discussed it with Severus. I'll sit with you for meals and in the classrooms, but live in the teacher-corridor."

Unpacking the pieces of cake his mother had packed for the Snapes, Draco promised he would keep contact and try to make others comfortable with her. He also made a mental note to add more stationery to his trunk.

Severus returned, refusing to report. "It is nothing important; interesting nevertheless. Draco, I wish that you keep your eyes open at the Academy. Teachers, students, elves, everyone. *Do not* contact me while we're there. *Do not* take notes. I discussed with the Dark Lord that we will continue our training chases here. Schedule allowing, you will come every Tuesday morning."

Turning to his wife, he continued. "The same holds for you. We discussed security already. Ginevra..." he stepped closer, "... you are at risk over there, suspicious to everyone and far too often on your own. Please rein in your curiosity. *No* active research, *no* bold and reckless nosing! Yet, you could detect patterns: who seeks which contacts? You might find people avoiding certain others. Simple as it sounds, it all adds up." He regarded them both with seriousness. "We are in a good position, one teacher, one O.W.L.s student, one in sixth form college."

Draco took the statement easily and left for home with a mere nod, while Ginny still digested the idea. She had a task! She, Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape, the Dark Lord's right hand, were a team. She smiled.

After tea and cake, they dressed for school, packed four bags and added Severus' broom. Looking at the pile, Ginny cursed her age that had her miss the Apparition lessons. With a complex back and forth, they hauled it all to their favourite Apparition point. Severus Apparated two bags to the Academy, not without strict directives what to do in case... He returned within minutes and had Simon Slash, the Duelling teacher, in tow. The young man grinned wide. After being introduced, he suggested, "I take these bags and the broom, you take your treasure." Severus snatched the broom himself, and with a shrug, Slash was off.

"Nice man," Ginny said.

"It seems so, but remember the song and all." He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her. "Come now."

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A/N:

Let me thank my betas, Angelika and Jingjingchiquita for brushing up the language, substituting un-British concepts with British ones and providing really nice ideas. They were also asking me a lot of very justified questions that made me add clarifications. All this took a lot of time, please understand.

Mr Ollivander describes the wands of Harry's parents similarly to what I make him explain here, although he doesn't discuss the moon phases. We also know that Ron has Charlie's old wand, but we have no clues why that is. If we accept that the wand searches his wizard, it isn't obvious for me why Charlie would exchange his. So I invent that logic here.

Astigmatism is a collective term for various faults a wand might show in focusing spells. To hide the original context, multi-talented wizards introduced the term astigmatism to describe similar, but non-magical faults of lenses.

Back to School

Chapter 18 of 35

Meeting the headmistress, new students and teachers at Salazar's Academy.

JKR has brought us the wonderful world of Harry Potter. Nothing you recognise can possibly be mine.

Back to School

Ginny needed less than ten minutes to explore their quarters at Salazar's Academy perfectly: there was only one room, combining the functions of a bedroom, a sitting room and an office. It was a shame for a single teacher's quarter already, and they were supposed to live here together! The office-part was hardly a third the size of a Hogwarts office. A set of thin, oaken, folded screens of scarcely 6 feet height shielded a minute private bedroom from direct sight.

Ginny sighed.

Behind the pitiful room divider their truly private quarter offered an armchair, a single bed as wide as Severus' at home, and one bedside table. The space in the wardrobe and shelves certainly sufficed for one person, but Severus' subject of Potions demanded that he have spare clothes at hand. Ginny herself would need spares and protection gear for the flying lessons and a space to work. She could just imagine how their stepping over boxes and crates every morning and evening...mouths well protected...would set them in high spirits! Regularly shrinking and expanding them did not appeal to her either.

Disillusioned, Ginny flung herself onto the bed, thereby swaying her wand which caused it to emit blue sparks.

"Watch it, sourpuss!" a shrewish, female voice called. In no time, Ginny jumped to her feet, wand drawn. Poised to fight (that is standing well centred and knees lightly flexed, wand had at shoulder level, index along the shaft of her wand), Ginny checked her surroundings. As she slowly turned on the spot, she found a minute, tarnished mirror in a dark corner.

"My, my, you're a fiery one on several ends," it mocked her.

She glared at the ugly thing as if it alone were responsible for their new circumstances, earning herself another scathing remark.

"You're really not much to look at, are you. It would be better for all concerned if you didn't gaze in any mirror too long," the mirror continued to mock Ginny.

"As if you were clear enough that I would want to! Now, shut your trap, stupid thing," Ginny snarled through clenched teeth. A permanent commentator was all they needed, really! Considering how little she knew about this institution, there was the additional risk that the object was a means of supervision, linking their room to the headmistress, the Dark Lord, anyone.

The mirror harrumphed at her and chose to ignore her, which suited her just fine.

What a place this was! They had ascended the curved path, until a building had come into sight that she had first mistaken to be a truly generous servants' home and stables, and suddenly comprehension had dawned that this was all there was. This estate did not compare with Malfoy Manor, and any comparison with Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was bound to be comical.

A stern-looking witch with a straight hat had shrewishly ordered Severus to dispose of his 'luggage and paraphernalia' and immediately join the staff meeting.

Fuming internally at the poisoned atmosphere, Ginny eventually got up and started unpacking.

When Severus returned from the staff meeting, lips pressed in a thin line, he looked so annoyed that she didn't wish to say anything that might ruin the evening. "I've taken the lowest shelf for my clothes and yours are here. Let's see how we manage this week. We can always rearrange things later."

"It is all right," he offered before he inspected the walls of the room carefully. Using innumerable spell-detection methods, he found a semi-transparent spell, which he didn't dare remove. Instead, he created another spell that wrapped around it, blurring the sight.

Ginny followed his actions and thoughts. "What's the staff room like?" she asked, attempting to distract him.

"Staff room? One section in the library, equipped with two settees, is reserved for staff. I am supposed to receive my students here and must have the office for myself most of the time." He looked around, but there was no space for another desk.

A shrill tone called them to assembly before she got her reply.

Entering the Great Hall, Ginny had to breathe deep to not laugh. The place was about the size of the parlour and dining room at the Malfoys'. Gloomy, larger-than-life portraits of Salazar Slytherin, Herpo the Foul, and other Parselmouths covered the walls behind it and opposite the high, mullioned windows, and the silver-green ornaments decorating the low ceiling were hardly cheering up the sinister impression. Cold sweat drenched Ginny's back, as the monkey-like, gaunt builder of the Chamber of Secrets stared at her.

The high table for the staff was laid with silver goblets and cutlery, but it didn't look higher than the other tables. *That's not so bad*, she thought sarcastically. *Colin and Hermione have often complained how humiliating it is for the pupils to have to crane their necks.* Three long tables were meant for the pupils, and, in one corner, dishes were piled up on what might be a counter where three house-elves and an unknown woman seemed to wait for orders.

The elder students here, who had already passed their O.W.L.s, muttered as Ginny entered the hall. Their murmuring made it clear that they felt Ginny didn't belong with them. She was not from a proud family of Death Eaters, and her clothes weren't the elegant witch-wear either. Instead, they had Transfigured an old robe of Severus' in a rough-and-ready way, and she had donned the unflattering piece over the simple Muggle clothes she owned. She was received with a mix of calculating obsequiousness, icy coldness and hardly inhibited snickering.

A penetrating voice drew everybody's attention to the front. "Welcome, welcome to Salazar's Academy, my dear Sixth Form College students. I am Headmistress Mulciber. You are the elite of our ranks, the pillars upon which our lord will construct his new society. He bestows great honours upon you, granting you access to the higher science of warfare, defence on ground and in the air, and to the fine arts of supreme magic..."

After the pathos of the welcome, mixed with shrewish carping, she outlined their many social tasks and threatened them with expulsion if they crossed a line...or permitted the younger ones to do so. Feet shuffled in the group and from the back row, Ginny heard "What an old cow!"

"Remember..." Mulciber raised her voice and paused for effect. "...beyond fifth year, your career will depend on each and every exam you take."

Ginny herself would be a fifth-year, and she would finally take her O.W.L.s, which had not been conducted at Hogwarts at the chaotic end of the school year. After Easter, Ginny could become a sixth-year if... the conditions weren't clear to her. She frowned.

The shrill voice once again interrupted her thoughts. "You will now divide into four groups, and four teachers will show you around the building and the grounds." She conjured a green and a silver band which formed a cross in the air and descended in the throng of pupils, forming four groups.

"Professor Snape, will you take this group," she ordered, pointing to the front left quarter. The group in the left rear was gathered by Professor Flank, the woman who had earlier referred to Ginny as 'paraphernalia'. Draco's group was lead by Professor Stunt, a tall, dark man Ginny was sure she had seen before.

To her dismay...but not really to her surprise...Ginny was part of the group Headmistress Mulciber lead herself.

As they left the building, she pointed out the various security measures that had been taken. Among others, there were sophisticated detector spells for anyone crossing the borders. *Crossing them in either direction*, Ginny noted inwardly.

They reached a newly laid out area of the park and the headmistress opened a shed. A general murmur of approval rose at the sight of a few Firebolts, but she stared at them maliciously. "There is absolutely *no need* for you to comment unless you are explicitly asked to."

Back inside, they had a brief look at the dormitories, four for girls and five for boys. "You who prepare for your N.E.W.T.s are in your own dormitories; while we prefer to keep the younger years mixed," she declared. The dormitories were crammed and not nearly as cosy as at Hogwarts. Ginny didn't see a common room at all, but they took a glance at the library.

They returned to the Great Hall, where Severus was already waiting. When the other groups arrived, their teachers were scolded for their tardiness.

The headmistress pompously proceeded to illustrate the queuing system for meals. "Teachers first, then the older classes. The younger students queue behind you. You will spread out and place yourselves among the younger pupils to keep order. Again, any disruptions close to you will be considered your flaw."

The elves brought soup, bread and jugs of pumpkin juice, and Mulciber had them practice the queuing system. Murmuring quietly behind their hands, they formed a queue. Demurely they walked along the counter, taking a bowl and a silver goblet and holding them expectantly towards the elves who busied themselves with jars and ladles. The poor creatures squealed in agony when the stern voice of the headmistress forbade them to serve the hungry little masters.

With empty dishes, everybody was to find a seat.

"No dawdling, no shuffling; act your age!" they were admonished.

A swirl of Mulciber's wand lifted the glasses and stacked them neatly at the counter again, and then she called the empty soup dishes back in the same way.

As they queued for the second time, a silent fight erupted for the front positions.

Close to Ginny, a stomach growled loudly, causing the girls to snigger. When Ginny trusted herself enough to look up with a straight face, Pansy Parkinson was leaving the counter, grinning back at the queue, lifting her filled goblet in salute.

"*Scourgify!*" came the command from the high table, and her dishes emptied. "There is no reason at all for gloating. Parkinson, isn't it?"

The girl nodded silently, unsure how severely the school would consider her misdemeanour. Someone near Ginny hissed, "This is no good."

"Stop serving now," the headmistress barked towards the elves. "Parkinson to the end of the queue. Finish the drill."

As they queued for the third time, the headmistress checked her watch. She gave up and waved the elves to resume service.

"She said we ought to act our age," someone growled, causing more sniggering and grunting.

They seated themselves with wide distances, as directed, but Draco and Theodore arranged themselves quite near to Ginny, acknowledging her with a smile.

Ginny took a look around. She recognised two seventh-years from the Slytherin Quidditch team and one she thought was a Ravenclaw. There were conspicuously more boys than girls, an unbalance she had never noticed at Hogwarts...how strange.

Or not, she reminded herself, *for next year I will not be here anymore either*. The thought alone made her cough, and she spilled a bit of her soup. She immediately felt several pairs of eyes upon her and preferred not to acknowledge any of them.

The shrill bell chimed once again, causing Parkinson to drop her spoon, its clatter reverberating loudly.

Severus left the hall. Soon enough he returned, now finally showing his very best teacher's mood. He herded the chatting throng of 'O.W.L.s students' inside.

Dressed in a lime-and-cerulean tartan robe with thin crimson lines, sporting massive shoulders and neck, Urquhart, last-year's captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, positioned himself not even three yards from the door, his legs slightly apart, his muscular arms crossed, stern eyes taking in the room. As the throng poured in, he reminded Ginny of a solid rock in the surf. If he was the prototype of his clan, the Loch Ness kelpie did not have a chance...they would wrestle it until they had the bridle in place!

Ginny spotted Harper, the little idiot who ignited everything he jabbed with his wand. In last spring's Gryffindor versus Slytherin match, he had taken money from Draco to sit on a broom and cast his racist insults towards Ron and her. If Quidditch had a lower standing here than at Hogwarts, he was in for a rough time.

As a group pressed past Urquhart-the-rock, a very familiar tall figure came into sight, with blond hair, nose upturned and a skinny, gangly appearance: here was Zacharias Smith! Well, wasn't the world full of surprises?

On Severus' order, they stood along the walls while Headmistress Mulciber addressed them in a similar way as the elder ones, only this time the threat to be expelled was replaced with the prospect of detention. She could not send these children home, because their parents were needed for the war! This was also why the periods started with dinner and ended with breakfast. It gave the parents two more nights for their secret activities.

The teachers made the lead to take the main course, the sixth form students following. Ginny now assorted herself to the O.W.L.s students where she belonged. She smiled at Bernhard Hunt, a Hufflepuff who, back at Hogwarts, had frequently shared her tray in Herbology, but he turned to look straight ahead.

Only when Severus and Ginny returned to their room did they realise that their washing facilities were across the corridor and had to be shared with other teachers living close by. Severus was outraged. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate that everybody had to make sacrifices during a war, but the headmistress had occupied a three room suite all for herself. Thomas Mulciber was hardly to be expected to join her, as she had already declared. With a grunt, Severus insisted that he would always accompany his wife on her way down the corridor to the women's bathroom. Silently, Ginny rolled her eyes.

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The next morning after breakfast, the year zero gathered around Mr Ollivander to be equipped with wands. Ginny hardly caught a glimpse of the old man before she had to go to her class. *These eleven-year-olds get wands, but what about those not attending this school*, Ginny wondered.

Fleur had told them how her wandmaker, the celebrity of the French speaking world, Monsieur Croivier, always wished to meet the wizard personally to assemble core and wood of their wand. He hardly produced on stock. Certainly, neither he nor Mr Gregorovitch, the famous wandmaker of the Balkan countries, would travel to Britain in these dangerous times.

Maybe two dozen fifth-years went upstairs to attend lessons in Charms and Hexes, including two boys and two girls Ginny had never seen. Professor Barnes was an elderly wizard, who preferred to be seated or rested against his lectern, but his mind was fresh, and he was witty. For the last two years, he had already been teaching Death Eaters, and he treated them like the twenty-year-olds he was used to.

"We have seven periods of four days to deepen, widen and strengthen your knowledge before you take your O.W.L.s here. This is more than you would have left of your school year, and the O.W.L.s test will thus be a tad more demanding." A pause and a glance at them all individually ensured they understood.

"We will use the remaining four periods before the Easter break to concentrate on Charming dead matter. Then we will start actual N.E.W.T.s lessons with those of you who have the guts for it. For another four periods, we look into Charms on plant life and animals." Sometime in the middle of his outlining the topics they would cover, Ginny noticed that he would not be using the board behind him at all, and she hastily scribbled down what she remembered.

Ginny found it easy to concentrate on his structured lecturing style. For her year, his lack of pedagogical skills was easily covered with statements like, "If you feel yourselves unable or unwilling to learn what I have to offer, I suggest you have a talk with those who did not make it into the N.E.W.T.s classes."

For Ginny, Potions offered little surprise, although she had dreaded her status in this class more than in others. Severus paid her no extra attention, and he kept the same discipline as he had always done around hot cauldrons. Severus had assigned the four Durmstrang pupils with capable partners, and they worked diligently. Frowning over the textbook every now and then, they shyly asked their partners for a demonstration, and Ginny wondered about the lenience Severus showed over the discussions arising.

The first lesson ended up with three of them cleaning the Great Hall and the corridors for detention. Ginny stared into her bag as she packed it, fighting hard not to smirk. How stupid had they been, snipping trout scales into another group's cauldron. The fact that the targeted pupils had been Hufflepuffs back at Hogwarts was totally irrelevant here, other than that it seemed to annoy Zacharias Smith more than she'd have expected.

Ginny was pleased to see Narcissa Malfoy and the elf she knew handing out the lunch. The queuing system worked much better now, and this time the food was exquisite. Ginny told her so when taking seconds, and Narcissa quitted the following student with a smile as he confirmed the assessment. *Well, I wouldn't want to impose myself on you*, Ginny thought in annoyance.

Draco had beckoned Ginny to sit opposite to his neighbour, and now that the first hunger was sated, he involved this student in a discussion. The third-year kept looking down into his dish as he replied. Draco then also engaged Ginny's own neighbour. When he tried to also draw Ginny into the discussion, it died with monosyllabic replies from the younger ones.

With a sigh of resignation, Ginny fell silent for the rest of the meal.

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After a session of quiet Prep, the day continued outside with the flying lessons for students in years one to five, totalling about ninety pupils. Their lessons would differ considerably from Madam Hooch's. In fact, she was scoffed at for her mollycoddling approach.

A snub-nosed boy a head smaller than her gesticulated wildly as he explained just how he would swerve and glide and spiral on his broom. Sporting a roguish grin, he explained, accent thick, "I fly so, and high, and zisch, like... like..." When the words failed him, his arm described a sweeping curve, right into Mandy's nose.

"Stop that, you little idiot," she scolded. "Maybe you should use words next time."

"Oh, Entschuldigung, I mean, err, I am sorry," he stuttered.

"What are you drivelling about?" Mandy snorted.

"'Drivelling'?" he repeated, bewildered. "Gerhard, was heißt das?"

"Sh, speak English. I don't know what it means," an older boy, obviously also from Durmstrang, answered with a shrug.

"Tsk, they can't even express themselves," the girl taunted.

"You better not say tat!" Gerhard flared up, protectively laying his arm on the scallywag's shoulder. "Tis little boy is Bulgarian and speaks Tjerman and Russian. Now he must learn English. Tere I like to see you."

Once outside, the boys put a lot of space between themselves and Mandy.

One flying instructor, John Missile, taught a subject called Combat Flying and trained them in defence and attack while airborne.

The other teacher was Bartleby Stunt, a former captain of the Slytherin team and previously Chaser of the Aberdeen Dragons. Ginny remembered praising his performance in a game against the Chudley Cannons and how it had annoyed Ron. His subject at the Academy, however, was called Flying Techniques.

"We will cover formation flight, flight under Obfuscation and flights with loads, be it dead matter or," pausing for effect, "incapacitated people."

The last statement caused the assembled to shudder and murmur.

Under the eyes of these two teachers, they were sent over an obstacle course to assess their flying skills. The less experienced flyers would form Group One, while the experienced flyers would make up Group Two. Their credits would be measured on two scales, actual performance and relative improvement from now on. "Not having been trained so far is not your fault, but being trained and still failing is not tolerated," Stunt explained. It sounded fair enough, although Ginny seriously doubted Severus would have agreed, back at Hogwarts.

Most of the pupils had brought their own brooms, and Ginny held Severus' broom in her hand, a Nimbus 1001. It had been half a year that she had last had a decent chance to fly, and her whole body itched in anticipation, a state that resonated with the broom's own.

The tests started with the first-years, called alphabetically, followed by the second- and third-years. Most of them went to Group One, some even failing to get the broom up into their hands. A few, however, including snub-nose from Durmstrang, were remarkably skilled in dodging and flying tight curves in high speed and made it to Group Two.

One of Ginny's new classmates from Durmstrang showed a spectacular performance, dodging Bludgers and other objects the teachers threw at him, while he was still able to send green sparks precisely onto the targets on the ground. Ginny started swaying along with him: left, right, down under the branch of the tree, now rise high and hit the mark on the top of the next tree before he had to turn sharp to the left and into a dive. After three laps with hardly a mistake, he was sent to Group Two and walked over with a confident stride. Ginny wondered how she could work her wand this well at high speeds. She had never done so before. Would a moving caster change the direction of a spell? Would it somehow depend on the velocity with which the spell propagates, or possibly even its character?

Missile continued, "Smith, Zacharias!"

The Quidditch player from Hufflepuff and most dubious member of the D.A. was up in the air in no time. He flew a lot faster than Mandy Sands before him, but could not score nearly as much as the best ones.

Instead of following his second lap, Ginny prepared herself, glad that her new family name had moved her at least two places forward.

"Thompson, Larry!" Stunt called.

The Ravenclaw boy was as startled as Ginny. He wasn't really prepared yet and had to rush to get his gloves on before he shouted *Up!* and took off. He did well enough on two laps. Ginny recalled that he had been a candidate for the Ravenclaw team for two years. His frustration at not making the team must have prompted him to train even harder, and now he wasn't caught by any Bludger. His wand work was not precise, but he made it to Group Two.

"Urquhart, Darren!" Missile called the last boy waiting with Ginny.

Urquhart manoeuvred so wisely through the challenges that his somewhat crude spells scored well enough. After their instructors politely indicated Group Two, Missile took this group and headed towards the dressing rooms. Consequently, Stunt was left with Group One plus Ginny who had not been assessed even at the letter W. She stubbornly remained where she was.

They were training transportation. First they did ground training, where they ran an obstacle course levitating a small piece of wood. All pupils assorted to Group One made two laps, but again, Ginny wasn't called. Many pupils sneered at her, while maybe one third had at least the grace to look elsewhere.

They continued with heavier loads, first alone, later in pairs, which turned out to be a lot more difficult. Lifting an object over a bush was a clear task for a single person, but two together had to agree when to start lifting it and how high exactly. When they had to form groups of four, only the Durmstrang quartet passed acceptably. Stunt declared one per quartet the leader, who had to trigger when to lift and where to stop. All teams were a lot more successful then.

"We'll need heavier load now. You there," he addressed Ginny as if seeing her for the first time. She was too perplexed to react and found herself rolled up to simulate dead matter. Each of the quartets had a go with her. Gloating over her humiliation, the younger Slytherins dragged her about in a rough manner, rolled her and dropped her quite often at will.

Ginny was fuming inwardly, but she didn't say a word. It just wasn't worth it.

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The following days went along smoothly, except for the fact that Ginny was scolded for not having her assigned books in Transfiguration and Herbology. "But it seems we are to make an exception for her as long as she joins us," Professor Flank, the Transfiguration teacher, said with a smirk that repeated itself on the faces around Ginny.

Geography and Beasts of Britain turned out to be a challenging subject, mixing the geographical aspects of Muggle and Wizard Britain. Where the major Muggle cities were located, how to identify them from afar, how they were structured and what their industrial centres looked like from above. What did such a settlement mean for a wizard? For example, how to beware of tall smokestacks, airports and planes when flying. Similarly, they needed to apply special measures near magical wildlife enclosures, like

the natural reserve for the Welsh Green.

Most pupils in Ginny's year understood to behave and not risk their O.W.L.s grades or the chance to continue after the test. The elder ones were even more diligently following the strict regime. Being expelled to the rank and file of the Dark Lord's army, the obvious punishment for the male students, hung like a Damocles sword over their heads. The few girls who had made it so far were not ones to enjoy a quick marriage and pregnancy either.

In sharp contrast to that, there were immediately a lot of pranks going on in the years one to four, where scrubbing and polishing cauldrons or the floor was all that awaited a culprit. A group of third-years attended lunch sprouting rhubarb instead of hair, having fun clipping the leaves and watching them re-grow. On another day, dinner saw small girls limping in, their left legs Transfigured into a canine form. The classrooms of Professors Windeye and Barnes could be drenched in pink liquids or smell like a pigsty. The headmistress delivered detentions at high speed, but the professors had no time to supervise them, and when left alone, the culprits hardly did what they had been assigned to do.

At dinner Ginny would make it a rule to be late, eat slowly and stay longer. On the fourth night, however, when Severus was not at dinner, several fourth-year students stalled and circled around her purposefully and remarked how odd it was that nobody seemed to be in the dormitory of the Gryffindor.

"Let us join you and see what murky corner they assigned to you."

Head held high, Ginny went to the library and engaged herself in the medical area where she believed she'd be left alone soonest. During her extensive excursion into the Aztec rituals of cleansing and their medical potions in a translation from Nahuatl, her unwanted company gradually dropped off from boredom. When she returned the book to its shelf, she quickly snatched yet another book...Japanese first aid guide...and noted with a grin that all but two had given up and turned to leave. With a smile, she perused the index of the tiny booklet that had been her saviour. Why had it insisted on falling into her hand? It had felt tempting, too tempting maybe? But when she tossed it onto her desk in fright, it opened to the description of a spell for oral hygiene in case of contagious diseases like Stomatitis, flu, sneezing or cough. The membrane-like, flexible spell placed itself over the mouth and nose like the cloth the Japanese Muggles used, but could not be wiped away as easily. Air passed through it with ease but liquids could not. One would not be able to eat or feel through the spell. *This is it*, she realised in delight. The spell for every night!

Booklet in hand, Ginny sprinted down to their quarters in anticipation. She didn't even hear the accusations of her last followers as to how she had wormed herself into the honourable Academy. They left rapidly when she turned into the teachers' corridor.

Severus met her at the door to draw her in. He started scolding her about her foray, but when Ginny proudly showed him her discovery, he approved of the spell, and they worked on it for a while before he had to take up the grading waiting on his desk.

He soon turned as moody as during the previous evenings at the Academy. Ginny could read the *wordbunce* on his face all too often while he went through Potions essays.

When he was extremely disgusted at an essay in Defence, she glanced over his shoulder. A sixth-year was elaborating torturing techniques. For minutes he paced the length of his office before he took up the next essay from the high pile to his left.

There were various other problems causing Severus' annoyance. Their cramped living conditions for one, and the character of the headmistress and some colleagues for another. Class discipline certainly wasn't his concern. Ironically, the atmosphere among the staff was poisoned just because he had his classes in check when others failed. And, more importantly, his current position left him with few opportunities to follow the war going on and even fewer chances to collect information or search for ways to transport the news to the Order.

Ginny had no need to hear this from him, it was all too obvious. It was the right choice to keep her petty, little struggles to herself.

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It was long after eleven on Sunday night, and Severus had not returned from a staff meeting. Ginny's Transfiguration essay benefited from the silent concentration, but eventually she felt too tired to add value to it. She checked her other assignments for the following period. She would preferably do Potions at home, where there was ample literature available. In Charms and Hexes, they worked on the difference between charming huge solid bodies like rocks or whole logs of timber wood and bulk goods like sand or loose soil. Next week, they would Charm liquids and gases. Ginny had trouble recognising the difference between them. The teacher had noted that they needed to appeal to their Muggle sense of things to grasp the concepts. Easy to say! Those of them who had had Muggle Studies at Hogwarts (which the Academy did not offer) and the half-bloods with contacts to their non-magical family were suddenly in advantage. While Ginny enjoyed this fact, she still faced the trouble that she was not that privileged. *I'm bloody living among Muggles, and my husband is a half-blood*, she told herself. She would have to ask Severus, she decided, and packed away all her books and parchments and made for the bathroom.

The corridor was utterly silent, and the few juvenile, whispering voices that did not belong there carried along undisturbed. They were to her left, towards the Great Hall and the staircases. Students planning a prank while the teachers were busy? Ginny decided not to be the victim and set up two strong wards they would not crack without waking her.

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When the exhausted and annoyed Severus Snape, Edward Barnes and Simon Slash returned to their corridor, they found the floor and walls covered in smelly, yellowish mud and the doors to their respective quarters sticky with slimy goo. It had found its way inside and already covered Professor Slash's desk and carpet. It was nearly two in the morning when Barnes checked his quarters, discovering that even his bed was gooey. He admitted to having forgotten one of his general wards. Together they cleaned the mess and removed the smell in the private quarters of the two men.

The men were reluctant to enter with Severus. They waited at a polite distance when he went in...or tried to do so. He was utterly surprised to find his room most heavily warded. It took him all concentration he could muster at three in the morning to find a resonance in the ward and finally enter.

Neither smell nor goo had found their way inside. With a smirk, he bade his colleagues a good night. What problem was a tiny bed if it was clean and you were allowed to share it with such a wonderful girl? Woman! Witch! Soon he thanked the Japanese medical wizards, snuggled close to her and fell asleep.

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After a hasty breakfast, the pupils at long last left for home. Ginny and the three teachers were kept back to attack their mucky, smelly corridor with wands and brushes. They got support from Professor Flank and Headmistress Mulciber, who silently discussed discipline problems when they assumed Ginny would be too far to listen.

Eventually, Severus and Ginny had cleaned the immediate area around their door. Severus deliberately turned his young wife to face him. "This is not your task. Go have a rest."

Mulciber frowned but Barnes came to his colleague's aid. "Take your girl home now, Severus; we'll manage the rest."

Slash supported him, noting, "It was her who saved us from cleaning your bedroom and office in the first place." Seeing the odds against her, the headmistress quickly swallowed her protest.

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In the days before the next period, Ginny and Severus were busily searching for ways to ease their life at the Academy. They would have to shrink their belongings to fit into the small cupboard; Ginny needed books and a robe. They saw little chance for these things. Severus was somewhat surprised that she did not miss protective gear for flying lessons, but with grading and a household to keep up, he forgot about the issue.

Severus asked Ginny to join him in the lab. They discussed when to use knives with a blade from stainless steel or carbon steel, when a flint blade was recommended, and how the cutting directives often harmonised with the stirring patterns.

Ginny had had more than just a glance at the Potions book of the Half Blood Prince and saw that all this must be like second nature to him. For her it was mainly facts to learn, but being shown the patterns and symmetries helped a lot.

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They had an invitation to the Sands for Tuesday night. It was as annoying and boring as Severus had already promised such events would be. The Sands' manor came close to the estate of the Malfoys', and every five minutes one of the guests made sure the Snapes noticed it. Ginny wondered why on earth they bothered inviting them at all, but it dawned on her soon enough: all their money had not ensured Gregory Sands a place in the Inner Circle yet.

The Snapes sat at the same end of the table as Marcus Flint and his wife Serina. She had lost much of the arrogance she had shown when Ginny was being equipped with a wedding dress. Instead, she was moody and tired. Marcus hardly addressed her at all, and certainly not with any nice words as suits newlyweds expecting a baby. Appalled, Ginny realised that his little brother Albert, her arrogant fellow fifth-year, was merely a weak copy of his elder brother and their father. The whole family gave nourishment to every prejudice Ginny had ever heard about Death Eaters, including the colourless appearance of the two women. She was thankful to have Severus' position as a protection against the loathing that they wanted to throw at her but didn't quite dare.

After the two hours of dinner, Severus suggested that Ginny might move to the lower end of the table where the younger people had gathered, Albert Flint and Mandy Sands among them. Their parents quitted the proposal with a smile that was maybe meant to appear benign, and she left. Possibly he wanted to talk business?

Far from that, Severus faced an interrogation of sorts. Bellatrix tried to get him to justify why on earth he hadn't managed to impregnate the girl yet. Another pair wed with them was already happily looking forward to a baby.

"As for you, Bella, may I remind you that you haven't been very productive in providing the Dark Lord with young blood either?" She glared daggers at him, and he drew new energy from the short moment of revenge.

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Hours later, Draco insisted on Apparating Ginny back, watching with concern how Severus' brows furrowed deeply when he concentrated.

They waited a long time in the Apparition spot. "Don't fret, Ginny," Draco said. "On his own, he'll be fine."

"I know. I have a *few* elder brothers, remember," she replied dryly. "Thanks for handling the Side-Along Apparition, though."

Ginny had to pull her husband upright since he struggled after reappearing more than a foot above ground. He didn't walk straight on their way home. "Those people juss' leave me unnerved," he said, slightly slurring.

Ginny did not grace the obvious remark with a reply.

Very early in the morning, Ginny made muesli for herself and deftly whipped up a headache cure for her husband. She placed it forcefully on his bedside table to wake him up. Taking the cure from the table he looked sheepishly at Ginny before swallowing it.

Ginny did not speak, but her glare penetrated his sensitive eyes worse than any sunshine could have done, if there had been any.

Minutes later, Severus was up and about. All morning he busied himself with grading, not quite sure what to say. With almost furious motions, Ginny turned pages or corrected sentences as she worked on her own essays. Twice she had to extinguish flames from her harsh effacing spell.

Around lunchtime, Ginny had calmed down and glanced at Severus, who did not look up. She dropped her work, proceeded towards the kitchen and prepared rolls and a salad. From the gradually softening sounds of her cuts, Severus deduced that her fury was leaving her. He exhaled deeply, only now noticing that he had been holding his breath. They had not even had an argument. Why had he felt so depressed? *Because her opinion matters. It matters a lot.* He stood.

Silently, he crept up behind her, gripped her around her waist and caressed her gently. With the care to avoid lip contact that had become second nature for them, he swept her hair back and murmured close to her ears, "I promise you this will not happen again, if I have any choice."

Ginny's stiff body relaxed in his hands. Severus gently increased his effort, and when she started turning in his embrace, he stopped her, swiftly moving his hands under her shirt and further up, magicking her breath to rise and little moans to escape her. Soon her knees were about as steady as jelly, and she gave up all resistance.

When she pressed her head on his chest, arching her back, he suddenly stopped and took his hands out from under her garments.

"My apologies."

Ginny barely gathered her wits quickly enough not to fall. She turned and saw him retreating, head bent in... shame?

"What is it now, Severus?"

"I... " he broke off. He looked more embarrassed than he had in the morning as if shocked over himself.

"Look at me, Severus," she ordered. He stopped in the doorway and lifted his eyes for a mere second. Ginny, still aroused, closed the gap between them. "That was nice, Severus. Please, why did you stop?"

"I swore to myself never to assault you again, and yet... I should have asked."

"Ask me now! Quickly!" she suggested, reaching up and unbuttoning his shirt.

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They remained in bed for lunch.

Propping himself up on his elbow, Severus stroked her cheek, reached over her for a roll and said, "If I had kept my wits at this party, I could have asked the Sands for a set of school robes for you."

"I won't wear anything that insulting dimwit has touched!" It was out before she had time to think.

"Insulting? What did she say?" Severus demanded, his body stiffening.

Ginny tried to avoid the answer, but Severus prompted repeatedly. Finally she huffed. "If you must know: at the Mulcibers' she declared she can't even stand *imagining* being touched by you. Yesterday she told us all she would have chosen death over you."

"You never tol... of course. How did you react before Christmas?"

"I told her I could not stand the image of you touching *her* either."

Severus turned away. "You defended me even then... and you did not even have your wand." Yet another reminder of how he had wronged her.

"As if I had cared," she said drily. "Yesterday Draco was quicker with an answer. Along the lines he regretted he hadn't proposed matching her and you. He could not be too direct in their own house, but I bet she won't say anything else so soon."

To enjoy the rare bit of dry weather, they had just decided to get up and stroll through town when their cosy get-together was sharply terminated. Severus clutched his left arm and hissed in pain. Quickly they set up a timetable for their return to the Academy.

Sudden calls were dangerous ones, but there was nothing Ginny could do. To distract herself from her fear, she decided to stroll around alone. She had at least three hours, so, after carefully re-erecting their wards, she headed for the town centre. She stretched her legs on a park bench, trying to unwind a bit.

"Hi, again!"

It was the girl from a few houses up on Spinner's End.

"Hi, Maud, finished your homework as well?"

They engaged in a small chat. Ginny artfully steered around most problematic topics but eventually had to pretend being in a hurry to return home.

"Care to come over for a chat at the weekend?" Maud asked on their way back. Ginny had to decline, but they agreed that she would try next Tuesday or Wednesday.

Panting, Severus arrived home only to transport them to the Academy. He would not reveal what had happened, and Ginny would not ask.

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A/N:

My warmest thanks go to Jingjingchiquita and Savine_Snape for their great help in putting this chapter into shape. Whatever reads smoothly, you bet they have made it do so. Whatever makes you frown is entirely mine!

Some comments about canon:

Ginny was in the library, preparing herself for her O.W.L.s exams, when A. Dumbledore called Harry to go for the locket. Returning, A.D. died, and chaos broke loose. The funeral was arranged, and no one had any interest in holding exams.

We never hear anything about her O.W.L.s.

I've also been assuming that the castle needed a lot more repair than what we see in DH: In the first chapters of this story, Ginny reported to Draco that they slept in Slytherin quarters since the tower was completely destroyed, but the dungeons were not damaged. This is my taking, and I think after HBP it was justified enough.

Urquhart is the canon Slytherin Chaser from HBP. He crushes Harry's hand when shaking it, which implies his physique.

Urquhart is a Scottish clan, but for today's Muggles, Urquhart castle is merely a ruin, the family living elsewhere. The six hundred foot deep waters of Loch Ness surround the formerly huge structure on three sides. To me, this shows that the magic branch of the Urquhart clan has done thorough work, although I'm sure they are annoyed with all the tourists!

According to Newt Scamander, getting a bridle over the head of a kelpie renders it docile and unthreatening. While he suggests a Placement Charm, we cannot be sure how the Urquhart family deals with it.

New Wands

Chapter 19 of 35

The Dark Lords visits his school. Ollivander visits the Snapes.

All characters are JKR's. I'm just having fun with them and make no money with this story. Your review is reward enough.

New Wands

Grimly, Severus sat down for dinner. Several of the children were crying openly; others were sobbing quietly. Young Miss Burke, a second-year, was attacking her plate with vengeance. With her bushy brows furrowed and her prominent lower jaw stubbornly pushed forward, she reminded Severus even more of her elder brother. As he piled peas on his fork, Severus remembered his first encounter with the Slytherin boy, twelve years ago.

The formidably-built first-year had been the centre of attention, proudly showing a set of photos that earned him the respect of even some fourth-years. His suspicion aroused by conspicuously too much bare flesh, Severus had swiftly ordered him to hand them over, only to find a rosy newborn yawn widely to him while her brother stood there, his chest swollen in pride.

During the previous night, Patrick Burke had fallen together with his former house mates. For seven years, Severus had surreptitiously attempted to give them a little guidance and a few impulses to find their own way, but in the end, he had been unable to save them from the suction from the dark.

Absentmindedly, Severus took up his goblet to rinse.

Among the students on the left, arguments started heatedly. Sitting closest, Parkinson hurriedly hushed the commotion. Apprehensively, she glanced over to the high table and started severely when she caught glares from the headmistress.

Severus' eyes searched for Ginevra. She had eaten a few bits of her helping, but she was putting down her fork every other bite and shifted restlessly on her chair, staring at her roast without seeing it. Two students opposite observed her far too carefully for Severus' taste.

Thankfully, though, the clumsy boy next to her, who had melted a cauldron in the previous week, knocked over his plate and gravy splashed on Ginevra's sleeve. She jumped up to clean the mess, and Severus flinched. Not a single Potions lesson this period, but already the first of her two robes sullied. On the other hand, her attention was back to the here and now.

Enduring a lengthy staff meeting with lots of hollow words (exemplary performance, stimulate the natural thirst for knowledge, connect to the better self in every student, character building measures), Severus rested his eyes on the opposite wall. Next to the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, they found an oddly shaped mark and as he stared, the mark transformed into Ginevra's anxious face, and the more it resembled her, the more he stared. He had to find a way to reassure her.

Passing through the whimsy French door, Severus was forced to lift his robe to climb ungracefully over the well-worn, battered leather satchel Ginny used as school bag, which blocked his path in their crammed room. It was the best opening he would get.

"Ginevra, would it be too much to ask that you not leave your stuff in the doorway?" Severus raged as he entered their shared room.

Ginny uttered a meek excuse and shuffled her abandoned things together, clearly too preoccupied to really care.

"It must be a family trait, this penchant to block others' way," Severus hissed, between two of her vigorous, but futile attacks on the old clasps.

Somewhat befuddled, she looked up and asked, "Pardon?"

Severus reached for the teapot and continued in a bored tone, "As if it wasn't enough that those impossible twin brothers of yours tried to block our retreat with a wall of crimson-glowing, pungent smoke spelling out 'OOH, NOT YOU' in eight foot letters."

Severus heard her robe rustle as she shifted. He drawled on, "Thankfully, *they* made it out of everybody's sight after their annoying obstacle dissolved, a consideration I can hardly expect from you." With the last words, he turned to the teapot, hoping she got the hint.

"I'll endeavour not to remind you of them, Severus," came her level answer along with the metallic click of a clasp, closing willingly when treated gently.

"You do that," Severus snarled and sat down. He generously motioned behind him that she may serve herself some tea, which she did.

Half an hour later, when Severus followed her out towards the bathroom, pretending to patrol the corridor, he was satisfied to see her stride out vibrantly.

Another two hours passed with grading before he slid under the already warmed cover.

Ginny, who had calmed down enough for finally revising Transfiguration, hovered her book aside and stashed her wand between mattress and frame.

"Nox!"

Her gentle hand reached out under the duvet, over to his side, pressing his own hand hard. Severus turned on his back and let her head rest on his shoulder, one of the few places that were almost fleshy and soft enough to serve as a pillow. She turned her back to him to avoid all pressure on the itchy spell on her mouth, but she gripped his arm with both hands, stroking him gently. Minutes later, his feisty witch was sound asleep, her breath regular and deep.

Much later, a wide awake Severus dared to pull out his stiff arm to find an agreeable position for himself. The length of his body warmed by hers, he found sleep at last.

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For the Potions master, the school was more time consuming than Hogwarts had ever been. He now taught two subjects, even if neither was taught in year zero. Severus had more essays to grade than any other teacher, and with the newly compiled syllabus, he also had to prepare each lesson. At least, he concluded, this meant he was allowed to stay in the same building as Ginevra for the daytime and most nights. He held his office hour in Professor Slash's office on Sunday, but every now and then Severus fetched tea from his own quarters, where everything was all right.

Over the next days, Severus observed his charge-that-was-his-wife surreptitiously. Ginevra ate and slept steadily enough. She worked on her readings and essays after dinner, and her effort showed in Potions, and she even surpassed her previous scores in Defence. Her other homework put her under a healthy pressure, but she found more time to rest and sleep than Severus had ever considered acceptable while a library was at his disposal.

When Ginevra came to dinner one day after Duelling, her eyes sparkled with delight. With a jolt, Severus remembered her determined face at lunch. Honed by months of drills with Mad Eye, she knew how to fight, but would she be lured into taking risks? Would Slash... Suddenly Severus itched to grab the man by his collar, demanding a report, but he swallowed against his anxiety. What should he, after all, demand? Certainly not that his wife was spared the training!

As Ginevra queued for the main dish, Severus found that her steady gait and confidence were, after all, also good signs. Zacharias Smith and Albert Flint even made way for her in the aisle and refrained from mocking her about the stains her cloak sported from an exploded cauldron earlier in the week.

More than once, Barnes asked Severus how to discipline the younger years, obviously unable to implement the suggestions. In the short discussion, he let slip that Ginevra was very active, well prepared and made profound contributions during the lessons. Barnes also expressed his regret that she wasn't making friends with anyone. The first time, Severus had felt like a Muggle parent, curious to get all petty details of their offspring's development, but he was relieved to get another opinion that seems to tally his own.

Barnes was the only one providing such observations.

After good-natured, if somewhat grubby, Professor Sprout with her annoyingly buoyant disposition, the nondescript Herbology teacher in the Academy could not fill any of the brats with enthusiasm. Every class returning from outside with brownish fingernails and smears of soil in their faces looked peeved, which was a stark contrast to the often boisterous lot that had driven Filch crazy. Ginevra made no exception, and why would she?

Severus certainly preferred them this way: at least a tad more under control of their actions and less likely to wreak havoc. All Severus expected from the woman was to teach them the basics on Potions-relevant herbs and that she would not let the plants, or the students, go out of control.

Flying was a pastime his wife had enjoyed from an early age, and her performance in Quidditch matches had become a real threat for Slytherin. Severus had no reason to doubt her qualification in either of the flying classes. Returning indoors in small groups, they always chattered amicably, and even if Ginevra wasn't joining in, her face was flushed, and she panted. A bruise or two was only natural—he'd be more worried if they came in unblemished! Regrettably, really, that both her Flying lessons were scheduled while Severus taught the elder students.

The only subject Ginny was quite obviously struggling with was Transfiguration. Professor Flank made no secret of her attitude towards the young Gryffindor—his paraphernalia!

The old shrew was blathering about her favourite pupils, and every time he was forced to listen. One of them was a fifth-year, Florence Hestrop, a previous Ravenclaw. She was too snooty to be already in a deep friendship with any of the Slytherin girls and had been quite versed in Potions. Severus decided he would pair Ginevra with her the next few times. Maybe they could form a functional liaison, or possibly even a light friendship?

Little did Severus know that Stunt still used his wife as cargo and did not allow her to participate at all. His colleague, Missile, didn't dare contradict the elder instructor's guideline openly, but he allowed Ginny a more active participation in general, and at times he even chose a civil, neutral tone towards her.

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The staff meeting together with their master was still troubling Severus when he arrived in their room. The man must have been a workaholic as well as a genius in his own days. Of course, Albus had always warned them about Riddle's brilliance, but had he ever slept while at school?

To listen to the lunatic monster philosophise about the *academic spirit* he expected had torn at the nerves of the only experienced—and frustrated—teacher. On and on he had enthused about how the students should feel blessed at having the chance to prosper in the sublimity of the Academy. Really, the man was even more divorced from reality than Severus had already known for twenty years!

Mulciber, of course, could be counted on to absorb his every word like Magical sponge. After their master had Disappeared, she had addressed them with the giddiness of an Australian teen who had escaped a swarm of Billywigs. She'd start an Arithmancy club, and if someone had any other splendid idea for the gifted...

Everyone who didn't match the high requirements was at immediate risk. He'd have to encourage Ginevra to deal with Transfiguration and Herbology. The best time would be right on the spot.

However, when Severus flung their door open in full stride, Ginevra was already stuffing her day's work into her bag.

"No academic spirit tonight?" he asked, sounding sharper than intended.

With a huff, she grabbed her kit and headed for the bathroom, rolling her eyes when he followed her. "How would you know?"

Severus followed her quietly to the corridor, confused about her stooped form. *What was that?* He took up the essay full of blots and smears. He cast a Revelate Tempus and cringed at the layers it revealed. She had interrupted the work after each paragraph, probably to consult a book. This was normal. But there were too many stops within a sentence, re-formulations or just breaks in the middle of a thought, which usually reflected an unsuitable working environment with lots of diversions. What had occupied her mind?

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As she returned, Severus tried an apologetic smile, but received an icy look in return. He supported her elbow lightly with his hand until they reached their bedroom. Ginevra didn't react in the least to his touch, a clear sign that he had gone too far. Now she was lying there, showing him her back.

Unable to reach her, Severus magicked the French doors closed and found himself straightening her clothes. He laid out each arm manually to give his hands something to do. As he shook the robe, he found four white, finger-shaped smears on her upper left front that were far too well designed to be an accident. Now he also remembered how his girl had been walking around with her arms crossed for half of the day. He had caught a glimpse on a corresponding stain on her bum in the morning. It had faded during lunch. Perhaps Draco had taken care of it.

Spelling their quarters safe again, Severus went to ask Barnes for help with the girl's only robes.

Now he knew for a fact that there were also ill-wishers among the students. He would need more time to figure out who it was, but then woe betide them!

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With a shriek, Ginny woke up in the wee hours. Something icy-cold had touched her; had, in fact, passed right through her arm and chilled her bones. Severus jumped out of the bed, wand in hand already disarming the intruder. "Severus, calm down," the Bloody Baron chastised him with a raspy voice. "Not even you can kill me."

"My lord, my most sincere apologies," Severus conceded, bowing deeply to buy himself some time. "I did not have much hope I could welcome you here. We are most honoured..."

"I am wherever my Slytherins are taught," the ghost replied, staring at a wall, his cheeks darkening. "It appears, though, I have startled your... My apologies, Milady! Maybe, Severus, we can move outside for a little chat?"

"Certainly, my lord."

Tired though he was, Severus kept this unexpected visitor in good mood. They chatted for nearly an hour, Severus explaining the structure and syllabus of this academy, and the Bloody Baron revealing close to nothing about whatever was going on at Hogwarts.

"Would your highness be amenable to becoming the house ghost?"

At breakfast, the Bloody Baron made a spectacular appearance right through the headmistress' scrambled eggs. She shrieked, knocked her tea and was about to scold the prankster when she recognised him. Severus announced gladly that the Bloody Baron had volunteered to be a house ghost for all students here and everybody in years zero to five should consider him their house ghost.

Draco looked over to Ginny when Severus quickly raised his hands to clap, effectively covering over whatever might have been the problem with the elder students.

The lessons for the rest of the week went on uneventfully, if you don't consider Severus' leaving for two nights or Ginny's bruises and a broken finger from Flying Techniques where she still had no other role than being load or target. The mediwitch healed her rapidly and uncaringly.

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Back home after the second period at the Academy, Ginny hardly dropped her bag before she faced her husband, who was still occupied with the last security checks.

"Promise me one thing, Severus."

Severus finished his routine. Probably she wanted more help on her school work, or maybe to be freed from household chores. Finished, he faced her expectantly, but her request took him by surprise.

"I need more freedom to walk and talk with others, or I get paranoid there."

"Ginevra," Severus began slowly, wondering what to reply. "We cannot take a risk." He purposefully said 'we', but it was not enough.

Ginny huffed. "We take a dozen every day already."

We do, and I hate to think of adding even one more to the list Severus thought, but waited patiently for more explanation. *Let's see how she would safely negotiate the corridors and use the library for her work.*

Annoyed, she went on, her voice rising. "I'm not inspired in our little room."

Severus stood stock-still. Angered heat rose inside him, which he suppressed as he was used to. *This is what we're talking about? Our little room bores her? Does she expect me to provide a suite and jacuzzi, maybe put up golden draperies?* She clasped her hand over her mouth, looking worried, and Severus wondered, not for the first time, if she possibly noticed his mood. No one else, not even Dumbledore, had ever managed to read him.

"The size and décor of our room don't satisfy the lady's taste? It doesn't provide her with enough stimulation?" he snarled. "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint."

Had she not stood in his way, he'd have left for the bathroom or bedroom. As it was, he looked straight ahead. Cold disappointment crept into his chest, replacing the heat. It wasn't an academic interest that bothered her; she needed cheap distraction!

"Severus, *don't* twist my words like this. You told me I have to speak out with what troubles me. Maybe I didn't select my words well, but I must get out of there—and I will."

"How can I trust your judgement in face of danger if you come up with totally immaterial facts? We're at war. You'll stay where it is safest."

Heat began to flush her face red, but she swallowed it down in acceptable time. Her brows furrowed, and Severus found himself observing and waiting, when he should have just left. Why had he been hopeful? What had he expected from a girl like her? She breathed in and out and looked at Severus once more.

With a soft voice, Ginny went on. "An ugly mirror or a too small chest *don't* trouble me; chipped teacups don't trouble me, Severus."

Severus could not help staring at her hands as they reached out towards him. He would not allow the touch, but they stopped mid-air and the gesture affected him more than he'd have thought.

"I cannot stand the closed doors and hours of dead silence. I cannot develop ideas without talking to others. Some can, but I'm not like that. I'm all wound up in there, and my essays suffer. Do you see?"

Something inside Severus warmed a bit, and while his stance hardly changed, the tension in his shoulders fell just a little bit.

"I must visit the library after dinner to work on my essays. Especially on Transfiguration."

Now she went to touch his elbow. "I know that it has dead ends and secluded areas, but it also has the books I need. What I collected so far," she continued, her arm swinging towards her bag, "is dreadful. Do you have any material on Transfigurations from one temperamental-class to another?"

For a moment, Severus contemplated if he had ever heard Minerva discuss temperamental-classes or Transfigurations between them.

Ginny's smug voice called him back when she said, "That's probably close to what I thought. Rumour has it that not even students from sixth form have ever heard of the garbled theory Flank developed."

"I'm more hopeful I find the theory on cultivation methods for Himalayan herbs somewhere here. They're a favourite of the teacher, although we don't have any in our small greenhouse. For hours, we perch on these stools, and she drones on and on. The rumours that the Dark Lord is unhappy with the Academy do not help either!"

Severus lifted his hand to halt her. "Ginevra, we'll work something out. Now, tell me what the Dark Lord wanted from you."

"Nothing new, I think," Ginny reported. "First, he stressed that he expects an exemplary performance from everybody. He envied us for having so much time ~~for~~ academic pursuit. Thank Merlin I stood second row. I was so much reminded of...*Tom*. Then he caught himself, straightened till he towered over the bookshelves and pointed out that the Academy wasn't the only place we could end up. Not that it was new to anyone, but he made less of a show of it than Mulciber and probably reached the very last one of my year as well. Albert Flint, the cheeky swank, stood next to me and shook like a leaf."

"The Dark Lord made us stand in single row along the shelves," she continued. "He passed along, pinning every single one of us down with a glare. Most stuck closely together, supporting each other, but a handful of pupils stood alone, straight and proud."

Her eyes fixed him eagerly when she added, "I have their names."

Imagining what havoc such a parchment would cause in the wrong hands, he burst out, "You didn't write them down?"

Severus received a glare as fierce as Molly Weasley used to shoot towards anyone doubting her cooking skills. "Do you think me a fool?" she asked. "I'd rather forget one of them than draw attention to myself that way—as we agreed to do."

A knot loosened in Severus' stomach, and he acknowledged her with a heartfelt, "Thank Merlin."

He must have used the wrong tone, though, because the girl wrought her hands and growled, "Well, thanks, I think, for not even trusting that I can follow an order that you cared to explain."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering how to proceed. He could not risk that she'd start doubting herself! If someone confronted her with a Boggart, and it turned into a dead Weasley... "Ginevra, please. You're far too often left to your own devices. I... I don't like it."

"I understand that, Severus. I don't like your nightly trips either. And yes," she added a little louder before he could interrupt her, "it is the same: I know that you're not simply strolling in the moonlight, although you did with the Bloody Baron." She shuddered at the thought.

When Severus didn't reply, Ginny continued, "The Dark Lord intruded my mind, and I let him search around any school-related item. Now he knows that I'm doing fairly well in Herbology, a bit better in Potions, and really well in Charms and in Defence. I have to work more—and I want to do so!—for Transfiguration."

"You didn't go for a better-than-your-average performance in Transfiguration?"

"Merlin, no! He already despises people who brag with the abilities they actually have. Overestimate your capability, and you'll be disposed of before you can muck up."

This was precisely their master's thinking, as Severus had had ample opportunity to observe. "I'm... impressed."

"I've been living with... him for a year, Severus."

Severus twitched lightly. Instinctively, he pulled her close. "How could I have forgotten about that? Ginevra, be careful. He must not suspect that you can control what you show."

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Glancing over a Transfiguration book that Draco had brought, Ginny saw Severus handling a long scroll with the names of all pupils. He added signs of +, 0, or "€" behind each name. When he went through a second time, she saw a zero and a plus at her own, new name, Ginevra Snape. The zero stuck out in the column where the minuses clearly dominated. This must be Potions. She had received a plus in Defence then. Whatever the signs meant, she agreed her performance in Defence was better, and certainly Severus wasn't one to deliver pluses in Potions easily. A zero was praise already, and it warmed her heart.

Severus also brewed a lot, and Ginny was to help and learn. They discussed stirring patterns she already knew and some new ones. Brewing with three different cauldrons at a time, Severus wisely divided his attention to all of them with a sketched timetable.

After a three course dinner they had prepared together, they relaxed in quiet conversation. Severus even opened a bottle of sparkling cider, and Ginny got some diluted with water.

Severus leaned back and recollected the information on Alchemy from the local Muggle museum. "At least partly, developing potions follows the principles they explained. Let's assume we wish to use frog liver. If a substance in there disturbs the potion, we can use a different kind of frog, or we try and take a toad liver instead. We might also add counter ingredients to compensate an effect. We usually know very well what substance it is we wish to counter. They said Alchemists would not be that analytical."

Ginny nodded. "At least you know. Analysing potions starts only in the upper classes, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Severus admitted, then took up the thread again. "The Muggles are, however, right that we don't extract the desired ingredients *from* the liver or try to remove an unwanted one from the potion. The liver is one ingredient. I shudder at the thought of disintegrating it as these *Chemists* seem to do. The magic would be lost."

Very slowly Ginny repeated this statement. "The magic... would be... lost?" She contemplated on the idea for a while, her brows and mouth working in concentration. "Is this why Muggle medicine for fertility produces a Squib?"

Severus focussed on her sharply. "That is one example."

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On Tuesday, Mr Ollivander was delivered once again. Before Ginny could bombard him with her questions about his customers, they all retreated to the lab, helping him brew the essences to soak unicorn hair.

Ginny wondered about the tiny differences that determined the temper of the wand.

"Let me see, sir. The strong acid of lemons on the wild unicorns, but the more moderate lime for hair from tamed herds like those around Hogwarts or those from Sweden or Spain. What does the wand search for in a wizard, sir, a match, or a complement?"

Ginny's jump from the academics to the application took Severus by surprise, while Mr Ollivander remained calm and encouraging.

"My great granny was certainly not timid, and I myself... I don't know if shy or tame describes me."

Severus snorted, received a glare and snorted again.

Ollivander said nothing at all, only fixed the girl with a curious look.

"Percy's wand isn't generally hard to operate," Ginny went on, "provided I hold it perfectly. George expects his to work even if wedged between his toes, and it does to some extent. It's a strange thing that one; it feels like rubber in my hand."

Severus had always felt that the Weasley twins had wound their way through life very much like an eel winds itself through water and was about to say so, when she added, "You know, I'd not be surprised if you told me that you mixed a soak when you produced it. Or, no, probably the unicorn was just exceptional for its breed."

"This... might be possible," the old man confirmed reluctantly. The thought of working one's wand with one's feet had clearly disturbed him, and he turned his attention to the cauldrons.

Before lunch, Ollivander opened a hidden sleeve pocket and presented a bundle of seven surprisingly short wands. He arranged them in a row along the dining table, encouraging Severus to check these lightning-wood wands. Soon Severus was engrossed with them. He hardly noticed his environment as he moved his hand over them and took some up to inspect and wave them.

Ollivander halted Ginny's questions and noiselessly opened his jacket once again. He laid out more wands with wild unicorn hair on the backrest of the sofa and beckoned his assistant of the day to inspect them. Hesitantly, Ginny went along the line. She let her wand hand hover an inch above the items on display. When her palm warmed up slightly, she gave the wand a wave and immediately produced green and golden sparks. It didn't feel bad, but was it better than hers?

A stench of smouldering sulphur wafted to them, and Ginny watched Severus fan the air without looking up. He was very occupied indeed.

Ginny's hand continued along the line. A yellowish-brown wand jumped right into her palm, warming it instantly. THIS one felt... perfect! With a light swish, she freed sparks of all colours, and the first uttered *Wingardium Leviosa* worked like... a charm. "Wow, I say!" she whispered.

She glanced over to Severus, but he was completely enthralled with another wand. Striking it lightly, he produced a bluish hue and his brows furrowed.

All the better! Quickly Ginny left the room. In the kitchen she went through the first lesson she had trained with Severus and Draco, alternating between this new, powerful instrument and her old friend. Yes, this felt perfectly workable. "This is a wonderful addition," she whispered as she clattered the dishes.

"You go about it wisely, I say. These wands are shorter on purpose; they fit into your sleeves easily," Mr Ollivander whispered. "You're destined for whippy, waning-moon walnut cored with a Madagascan dwarf-unicorn. A powerful combination for hexes and Transfiguration! Five and a half inches is just fine for this elegant wand," he continued in a low voice, while Severus was still transfixed with that wand of greyish wood. It wasn't much longer, and it obviously liked Severus as much as he felt affiliated with it.

"A fitting choice, that one, Mr Snape," Ollivander interrupted loudly as he laid out the cutlery. *Pistacia integerrima* from the Hindu Kush, felled by lightning. A core of Manticore tail-sting. Six inches, quite rigid. You'll speed up five percent immediately, I dare say, and far more if you train. Without losing focus, of course, sir." Severus would have to believe him for the time being, since the elementary spells hardly allowed for a comparison.

At lunch, finally, Ginny could ask about his shop and his customers, but the thought depressed the old man visibly, and they continued their meal in silence. Over dessert, Severus inquired how he was now faring. Ollivander reported that the directives had been kept to the letter.

He stood and stacked the bowls, sighing. "If I could take my young assistant to your wonderful lab again, sir?"

Severus weighed the risk and nodded. He retreated with a stack of essays while Ginny and Mr Ollivander descended once again to brew several finishes and start the marinade for the dragon heartstrings. Ginny noted down the instructions on how to finish it. When they emerged, there was no sign of the two rolls of wands, and Severus had finished third-year training with the new wand already. Introducing a third wand to his other two was much easier than getting the first one to accept a competitor.

At dinner Mr Ollivander told Ginny about some customers but refused to tell her the names or affiliation. Instead, he steered their discussion to wand cores. "Mrs Snape, what do you know about Manticores?"

Ginny recollected their physique being a body of a lion, but red, and a head with human resemblance but three rows of teeth. Its tail reminded of a scorpion, or dragon, since it ended in a ball with poisonous darts that the Manticore fired off at its victims.

"Is this how you collect them for a wand?" She shuddered at the image forming in her mind.

Mr Ollivander shook his head. "After contact with blood, the stings are deprived of their power. Remember also that the Manticore devours its victim completely, including their bones and clothing—and with them its own tail-stings, or darts. No, Mrs Snape, the daring people collecting tail-stings for their magical properties conjure images of

humans that keep the darted stings inwardly, unreachable for the Manticore. They must then tire the beast until it abandons its prey. In our modern age, they are reported to also use dummies, a Muggle invention to play car crashes. Manticore tail-sting hunters apply charms to make these objects resist the razor-sharp teeth of a Manticore. Still it is a very dangerous business, normally handed down from father to son in wizard families," he lectured. "Remind me, where would you look for a Manticore?"

"Look for? Beware of, rather. They inhabit the... caves in... Greece and in... Asia," Ginny remembered hesitantly. "The... south."

"Yes, today we find them everywhere between Persia and the Indian jungle. Originally, we assume, their realm must have reached Greece, which might somewhat explain the affiliation of Ukrainian and even Finnish wandmakers and wizards to this core, although over the last 500 years, there was no Manticore hunt in Europe. Today, Manticore tail-sting hunters almost exclusively come from the third lowest caste of Indian wizardry. Their family can prosper from their business, but will never reach a decent reputation."

For a long while, Mr Ollivander dedicated his attention to the lamb chops and vegetable before he spoke again.

"Indian wizard families often expect to be destined for a wand with Manticore tail-stings. I remember how affronted Mr Patil was when one of his daughters ended up with unicorn hair."

"One of them, Padma, is a Ravenclaw. Her twin sister Parvati, though, is Gryffindor, and her wand is... a bit peculiar, I might say."

"Well observed, young lady! As we discussed, the purely academic mind of a Ravenclaw rarely attracts a temperamental wand. My assumption is that wizards destined for Manticore would almost exclusively end up in Gryffindor or Slytherin. I had to sell an import to Mrs Parvati Patil," he admitted, clearly embarrassed. "The experience triggered me to resume my research in the field, and I stocked myself generously to understand their quality criteria. Who would have thought I would so soon be cut from supplies."

"Temperament, sir? Parvati uses her wand mostly for charming extra sparks on her golden earrings, conjuring fancy bracelets and all sorts of trinkets."

Mr Ollivander sighed, and Severus cocked his head in confirmation. Silence fell over the table.

"Sir," Ginny wondered eventually, wriggling on her chair. "Would one manage to make workable wands out of the sting of the Blast-Ended Skrewts, which Hagrid bred? Who could be destined for such a wand?"

Severus shuddered at the thought alone, but he bit his tongue. He enjoyed listening to the academics, especially considering that Ginevra was proving an attentive and creative participant. Her postures changed as rapidly as her threat of thought; a frown set her forehead into wrinkles or her eyebrows raised as she recalled half-rotten knowledge and made new assumptions.

"Those monstrous, crustaceous beasts I saw at the Triwizard Tournament?" Mr Ollivander asked, his knife and fork frozen in mid-air. "Merlin's beard, why would one try?"

She shrugged and left the table to reach for a book on magical beasts while she elaborated her idea. "They are an interbreed of Manticores and fire crabs, and they have a sting. I thought a research would be a challenge."

"Wand research is a quiet, if not secret, branch of wizardry, Mrs Snape. Wandmakers detected the properties of lightning-wood centuries ago, I assume, and yet there isn't a single publication on them in any wizard magazine. Knowledge is handed down through the generations."

"Ollivander, maker of fine wands since three-hundred-eighty-two BC," Ginny cited the golden letters over his door. They had been one of the first texts she had mastered at the age of five.

"382. Indeed." With sad eyes, the old man noted, "I'll be the last of the Ollivanders."

They continued their meal in silence.

When their master called Severus, he took Mr Ollivander along. Luckily they had been almost finished with dinner.

The plans on new attacks on Muggle-borns and attempts to breach into Azkaban took hours.

Returning, Severus found his young charge jumping up from the sofa to greet him, dropping the cooking book. On the table, however, he found not only scripts on Transfiguration but also notes on wandmaking.

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Essay grading or essay writing, wand training and household duties ruled their Wednesday until Ginny could not sit a minute longer. She made her way to Maud Taylor.

Severus had given her some advice how to behave, but at times she felt she failed utterly. "You are a strange person, you know that?" Maud asked when Ginny could not switch on the light to the cellar or retrieve the milk from the fridge, opening various cupboards instead.

"I know. You see, we live very secluded lives. This is almost the first time I've meet... someone like you," Ginny said hesitantly. "Can you just take me as I am? Please?"

Now Maud suspected they might be anthroposophists. "They have no telly, and often no cars, although I always believed they do have electricity."

"Yes," Ginny took the vague chance, "you're getting closer. Consider us something like them then, all right?" It seemed to satisfy Maud to have found a category for Ginny, and Ginny simply hoped it would not bring her into conflicts later. Whatever these antroso-things were, for the moment, she was glad they existed.

When Maud proposed a bike tour for the weekend, Ginny pretended to have other weekend plans already. "I'm not so sure if we even have a bike."

"Check that out before Monday next, will you? I'm eager to get out for a good tour, now that the weather is more agreeable. Hey, we could meet Monday around five. I have Volleyball training at half six. Want to watch?"

Ginny wasn't sure which pastime this was, but it seemed to be a sport, didn't it? "Can I write this down? I will have to ask."

"Who do you have to ask? Who are these two men anyway, the elder fierce-looking one and the elegant blond? If they are your relatives, then you would not even follow normal genetic patterns." Maud laughed.

"No, no, they aren't relations. I'm currently cut off from my family. If it's a comfort to you: my father and brothers have reddish hair just like mine. Mum calls her colour auburn, but..."

The distraction didn't quite work. "So who are these two then? Your boyfriend and his godfather?"

Luckily Ginny spotted an alarm clock. "Oi, that late? I have to hurry now. See you Monday next; around five if I can make it. Thanks for the tea!"

My gratitude goes to my betas, Savine Snape and Coshie, who showed great patience as they straightened my language and the plot.

I've also ordered a Butterbeer and cauldron cakes to Coshie and Sempra for their wonderful last-minutes support.

A.N.

1.

Newt Scamander's book is a little short on the Manticore, but then it isn't the only book on beasts. I checked the web for more. Among others it declared Persia and India as the home of Manticores.

2.

I have no intention whatsoever to compare JKR's wizards with anthroposophy—or any other philosophy for that matter.

My only idea here is that, as a typical Muggle, Maud feels more at ease when she finds a group to link Ginny to. A similar occasion will occur later with a different Muggle and a different philosophy. No offence!

It so happens that I know anthroposophists, some rather strict, others less so—all very nice people. I know more about anthroposophy than Maud. Also I know that the group is rather strong in Britain. As an educated girl, Maud would know of the name and have heard at least a few thoughts. Some fit here. That's why I chose them.

There will not be any thread of thought linked to it, and the topic will not re-appear. I purposefully do not compare any details with the wizard world as this would be inappropriate to my taste.

Unwanted Advice

Chapter 20 of 35

Ginny selects furniture and thereby learns about Muggle PCs.
Severus gets two pieces of advice that are hard to match.

Unwanted Advice

Ginny and Severus had just retreated after the first dinner of the period when a school owl delivered a neat packet containing two school robes in Ginny's size. They weren't new, but they were made from a decent-quality, soft but durable fabric.

The snakes on the clasps of one robe revealed its previous owner. With trepidation, Ginny observed how Severus applied what must have been dark curse revealer spells on it, making it flare and rustle. "I suppose I cannot prevent you from checking the robes for jinxes, but please, don't confiscate them for weeks to find a... a Hurling Hex."

Severus stared at her for a while, not answering at all. Then he continued his research, felt the fabric for any irregularities, seams and all. He shrank the garment until it might suit a gnome. He stripped off his own shirt, frock and coat, enlarged it and put it on.

"Sorry to disappoint," the mirror commented dryly, "but you don't have the cleavage or the waist for this charming cut."

Severus ignored Ginny's giggle as he stroked along his arms and chest, careful not to tear the tight seams. He moved and spelled arbitrary objects with Charms or Transfigurations Ginny had not seen before, although for more than one she supposed Severus had not quite expected the result he saw either. He repeated the lengthy procedure with the second robe, producing a useless, leathery glass bowl but steadfastly ignoring the witch hopping around him nervously.

Finally he nodded. "I cannot feel anything; maybe they are all right. You can start wearing one in our chambers. Take it off and inform *mé* immediately if it feels strange, or if anything at all seems amiss. We have not been equally careful with other clothes you were given, but this is more difficult: we don't know who had it in their hands before."

"What a charming robe for a fresh and spirited girl," the mirror exclaimed when Ginny turned to control its fit. "Take it in more at the sides, and you'll easily make a conquest or two this period."

With a swish of Severus' wand, the mirror frosted over, and its voice died in a choke.

:.:.:.:

Again the Dark Lord had attended dinner, and again Ginny found herself spending the evening alone. Drinking her fourth cup of tea, with several, rolled-up essays as her only company, Ginny suddenly felt like a copy of Hermione Granger. *Oh, Hermione, Ron, Harry ... what are they possibly doing right now?* Ginny had hardly thought about them in her time at the Academy, and doing so now left her empty.

She didn't know how long she'd been staring at the wall, longing for her friends, when Draco knocked. "In here alone? How about joining us for a chat? It will be all right, I promise." Eagerly, Ginny closed the inkwell and haphazardly pushed the papers to one side of the table. When Draco cleared his throat, she grinned, but returned and left a note for Severus.

Draco led her to a corner table in the Hall with two girls from her own year and Theodore Nott. The conversation started reluctantly, but the boys made an effort, and finally they had an amiable chat. To ease the conversation, Ginny revealed she didn't always feel too comfortable with Transformation, which she knew at least Florence mastered in her sleep.

The girls both had trouble with Defence as Ginny had already noticed. Heather, a reliable but somewhat naïve Hufflepuff, wasn't excelling in any subject, but then again she worked extra hard to compensate. She could fall into the category of the soon-to-be-wives, and with her house-background, she might even face re-housing.

Curfew for the students in their O.W.L. year or below was at 9.30 pm, and Draco accompanied the two girls upstairs while Theodore walked Ginny back. She used the chance to ask the shy boy about his favourite subjects. He did well in most, but he reluctantly admitted that he was struggling in Potions. "I just can't memorise all these cutting techniques. And how can these stirring instructions be so important?" He told Ginny about this and last periods' topics. They matched with what she had done with Severus between the periods.

They had long since arrived at the Snapes' but continued discussing stirring styles: which rod, which angle, which direction, when to stir in the centre, how and when at the outer side.

Severus and the Dark Lord appeared around a corner. Quickly, Theo bade Ginny a good night and left, bowing deeply towards their master.

"Academic discussions until curfew? This is how I like my students. Feeling well here, Mrs Snape?"

"Thank you, my lord. Yes, the Academy is a fantastic place to learn. It is so inspiring," Ginny answered smoothly, curtsying and lowering her head.

"And you've made some friends, too. I hope Severus isn't jealous." His piercing laughter reverberated in the small corridor and made Ginny's bones shiver, but she smiled innocently back at him, her mind freshly Occluded.

"There is no reason for that, my Lord," Severus answered while he tore down their wards.

Inside, Ginny hastily removed her things from the desk, excused herself and left for the private side behind the French door. She recalled the light talk in the group once again, while she heard the men discussing problems with the discipline. Yawning for the nth time, she decided to retire and went out, carrying her washing kit.

Not two steps out of the bathroom and Ginny saw a stressed husband checking on her before he replied to his master. Quickly she bade the men a good night and withdrew behind the folded screens.

Not a sound passed through the flimsy divider, but Severus appeared surprisingly soon afterwards, smirking.

:.:.:

At breakfast the next day, headmistress Mulciber announced they would divide the student body into two colours: Green lead by Severus and Silver lead by Professor Flank, the Transfiguration teacher. "You will be sorted in your first lesson today," the headmistress told them. "For the start of the next period, your dormitories will have been rearranged according to your colours."

Once again, Ginny was not sorted at all, and this time she told her husband. Severus received the news with concern. "I would have preferred fewer exceptions for you. For now, you'll join my assembly. Come then." Addressing her anger, he added softly, "Don't let it get at you, Ginevra!" She swallowed and managed a neutral face.

Scanning the assembled, Ginny noticed that in all years, the clusters of friends were broken up. Draco and Pansy Parkinson were Green and also Florence and Mandy, who didn't like each other. Florence's friend Heather and Theodore Nott must be Silver.

Severus explained that they would install a credit system similar to Hogwarts points, and there would be prefects from fifth and from sixth year.

"Further, as you know, the N.E.W.T. examinations are held at the end of the fourth period. After these students have left us, we will have more flexibility. To all well-performing students, the Academy offers a splendid chance to advance a year in their very best subjects."

He spat the words as if in doubt anyone would deserve such privilege.

"Should your performance in general be steady and well above expectations, you may be granted access to the lesson one year above you in up to three subjects, provided we can arrange the timetables. A flaw in even one subject blocks your advance."

Back in their rooms, Severus told Ginny that the Heads of Colours are granted a small separate office. "I have to move the office furniture from here over there. It is just next door, and I'll ask Professor Barnes to help me Charm a door. You can have your own desk here." He finished with the remark, "Besides studying diligently, you have something to plan now."

:.:.:

The Bloody Baron publicly declared he would be watching over all O.W.L.s students, independent from their colour. He always directed himself to Severus and steadfastly refused to heed their headmistress.

"That woman ignores the whole concept of a school," he complained late one evening in their private quarters. Frequently coming and going through their chambers, the ghost was obviously protecting her on Severus' plea rather than keeping her company while she was once again alone, waiting for Severus to return from the Dark Lord.

He wasn't one to be entangled in idle conversation, but he floated close behind Ginny's shoulders as she was checking through a catalogue of furniture. Severus did not insist on the cheapest model, but he expected her to select reasonably. Ginny conjured a measure and found that a Queen size bed would not fit into their room comfortably, but there was space for a Double bed of 4'6". Severus was tall, so she'd opt for the longest version: full seven feet. As she gave the measures, the catalogue presented her a beautiful four-poster. Made from reddish wood like the cupboard and chest back home at Spinner's End, its high, arched head was enchanted to show a family tree starting from the couple sleeping there and developing a new branch per child. A beautiful sample grew in the picture while Ginny was watching.

"Ambitious young lady," the ghost commented when the complex tree developed the first twigs for the great-grand children.

Blushing furiously, she turned the page and tried to ignore the chuckles above her. Thankfully, the ghost drifted upwards to inspect a dormitory.

Bedside tables? Well, they do come in handy, but there was no space here. She would first select the desk for herself. Some models came Charmed to endlessly provide foolscap or scrolls of parchment. Others had a strange-looking, blot-repelling surface and were recommended for children and the elderly. Certainly not! A Charm that would hold a book suspended in mid-air and turn the pages on verbal command sounded more reasonable.

On a hunch, Ginny took the catalogue to Professor Barnes.

"Books are neither solid bodies nor bulk goods, but something in between," he explained, leaving it to his visitor to draw the conclusion.

Ginny deliberated for a moment. "Ah, of course, that's because the pages are too loosely connected with the spine. Consequently, the Suspension Charm for neither of the two categories can be efficient."

"Correct, Mrs Snape. Whatever Charm the carpenter used will wear off within months."

Her professor had even heard of hexes that would send information back to the carpenter on what she was reading. "Also PCs, these electronic Muggle devices, can be contaminated with a similar function. The Muggles call it... *spyware*, Mrs Snape." He paused, and Ginny shuddered.

"You'd better invest in charming yourself clever bookmarks," he suggested. "There are spells that can memorise and link several pages with a common keyword. I'm always reminded of those when I see modern text editing programs on a Muggle PC."

Then they discussed the endless-flow quills and the parchment-providing Charm. "If you need not rein in yourself, they might come in handy. But of course you will have to pay for the stationery. Buying the Charm integrated into the desk will even bind you to only one provider who will dictate the price. I opt for a separate Charm that needs explicit renewal every so often." Reminded of her mother's shopping charm for groceries, Ginny readily agreed.

"Here, they advertise an Orthograph-Charm, sir."

"Oh, yes. Not the kind of spells you would need, Mrs Snape." The compliment made Ginny blink in surprise. He was right that her essays had shown far less of the nasty red marking this year. How could her sense of spelling and formulating straight sentences have improved this much? This flaw that she had been sure would stick to her forever, had not lost her points here in the Academy.

"In modern Muggle education, correct spelling has been neglected, and for many young people, a book is an unknown object. This new spell actually copies an idea from Muggle PCs: it corrects wrong spelling while you write. Muggles call this *spell checker*. It is historically interesting that we copied from Muggles here, while the spying Curse

was developed on the magical side at least five centuries ago. Muggles also have a grammar check, but it does not work perfectly, to say the least."

"It wears off?"

Now her professor smiled. "There is no such concept on Muggle PCs. They do the same, the VERY same, for thousands of times. It is rather the Muggle that... err... tires off."

He ended their chat, recommending that she invest into a back-supporting, adjustable chair and good mattresses. When Ginny walked back to their rooms, she smiled: the latter had been the heartfelt advice of a person with a stiff leg and back problems.

Her smile died when she arrived. A nervous Severus had already sent the Bloody Baron around to search for her and was pacing agitatedly when she entered. "Where have you been, wandering about all on your own?"

"I don't want a babysitter, Severus!" she argued with force, despite the fact that she knew of ill-wishers that he wasn't aware of.

Brushing his teeth in company has always been agony for Severus, yet today he bid his time to waylay Barnes in the bathroom. When the door opened, Severus quickly spat out and was about to berate him, when the old man lifted his hand. "I did accompany your young wife back, Severus. I merely used a Disillusionment charm."

Severus nodded in gratitude, his anger melting.

"She is such a refreshingly natural girl, Severus. Do keep her that way!"

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If he was not called to their master, Severus had to stay in his office until curfew of the older students, to be available for them. However, he arranged it so that he took a cup of tea with Ginny around her curfew.

He was pouring her a cup when she returned from the Great Hall with a sparkle in her eyes, reminding him suddenly of the girl he remembered from Hogwarts. Severus felt an unknown pain in his chest, seeing her behave like an innocent pupil for the first time in so many weeks. He had failed to realise how little she was allowed to act her age and how much she needed friends of her own age! Barnes' words popped up in his mind.

Ginny showed him the simple bed she had finally selected. "The reddish wood fits your furniture back home. It comes as a low one or a four poster, like this," she ventured, steering again free of the monstrous bed head with the family tree. Severus liked the plain model, no flourishes, easy to clean and polish, however, his vault would groan when the Galleons were withdrawn. There was a postless, budget version on the following page, but a four poster with a high bed head, testers and canopy was the symbol of wizardry! He'd get them one, and if only to spite his Muggle father!

The rest of Ginny's proposal found his approval as well. The only thing that he felt the need to comment on was suggesting the somewhat wider desk. Ginny's face twisted into a grimace. "Am I not working enough, yet?"

So much for keeping her the innocent girl, he thought drily on his way to the bathroom that thankfully granted him an unoccupied washing sink. Wetting the toothpaste, he jumped as the Bloody Baron appeared next to him, but decided to ignore the apparition.

After a while, the ghost said, "Your young lady was enthralled with the charmed family tree on one bed head." Severus looked up sharply, his brush stopping in his mouth. "I recommend," the silvery man continued, "to refrain from such a bed. If motherhood is denied to her, the tree will be a sad sight. Many a witch and wizard, from Slytherin, especially, wasted away being reminded of their unfulfilled hopes every morning and every night."

This was not what had shocked Severus, but the baron was right nevertheless. He even continued. "There are separate wall decorations available with the same charm. They make a splendid present for a mother after a delivery." Severus nodded, hiding his serious blush behind the curtain of hair.

Back in their room, undoing his trousers, Severus noted that once again, he had taken in advice with toothpaste running out of his mouth. Weren't the two somehow contradicting? Could a mother be 'refreshingly natural'? Yes, with all her overbearing, Molly Weasley had managed to be so to an admirable extent, Severus thought. So would Ginevra if he had his way.

Inching close to the subject of his musing, he gently laid his left arm over her belly and drifted away into dreamland for the last night at the Academy for this period. Tomorrow, Monday, they would leave right after breakfast. It was all arranged.

::*:*:

On Monday evening a loud plop would announce that a nervous, young woman had Apparated at the train station of Hogsmeade. The old station guard would see that her cloak was damp, her hair wet and her shoes soaked with mud. And he would note that he didn't recognise her, although, considering her age, he should have seen her at the station during her years at school. When she hastily looked left and right and all around herself, she would have a haunted look on her face as if she had just had a traumatic encounter. Yet, she would resolutely march to Hogwarts castle, now pulling her hood over her face as was common nowadays since nobody wanted to be identified by mere passers-by.

The Auror on guard three hundred yards further might see how her brows suddenly furrowed. She obviously contemplated over her most recent experience. Suddenly a thought would strike her, and she would shake herself. Her face would go neutrally blank, and she would slow down, continuing like any inconspicuous evening visitor, although basically the mere fact that a person would walk around alone at this time of the day was suspicious.

Panting from the brisk walk, she would finally arrive at the gates to Hogwarts ground where one of the guards would recognise her.

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Hugs and thanks to Savine Snape and Coshie, my supportive and creative betas. They went through the logic and the details in this chapter and made the text readable.

At the Henge

Chapter 21 of 35

Two separate parties arrange a special trip to Orkney.

At the Henge

Finally the last student of Salazar's Academy had found and activated his Portkey and was gone. Severus, who had carried a slim bag to breakfast, bent over to his wife, bringing his mouth close to her ear without touching it. "Hurry up; take a cloak and sturdy shoes. We are leaving for a trip." When she returned, he met her half way, took her elbow and steered her out of the house before the headmistress could stop them. He embraced her as if in a sudden romantic need, which worked rather well to keep off his colleagues, but instead of the expected caress, Ginny felt the familiar squashing of Side-Along-Apparition.

A stiff salty wind greeted her. "Where are we?"

Instead of a reply Severus quickly pushed a round paper weight into her hand. The world around her disappeared, as she felt the well-known pull behind her navel.

The new ground beneath their feet was a mix of rock and muddy puddles. They had landed in a deep ditch, which Ginny estimated at more than three yards deep.

Ordering, "Wait here, I won't be long," Severus donned a cloak he retrieved from his bag and walked up the brink. Ginny climbed up far enough so she could see and then followed him with her eyes. He approached a henge! Its menacing, tall stones glistened in the morning light. Ginny clutched her wand and didn't dare move farther. A strangely eerie feeling of lingering magic took a hold of her. The place didn't feel normal. Its magic had nothing protective; it was not reassuring at all. Very likely the ditch went all around the henge, Ginny thought and searched Severus out again. With his dark clothes and hair, he fitted so well into the gloomy scenery that Ginny felt goosebumps erupt on her skin.

His wand drawn, Severus circled once inside the ring of stones, sending spells in both directions: red fizzling ones to the centre, and invisible but humming ones outwards. The latter spells resulted in more stones being added to those already there. In the end, Ginny counted sixty tall stones towering over Severus' figure. He remained inside the ring and met with some indistinguishable figures. They were a lot smaller than Severus and sported long noses and ears similar to elves, but their bodies were of a sturdier build and they moved with self-confidence. Could this one be Flitwick? No, she decided, all these persons moved differently than her old Charms teacher.

Was it Dark Magic she felt? An ancient magic, which was not taught any more? Or was it non-human magic from the creatures over there? A shudder ran through her, in a mix of fright and cold. Here, in the humid, misty morning air, Mrs Nott's old cloak was damp and clung around her, unsuited to keeping her warm. She glanced over to Severus, who was easy to identify in the group, since he was by far the tallest one. The way he gesticulated, he seemed to have some trouble getting his wish.

Minutes later, Severus returned and noticed how she was shaking. "It is all right, no reason to be frightened."

"There's strange magic here, and I'm cold, too," she explained, her teeth confirming the latter.

Quickly, Severus turned and shouted towards the henge, "Wait a moment." He crossed over once again and had another discussion with gestures supporting his words. Knowing Severus, this was most peculiar.

..*.*.*.

He shuffled along the corridor to the room where she worked. Unwilling, as well as unable, to reach the handle of the door, he simply willed it open and entered maybe four steps. There he halted to get an overview. She was concentrating hard on a gemstone-crusted oblong crate that stood on a post in the centre of the spacious room. To make sure the intruder wouldn't disturb her, she had lifted her hand in a stalling gesture. As if he would! He was her senior manager, of course. Yet, her work was more important than tolling him respect at the wrong moment.

Her forehead shone with sweat that irritated his sensitive nose already; her brows were furrowed as she muttered yet another spell. Not loud, but he could see her full concentration. Observing her, he wondered, not for the first time, about the human sense of beauty. Her ears were small and lay always equally flat against her head—almost as if non-existent. How difficult it was for the young of his kind to interpret human emotions! How could that be considered beautiful? Her hair was fair, almost white and didn't show the tiniest of curls. The pale skin on her forearms and head didn't show a single spot, colour, wart, or anything that could catch the eye. She had nothing that made her outstanding. Equally, her nose was neither long, as he liked them, nor pointed enough. Yet, among his human subordinates, her husband was considered the luckiest person in the world to have caught her. Ironfist was pleased with her magical abilities, oh yes. But beauty?

The left joint of the crate buckled. She slowly moved her flawless, highly polished rosewood wand over to the right joint, which buckled soon after its neighbour. With a creaking sound, the lid of the crate opened, but the young woman wasn't fooled, Ironfist was certain of it. It would not reveal its treasures that easily, as she had learned in her two years as a Curse Breaker. She cast a stasis charm, went over to a standing-desk and quickly noted down how she had reached this state.

Returning to her task, she greeted him, "Maître Ironfist," thankfully without the irritating human habit of baring the tips of their teeth. He was equally thankful that she was a woman and remained standing where she was. Encountering a male Curse Breaker in the afternoon was torture to every goblin's nose.

"Mrs Weasley, I see you are proceeding. Could you, however, stop early today and meet me in less than fifteen minutes?"

"Eet ees no problem, sir. Do you want me to come een your office?"

"If you would. The sooner we start our special task, the sooner we are finished."

With these words the goblin left her. She removed the stasis charm that would have worn off within seconds anyway. A series of curse-detection spells made the lid of the crate flicker red; then the front with the already broken lock was bathed in a greenish halo. The next spell had no effect at all. She frowned. Had the crate been clear, she would have heard a hiss. Had there been a severe curse, the hiss would have been modulated and damped into a groan of sorts. But nothing? She took a look at the inner roof of the domed lid.

With a sharp snap, the lid closed, barely missing her nose. She, for one, was glad it wasn't longer.

"Eush..." she exclaimed and rushed over to her notes to jot down how to approach it next time. Deciding that she could not summon the energy for repeating the two joint de-frosting spells today, she stacked her notes and left to meet with her superior. It was past dark already, and her day would end in less than an hour. *What can he want at this time of the day?* She wasn't opposed to the idea of doing overtime, but this week it came most untimely.

"Mrs Weasley, will you crack our precious nut?"

"I got closair, Maître Ironfist. The lid closed itself with what I identified to be a timing spell," she told him, wiping her face with a white kerchief. "You indicated you had anoizzer task for me today?"

"We both have, Mrs Weasley. We are to meet a client. An important client, I dare say."

"A client? Oh la la! I'm not een the state to visit a client, sir. I would need to..." She looked down at her damp, wrinkled clothes that clung to her sweaty body. Considering his delicate olfactory-buds, she was surprised this high manager had received her in such a state at all. Normally the goblins held meeting with humans in the morning and avoided the curse-breakers' working rooms after lunch.

Ragnok entered, but kept himself in the background.

"Indeed. We'd do well not to disappoint him," Ironfist answered, waving his spindly index finger as if to scold her. Then he pointed at her. "Our client has specifically asked for you."

"For me? 'Ere in Eengland? This ees most unexpected. What can I do for 'im? Or 'er?"

"You are to identify his wife."

"Someone I know! Anozzer French woman!?" She got so excited, she almost forgot herself and smiled at him. Maybe *it* was worth a little overtime?

Ragnok growled, "I'm afraid not."

Her superior's response dampened Fleur's enthusiasm on the spot. She knew that his horizontal, forward-tilted ears indicated empathy, but this only enforced her disappointment.

"But I assume you will be very happy indeed." With these words Ironfist hopped from his high chair and went to the door. "Please freshen up. We need to buy clothes according to our client's wishes for you to wear. Meet me in twenty minutes at the back exit. It will be an exciting night."

Une soirée excitante? Our task will take the whole night, or at least considerable parts of it? Fleur was not pleased. In the week before Bill had to prepare himself for the full moon, he was most anxious to have her home. She had already carefully asked if she could possibly work less in these days and compensate during the three days he would transform and once again run wild, but the bank had not been co-operative. Goblins showed just as much prejudice against werewolves as wizards. Bill had lost his job immediately. Ironfist, the department manager, and Ragnok, her direct boss, had needed all their influence to keep her at all.

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Severus finally returned to Ginny. "All is set. We will return here at half past five." Not waiting for an answer, he took her elbow and Apparated her again.

"Severus, you are so lucky Frank knocked over all the porridge off our table and I hardly got any breakfast," she complained, now feeling sick in addition to frightened and cold. "Why did you have to mix Apparition and Portkey?"

"In here, then," he muttered briskly, visibly perturbed by her moan.

He steered her into a cosy little pub and ordered with the bored man behind the counter. "Two full breakfasts. Bring us a bit of everything you have, please. Tea with milk and sugar."

Soon they relaxed in the warmth of a humming and crackling fire. It was a Muggle place, and since most of the locals were at work, nobody cared much for the pair enjoying quiet conversation and an extensive brunch. They had been served a small, sweet 'breakfast trout' from Loch Harray as well as a variety of local farmhouse cheeses, one of which was a rich, soft cheese that somehow still tasted of the cow. Another one was smoked and a bit crumbly and had been introduced as Grimbister Farm Cheese. It was served with bere bannocks.

Seeing her tuck in, Severus assumed his witch did not miss the runny porridge of the Academy any more than he did.

He shortly told her, "Generally I prefer Apparition; however, as I'm sure you are aware, it's unwise to attempt to travel across open water by Apparition."

"We passed over the sea? Orkney?"

"Yes."

She visibly worked her brain at that confirmation. "A huge henge on a small ridge between two waters: Ring o' Brodgar?"

"Indeed," Severus replied, surprised she had recognised the location.

"Wow!"

She looked up, excited, but turning to him, the expression on her face changed to annoyed. "Don't goggle at me like a fish, Severus. I do know a few things. Fred and George plan to... ah, maybe you don't want to know."

Severus considered her a while and decided that yes, he would indeed prefer not to know.

A group of men arrived around noon. They sat at the bar, ordering crab sandwiches or other local food. Then they engaged in a conversation.

Soon the pair turned silent and paid close attention to the debate at the bar. How come several people have had such similar dreams? All saw dark, hooded men and women with silver masks walking around the old henge as if in rituals. Some people reported that in their dreams the hooded figures had also worshipped the Comet Stone, an isolated menhir close to the henge.

"The first one might have watched a horror video and dreamed about it. The rest just picked it up and wanted to be important," a man in oily dungarees declared. "Look at those people who report these dreams, none of them is a hard-working farmer or fisher. Most are—" he snorted "—*artists*."

"The doctor reported a dream of his daughter, though. He's a highly educated man."

"Townfolk from The Mainland," the first said dismissively.

Ginny caught Severus' attention and held his gaze. "A Muggle newspaper should report this. The Ministry could be prompted into action," she murmured.

"Muggle women accept the unexplainable easier than men. You go over and suggest this!"

"Excuse me, sir, did I hear this correctly, there are unexplainable mystical spectres here? This is most exciting, sir." Ginny addressed the man, while the proprietor was close. Severus put up a bored, disbelieving face. "Yes, Tobias," she turned back to him, ignoring his flinch. "They should have a reporter coming over. Certainly many people would be interested."

"No, thank you, Missy, we don't need those nosy newspaper folk over here," the first man told her.

"They drag photographers along," another continued, "and in their wake all kinds of... esoteric fools come and run around in our fields and disturb our cattle in what they call an adventure holiday."

Seemingly disappointed, Ginny shrugged and returned to her seat, but inwardly she smirked how clearly the glint in the innkeeper's eye revealed his smelling business.

For dessert they were served a huge bowl of strawberry and rhubarb fowl and local fudges. The proprietor was a bit disappointed that they would not taste any Orcadian wine made from local products. Finally, Severus tasted some and bought a small bottle of both gooseberry wine and elderflower wine, dropping another dismissive remark on these dreams to fertilise the seeds they had sown.

"Well done," Severus congratulated Ginny outside. "The innkeeper clearly took the bait."

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"Ever been on Orkney, Mrs Weasley?" the guard asked when she hastened to the exit, freshly showered and dressed in her personal, elegant burgundy robe with frills around the hem.

"Par les chevaux d'Epona, non!" She shook her head in shock over such a question. Ironfist, now next to her, sighed and asked the guard to have a Portkey at the ready when they returned.

"No word about it outside this building, do you understand?" her boss warned her, and the door opened at his wave.

"Now, our client wishes you to come to our meeting with two sets of new robes. He is quite specific about them, but I dare say you will not regret the purchase. We are to choose sets, where the inner dress and outer light robe can be worn together or separately, something that suits a young woman like you. He does not approve of red or pink though," Master Ironfist stated, knowing her penchant for scarlet tones. "He also prefers them demure."

Ironfist steered her over to Madam Malkin's, accompanied by the guard for their safety.

In the shop, Ironfist repeated the description, adding, "The lady needs one pair of shoes and a warm, black cloak going with both robes. The sets are to allow for pregnancy."

"Quoi? Maître Ironfist, I 'ave no need for such clothes, I am NOT expecteeng!"

"I would have hoped so. When you are, kindly inform me about it directly. The client desires to see you in such robes, nevertheless."

While Madam Malkin led them to the next room, Fleur muttered something French under her breath, along the lines that they could hardly afford her out of job as well. Loudly, though she noted, "This ees a most strange customer."

Ironfist stood and fixed her with his eyes. "Mrs Weasley, every customer is served, especially if he is as important as our current client."

Quietly she composed herself and whispered, "Should we not go to Twilfitt and Tatteeng's for such a reech man?"

"I said important, Mrs Weasley, not rich." Muttering more to himself, Ironfist added, "Not yet."

Fleur didn't dare ask which outcome of the war would make this specific client rich.

They were shown several sets of robes. Fleur would have liked a brown one with laces that her boss immediately rejected as "too frilly".

"Eet ees not," she started, but he told her he knew the customer's taste well enough, and the man would not approve. Disappointed she tried the set in green velvet Ironfist pointed out to her. "Sir, this 'as silver clasps and a snake woven into the material. My 'usband's family would not approve." So it was rejected.

Next they were shown an elegant, demure set in a shiny, yet not too light blue. Fleur beamed excitedly.

Ironfist screwed his ears to not blurt out any disparaging remarks about the feeble fabric with its softly falling pleats. Thankfully, none of the females of his kinship wished to look slippery and airborne like a stork-billed kingfisher. However, the goblin was well aware of the taste of his more human clients, and so he forced himself to praise the gown. "Wonderful."

The shop keeper commented on the material, how easily it would be taking on cleaning or ironing spells, and Fleur noted that it felt pleasant on the skin. The clasps were available in bronze, brass, silver or golden. Black was also an option, which Fleur discarded right away. Madam Malkin asked, "Are you a Ravenclaw, dear? Or feel related? Then take the bronze clasps." Fleur wanted to agree when Ironfist turned his head up sharply. "No, we avoid all houses. We take the... golden ones."

Brass would have done the job, Fleur noted to herself.

A silky, crimson inner dress of simple, comfortable cut with a matching outer robe of soft wool with thin, grey and wider blue stripes caught Fleur's eyes. "Maître Ironfist, this would be so wonderful."

"The colour is not acceptable."

Madam Malkin had little trouble with this harsh remark. "We have the same set in grey, the stripes in crimson and blue."

Ironfist inspected its material and seams carefully and nodded. The set was added against Fleur's slight protest that the colour didn't become her. She would so have loved the red set. Then she felt oddly nervous when Madam Malkin showed her how to spell the folded seams to get a step-by-step expansion over the pregnancy belly as well as the breasts. "Don't forget to undo here as well to get more length in the front." Leaning closer, the woman added knowingly, "Don't worry, love: your husband adores you whatever shape you have. A becomingly clad pregnancy belly is absolutely nothing to hide in any circles of society. Especially since the sight has become so rare these days." Together they refastened the expansions, and Fleur was told to put one set of robes on.

They found a wide, black cloak with hood made from fairly sturdy wool that was moderated by a soft cashmere component. It came with blue silk lining and felt wonderfully warm, soft, and yet durable. Again Master Ironfist selected golden fastenings. Black, self-fitting shoes with a darkened iron buckle completed their purchase.

The blue set and her own clothes were packed separately, and Fleur reduced the packets to pocket-size. Ironfist paid for their purchase one by one and collected the receipt. This all appeared extremely strange to Fleur. *Is it actually the client who has paid for my new clothes? Am I to attend a fancy dinner party?* In this case, of course, he could give specific requirements. But why two sets? Why colours that didn't suit her? And, would he let her have the purchase in the end? If not, she would definitely get herself this gorgeous cloak—the most expensive piece by far! Maybe she would even get herself the red set of robes, when her time came to wear such clothes. She and Bill had agreed to have a child right after the war—howsoever they would work out the finances.

..*..*..

The Snapes walked around the cosy, grey town of Stromness. They visited the piers from where so many famous British Muggle explorers had left for their adventures.

When they returned from the harbour, the door to a small Muggle museum suddenly opened. "We're closed outside the season, but you are lucky that I just felt like passing by today," the elderly keeper said. Severus led his wife in with a smirk. After they had learned about the geology and history from the Muggle point of view, Severus hinted towards a tapestry Ginny had failed to pay attention to. Behind it, they visited the exhibition of the wizard history of the archipelago. With a smile, Ginny understood the sudden urge the old woman had felt to open the house for them: the museum itself had felt their presence and compelled her in.

Ginny made her way to a display about the henge they had visited that morning. About their landing point, the ditch, Ginny read, "It has a diameter of over 120 metres (403 ft) and was once three metres (9.8 ft) deep and seven metres (23ft) wide. Muggles estimate it must have taken 100 people working ten hours a day for 80 days to carve the ditch with spades (a Muggle equipment for digging into the ground).

"Historical documents reveal," the information board went on, "that in fact the pillars were erected by a group of sixty goblins who were skilled in magical construction. They were working for five hours to set up the sixty pillars and draw the ditch." Ginny grinned.

They checked two souvenir shops, one Muggle and one magical. Amusing herself with the available knick knacks, Ginny left warmed up but without a purchase. Severus exhaled deeply and then drew in the fresh, salty air.

A shoe shop was luckier with them, selling a pair of fancy Wellington boots sporting red poppies to Ginny.

"Finally I can get around in the garden," she exclaimed and had him pack her wet shoes while she kept the boots on. "They are a useful memory of our visit!"

The local butcher made business with them, too, when they stocked up on joint of beef for a roast and more of the wonderful cheeses. Remembering their breakfast porridge, they purchased bere flakes, a local speciality enjoyed by Muggles and wizards alike.

The fresh air and their purchase had motivated their stomachs greatly, and they visited the same inn again. After a hearty meal in the warm and dry room, they faced the cold winds again as they left for the henge.

The wind whistled around the stones. Even in the centre of the ring, Severus had to shout as he introduced Ginny to two Gringotts goblins.

The withered creatures positioned themselves back-to-back between them, touching each other at their tilted-back ears and bare scalps. Spreading their bare hands outward, they concentrated until a silvery web grew out of their long, spindly fingers. It formed a ring around them. The web grew upwards and down to the floor until it had put all four of them under a dome of light that kept the rain and the cold wind outside. The goblins turned to face the humans, tilting their head at Ginny's distress. She stopped shivering and exhaled as the strain eased.

The older goblin explained that, lacking her papers, a trusted member of Gringotts bank was required to identify her. Then she would be handed her own key to their vault 1783, Severus Snape, now renamed to *family Snape, Severus Tobias and Ginevra Molly*. This meant she could withdraw money at Diagon Alley on her own as well as in the Gringotts branch in Hogsmeade and associated banks in wizarding Europe.

Ginny swallowed hard; this was a sign of trust she had not expected, nor did she feel she deserved it yet.

Further, so the goblin told her, her wand would be registered, and she would be entitled to pay bills from magical purchases in the most practical way: by tipping them with her wand in every British magical shop and wherever Gringotts had a partner bank across the globe. She could look at the complete list of countries, the conditions and the fees in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.

Her eyes went wide. "Severus, this is all *your* money. Nothing is mine! I could bankrupt you."

He replied stiffly, "I do believe you are my wife. So everything that is mine is yours, too, bankruptcy included." He inhaled deeply. "You will have very little chance to empty our vault," he added sadly.

Annoyed at the interruption, the goblin drawled on, explaining that she would feel a pull as the money left their vault, and from the intensity she would be able to gauge how much money remained. He suggested that they set a limit for a single purchase as well as a limit down to which she could empty the vault remotely.

Ginny nodded. "I know about that. My parents have the same mechanism."

When two figures approached, Severus and one goblin left the dome and went to meet them. The other knobby creature removed himself from Ginny and waited at the rim of the dome, his face still as if carved in stone.

Ginny Transfigured a stick into a chair, but her spell didn't work well, and she produced only a low stool. The goblin sneered at her. Despite the blurred vision through the dome and mist, it was easy enough to identify Severus. He was so much taller than everybody else. Two figures were undoubtedly goblins. The third and final person, standing somewhat aloof and fighting the elements to keep a cloak or coat around themselves, was a head smaller than Severus and thus possibly Ginny's size. Ginny could see Severus inspect this person, having the figure twirling and parading like a well-trained Crup. What was going on?

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Returning to Gringotts, they immediately took the Portkey, which transported them into a thin rain. On her left she made out a water surface, but could not decide if it was the sea or a lake. *Loch*, she reminded herself, would be the Scottish word.

"We are near to the Ring o' Brodgar, an old henge. This way!" Ironfist declared and stomped ahead. In the dark, muddy ground, Fleur had to take great care to keep her new shoes clean. Soon she felt equally sweaty and wet as after her fight with the treasure box. The cool, salty breeze dishevelled her hair, and the speed her manager expected on the uneven ground didn't allow for much dignity. *These British wizards have no style*, she thought not for the first time.

Ironfist stopped at a singular stone several yards before the henge. A cloud of shiny mist hung in the sky, illuminating their position surprisingly well. It seemed to deflect the rain and wind as well. Another goblin and a man stood under the cloud. "Our customer is waiting," the goblin said, indicating the dark figure standing there in the wilderness.

Forget your fancy dinner, Fleur Weasley!

"Mrs Weasley," the tall man greeted her with hardly a nod. "If you would take off the cloak and show me your purchase."

Vraiment charmant! He doesn't waste time on pleasantries, this one she thought. When Ironfist took the cloak, she shuddered in the sudden cold. Oddly enough, this seemed to go well with the client who had started circling her. His hooked nose gave him a predator's appearance, and his dark eyes bored into her as if to undress her. His creepy behaviour matched the place of their bizarre gathering.

"Take off the outer robe."

"But sir, eet ees so cold."

"Take it off now!" came his sharp voice. "Walk around a bit if you're cold. I prefer to see the dress in motion anyway." After a few paces, he approached her and examined the fabric of dress and robe, seams and all. His concentrated look met hers unexpectedly, but she held the gaze. "You are not pleased with this set," he stated. "Why is that?"

Fleur gathered her thoughts. This was a client, and he had already found out the truth *Be diplomatic now!* "Sir, the fabrics and the style are wonderful. I'd myself have preferred anoizzer combination of colours. The same model was available een red with the stripes een grey and azure."

"Understandable, for a person as pale as yourself."

Par la baguette de Circé, this dark beanstalk of a man is quite the gentleman He waved her to once again pace in front of him and finally seemed satisfied. "I will take it. Show me the other one now."

The order left Fleur desperate. Being demanded to freeze for a client was perhaps acceptable, but to undress in this uncivilised place?

The tall, intimidating man rolled his eyes and turned around, the second goblin took out the blue dress, and Ironfist wriggled his hands twice. Fleur found herself clad in the blue dress, while the assisting goblin packed the grey dress and robe neatly before shrinking the packet.

"Sir."

He scrutinised her again, making her turn in front of him. "And both models allow for... ahem, expansions?"

Oh, so he has feelings, somewhere under his high-closed robes? Well, somehow he has made his wife pregnant she thought. "Yes, sir. The spell ees quite simple."

"I see. The robe now, Mrs Weasley. Or maybe I should say Fleur," he added with a smirk.

Taken aback by the insolence, she had to swallow hard not to put him right. *He is an important client*, she reminded herself and slipped into the blue robe. It helped slightly against the cold. Again she turned left and right. "The clasps are not bronze, I hope," the man said, coming closer, touching the fabric and examining the golden fastening. "This is... acceptable." With a nod, she was dismissed.

Ironfist magicked her into her own clothes, and the man—who started reminding Fleur of someone she couldn't place right now—took a look at the shoes and the cloak. Ironfist handed him the receipt. The stranger lifted an eyebrow. He checked the cloak once again and suddenly looked far less arrogant. Fleur went over, picking her courage. "Eet ees a bit pricey, but to be 'onest I like the cloak best of all. Eet ees warm and so soft, but still durable. Eet weel look... *splendide* for years!"

"Very well." A tip of his wand on the receipt, and the whole purchase changed its owner.

Sadly Fleur let go of the cloak. "I 'ope they 'ave anozzer one," she murmured. Remembering what she had been told, she asked, "Where is the woman I shall identify?"

Ironfist gestured to the centre of the henge. A lonely figure sat in a dome of light. "Let's go over. She cannot hear you," Ironfist explained.

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The group outside Ginny's dome must have come to a conclusion. The unknown person and both goblins approached, while Severus held himself in the background. It was a woman, freezing, rain running down her face.

What witch do I know working for Gringotts? Fleur Ginny rushed off her seat to meet her, but could not trespass the strange dome. "Fleur!" she shouted with all her power.

Sounding distinctly bored, Ginny's guard ordered something, but Ginny was beyond caring. As close to the dome as the softly repelling barrier would let her, she hopped on her toes and waved and shouted.

"Ginnie!" Fleur must have shrieked in recognition. Painfully clearly, Ginny heard in her mind how Fleur would stress the second syllable in French style, although no sound had passed through the dome. The two goblins discussed with Fleur. She nodded frantically, gestured wildly. Did they not believe her? Why did they not let them meet? Oh, she would have loved to talk to Fleur. Yes, even the most remote member of her family was welcome to her these days.

Fleur stood still now, contemplating something. She turned her back to the dome. "Fleur, don't leave!" Ginny's voice reverberated in the small place.

"Keep quiet," her guard hollered out.

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The unknown goblin entered the dome and addressed Ginny. "Mrs Weasley has recognised you."

What? Is mum here, too? Oh, no, Fleur is another Mrs Weasley, of course Hopefully her irritation would not influence the identification process. The goblin scrutinised her. "We need to exclude Polyjuice and other tricks that would allow you to register with a wrong wand. Mrs Weasley assumes you can tell me the insignia on her wedding band."

Ginny let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. That was easy. Good thinking from Fleur! "It is white gold. The centre shows a pentagram of slightly convex strokes, and there are two diagonal cuts on each side of it," she started.

The goblin made no sign whatsoever, but when she did not continue, he asked sharply, "Runes?"

Oh, dear. They had discussed so many of them. Which one had Bill finally taken?

"There is only one," Ginny stalled. "Bill had selected three, but only one is engraved. The three were 'flying love' for she is part-Veela, 'new place for home' for she comes from France and 'internal beauty' for... no," she corrected herself, that was Fleur's for Bill, just a moment what was the last? "'Strength from the earth'. Yes, these three. I cannot say which was engraved, it wasn't important."

The goblin's ears tilted just a bit, but Ginny had forgotten what emotion this expressed. He discussed with Fleur who once again threw her arms in the air as was so typical for her. Finally they called Severus to join them. The goblin reported endlessly, Severus reasoning patiently but unrelentingly and eventually... YES, a minute nod from Severus over to her. Simultaneously, her guard asked for her wand.

With the help of the goblins' magic, they all entered the protective dome, and Fleur shook herself like a dog. Without further warning, Ginny found herself in Fleur's embrace. French kisses left, right, left...

"Ginnie, 'ow are you? What a lovely surprise!"

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Amazed to no end, Severus observed his young wife conversing with her sister-in-law. She had never expressed great affinity for her, nor had he recently noticed her being extraordinarily distressed over missing her family.

However, now that Fleur was her first link to her—previous life? normal life?—she sputtered little details of her recent experience, asked and answered six questions at the same time. Amazing, how these two communicated, both speaking and listening at the same time, rapidly replying and then asking a question of their own on a completely different subject. Still, he noticed with satisfaction and respect, Ginevra managed to steer their vivid exchange clear off dangerously wild waters.

Suddenly unsure of himself like a teenager, Severus held himself in the background, taking in the scene. Her eyes sparkled in a fashion he had never seen. Not with the warm adoration she harboured for him, which still startled him, but in a general expression of excitement. Every now and then, she would toss her hair around, smile or laugh at nothing in particular. She showed a merry joyfulness he failed to bring her.

A sound at his elbow made Severus jump. Griphook had cleared his throat. "The other wands?" Severus reached into his sleeve and produced his two new wands and took Ginny's new acquisition out of a pouch, explaining who owned which.

He was interrupted when someone tugged at his sleeve.

"Severus come over here," Ginny asked and giggled. "You have undoubtedly intimidated and scrutinised Fleur enough for tonight. Now you can show you have some manners, too! This is family! Consider yourself more than lucky that you are administered such a low dose first. Fleur please meet Severus Snape, my husband. Severus, this is Fleur Weasley, my sister-in-law. Now shake hands, will you!"

Both addressees exhaled deeply and concentrated their thoughts on Ginny to overcome the awkwardness of the situation. Since no discussion followed, Ginny huffed and started one herself. "I've seen you over there. What on earth were you doing? Did he check your ballet skills?"

In short words, Fleur explained she had demonstrated clothes, wizard clothes, obviously meant for Ginny. Then a thought struck her "Ginnie! You are not... 'E did not..."

she blurted out before she remembered just how the man looked like she was talking about, or how close he stood.

"I'm not what?"

Severus left the scene, hoping none of the ladies had seen his reddened cheeks. Quickly gathering her wits, Fleur reported, "The dresses and robes are suitable for pregnancy. Ginnie?" her voice dropped.

"Oh dear. No, I'm not. But it's good thinking. Don't be shocked now, sit down! Listen."

The stool elongated into a bench, and the story of Voldemort's intentions was told. Finishing, Ginny said, "I've been granted a delay until summer, till my seventeenth birthday."

Fleur was paler than pale, and her accent got thicker than ever. "Ow 'orrible. With 'im? And for now, does 'e expect...? Must you...?"

Just in time Ironfist announced, "We can keep the dome for ten more minutes."

Severus crossed over to the women again. Ginny declared, "Now, Fleur, it is an arranged marriage, but it truly is not bad. Listen, I want you to promise: No word about this obligation to Mum, or to any other Weasley. You can't even tell Harry or whoever else, all right?" At Fleur's desperate face, she looked over to Severus and then gave in, "Tell Headmistress McGonagall if you must."

Severus added in a serious voice, "Mrs Weasley, the alternative is that I Obliviate you now. Since the aspect is woven deeply into the selection of the robes, and we have no time to sort it out, you would lack these two hours and could not report anything. I truly hope..."

"Eet ees all right. I understand. They put Percy's memory into a Pensieve to examine eet. I will make a cut where needed. Women's talk." She attempted for a grin, then, thinking shortly, she proclaimed, "We stop discussing this right now."

Ginny exhaled gratefully. "The wedding came a bit rapidly, but we are really happy with each other. I hope Mum will believe this." She went to demonstrate just how happy they were and caught Severus in an embrace and stroked his cheek.

Ginny faced Fleur again, declaring in a single breath, "We live in a rather normal house and lead quite a normal life. You do not want to know the whereabouts, and I'm really sad that we cannot even exchange owls. They *must* understand."

Severus handed Fleur a small parcel. "This is enough for Bill and Lupin and one more."

Ginny looked up and back into his eyes. "Oh, Severus, you remembered! Thank you!" She pulled his arms around her and didn't let them go.

Holding his witch tight, Severus quickly instructed Fleur on this new variant of the Wolfsbane potion. He promised he would try and send the wobbly cakes regularly. He asked for their address.

Fleur looked highly uncomfortable. "I cannot..." Looking straight into his eyes, she continued, "...nor can I let my 'usband be ze lab Kneazle of a... a..."

"Fleur! How can you..."

"I understand," Severus interrupted stiffly, standing straight and sober again. "I have had two willing candidates for four months now," he told her. Continuing in a softer voice, he added, "and yet, it is, of course, only an offer. Take them with you. Lupin and the boy might want them. They can store the other rations for next time, but then they must be destroyed."

He was about to leave, when Ginny caught them both. "We've two more minutes. Was there anything else?"

With a highly red face, Fleur conceded. "I apologise, S... Severus. I will let ze men decide. Zey know you better. I cannot give you our address. *Whatan* I do?"

Severus took two deep breaths before he could turn around. "Nothing, but thank you for being a messenger to Molly and the whole family. I'm doing my best to keep Ginevra safe and out of harm. She is in no immediate danger."

He straightened up till he towered over the witches and declared with force. "I can say that she is safer than any other Weasley."

"Hey you, you're not just keeping me like a pet! You make me happy and content, and I don't mind telling them," Ginny pouted, reaching her arms up to grab his neck.

"Well, I'm glad if I manage a little more than provide for her safety," Severus added, straight-faced. "Good bye Mrs Weasley, Fleur." He shook her hand.

The women embraced and wished each other luck. Checking her watch, Fleur asked, "Sir, can I Apparate to 'Ogmeade? I manage the distance, but ees eet safe?"

"You have a Portkey to the Mainland? Good. Hogsmeade should be as safe as any other place. I suggest make haste to reach the castle gates."

They parted hesitantly.

After five steps, Severus called Fleur back. "Cut the memory before this. Here is a note to the Headmistress. It is personalised to her. No one else can decipher it. Yet, make sure no one even sees it."

"Eef I'm caught, I should spit on eet and eet turns blank?"

"Yes, thank you."

Severus hesitated again. "Would you hand us a strand of your hair for Polyjuice? It will only be used by women who need to contact the Order for refuge. I will keep it safe. Please decide quickly, I must Obliviate you from the request in any case."

She frowned shortly, then deftly pulled a few hairs out, noting, "Quarter-Veela!" Squaring her shoulders, she faced him to be Obliviated.

The goblins let down the dome and disappeared without a trace.

Fleur didn't look back. She waved, reached into her pocket and was gone.

Tears rolling freely, Ginny faced her husband, and they nodded mutely. They could be satisfied with the outcome. Seeing the exhaustion in her face, he gathered the parcels and handed her the Portkey. They landed somewhere in the Scottish highlands. Severus embraced her gently before Apparating them to the clutch of trees close to Spinner's End.

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With steady steps, a figure arrived at the school gate. Fred, one of the guards, recognised her. "Fleur! Where have you been? Bill is driving everybody crazy."

She panted from the brisk walk. "Listen, Fred, I weel send a replacement for you. I 'ave newsde *la plus haute importance* of utmost importance."

He rolled his eyes at the drama in her voice. The only dramatic thing he saw was that they could not afford a task force for stray wives.

Fifteen minutes later, Fleur had duplicated her memory into two Pensieves, one of them carefully steering clear of the special requirement for the dresses. A shaking Professor McGonagall had helped her with the spells, smiling knowingly when she heard there were tiny aspects Fleur wished to exclude from the public eye. In fact, the old teacher was moved and utterly relieved to hear that the two of them had even found time and subjects they considered worth of keeping between themselves. With raised eyebrows, she then pocketed the piece of parchment from her former colleague, not quite sure what to make of it.

The whole Weasley family except Charlie—and Percy, but who mentioned him?—assembled in the office of the headmistress-without-school. Harry was invited, and so was, on Fleur's request, Remus Lupin.

This arrangement left Hermione and Tonks for patrolling, and they stomped off, trying hard to keep their temper low. How could Remus be more important than one of them?

When Fred closed the door, Fleur started her report with being requested to interrupt her work and go. "Maître Ironfist arranged eet so that I 'ad no chance to tell anyone. And I 'ave to say 'e was right. Because we went to see Ginnie," she stated, pausing for the effect. She was not disappointed.

When Fleur could hear her own voice again, she quickly confirmed that Ginny had been in very good condition, physically and mentally unharmed. She shortly explained she had to go shopping and they had travelled to *the Orkneys*—Professor McGonagall flinched—where Severus Snape had expected her to present the clothes.

"Then they led me over to a 'uge dome of light inside the 'enge." She prodded the Pensieve with a flourish, and the dome appeared, Ginny inside, jumping and shouting noiselessly. Molly, who had been shifting in her seat all the time, almost fell into the slowly turning figure. When the picture had fallen back into the whirling, silvery liquid, Fleur told them how they excluded a manipulation by asking her to describe her wedding ring.

Ron and George stared at Fleur in utter disbelief. "What made you think she might know?"

Fleur and Molly snorted, and Arthur's, Remus' and Professor McGonagall's lips curled in a suppressed grin.

"Of course, she would remember ZAT!" Fleur exclaimed.

She shortly turned to Bill, saying, "And there ees more to say, but I tink we do that een the end."

"As I was saying, she did remember the carvings and the runes, and Maître Ironfist was satisfied. We entaired and talked while the goblins arranged for 'er access to Severus—that is their—vault." Her use of his first name didn't go unnoticed, but silence fell when she once again made Ginny appear out of the silver liquid.

Molly, Arthur and also all the boys had a very hard time looking at their lost youngest family member. Her over-joyful reaction to Fleur nearly screamed the presence of an inner loneliness, a lack of the safe harbour only a family could provide.

Harry reacted strongest to Ginny's affection for the despised Potions master, traitor and murderer. When she touched him, embraced him, caressed him, he jumped up, shouting, "He must have drugged her, or maybe he's using a spell? Imperius!"

Fleur shook her head, silently saying, "There was not a seengle indication for that."

The scene ended with Severus' regards to the Weasleys, "...She is safer than any other Weasley", and Ginny's reaction "...You make me happy and content, and I don't mind telling them." Then they heard Severus' presumably last words of good bye.

"Then we had to part," Fleur finished, and once again the cacophony of Weasleys and friends filled the room. Fleur was glad she had steered around the odd parts and went to embrace Bill.

Harry was outraged. "How can she be safe in that company? Who protects her from *him*?"

Ron's loud voice was to be heard over the rest. "And they are really married now? I mean living like a couple, doing..."

Fleur cleared her throat, stalling. "You'll understand that we did not 'ave much time to converse. I don't know. But I tink 'e is less 'orrible than 'e looks."

"That's bloody little relief," Fred shouted. "If he hurts her, I will..."

"'E certainly is attentive to 'er, and a very strong wizard," Fleur said, wondering what made her defend the man.

"Attentive?" Harry snorted. "Didn't you see how he jerked his head away when she was compelled to approach him?"

"Why did you let them go? Why didn't you take Ginny with you?! This was the best chance, maybe the last we'll get!" It was Ron shouting, his face red in fury.

Fleur had a hard time defending herself without revealing the demand to produce offspring. She knew she was not convincing, and before long, the younger men weren't even listening. Disappointed and furious, Harry and Ron left to fill in Hermione and whoever else was patrolling. Fleur's eyes followed them sadly. Fred and George shortly wondered if they should follow, but decided they rather wanted to gather the information on the Wolfsbane cakes.

"Remus," Fleur called the man over. "'Ere are these cakes. I don't know what to tink of them. Ginnie was positive that they are okay."

Remus, who appeared thinner and shabbier than ever, regarded them with relief; eagerly, if not to say greedily. "I don't know what Severus is up to, but I do trust his potions. He has never let me or anyone else down with regards to his brewing skills. If you don't trust them right away, I understand. Then we have stock for next time. Bloody hell, six cakes instead of seven times three beakers—this is progress!"

Seeing Fleur's fear, Bill suggested Remus try the cakes this time, and he would join in after a month. The potion didn't save him from the pain of transformation, and he was willing to take any step to make his wife feel less uncomfortable with his state—if only so she didn't lose her faith in him, didn't leave him. They had prepared the Shrieking Shack for the months without potion. He would bear it once more with nothing other than fear to keep him company. Fear in general, but especially the fear that he may return to an empty home.

Fleur held Bill's arm. "'E also said you are not a werewolf. Not like Remus or the ozzers. 'E still does not know details but something ees different with you, and 'e will try to find out."

"Yes, well, he is at the source of information," Bill replied dryly. "I certainly transform with enough pain, thank you very much."

"I know. Noting changes right now," Fleur said silently, stroking his cheek. "But you are brave and strong." She searched his lopsided, deformed mouth with hers.

Suddenly building up in volume, she continued, mock-menacing, "Mais écoute, chéri, why didn't you show me that beautiful wedding band Ginnie suggested?" Startled, Bill remained quiet until she explained, "I saw 'ER wedding band. So beautiful! They 'ave two runes. Only I don't understand why they chose yellow gold."

"What, yellow gold?" — "A Slytherin like Snape?" — "Did you see his band as well?" Fred and George asked what everybody wondered.

"She said eet is the same. Isn't eet normally?"

"With Snape in the game," — "nothing is normal," they continued in their famous way of completing each other's sentences. "Certainly not if" — "he marries our sister!"

Arthur Weasley was still cradling his quietly sobbing wife in his arms. In the silence following the twins' last statement, he opened his mouth for the first time tonight. "I'm still touched with what I saw, and I want to thank you, Fleur, for sharing this with us." General murmurs of agreement rose from the assembled. "We draw hope from these memories, but I must ask you for your judgement if the two appeared to be genuine."

"I 'ardly know the man. From le Tournoi des Trois Sorciers, the Triwizard Tournament, only. You can judge eef 'e is always so creepy. But Ginnie was very much 'erself. She ees missing you; probably she feels lonely. This ees to be expecteed, even with the nicest of husbands." Snorts from Fred and George accompanied this last thought, while Bill registered that Fleur was also talking about herself.

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"What makes you trust Fleur, Severus?" was the first question to spill from Ginny's lips.

"The very capable headmistress of Beauxbatons selected her as amongst the most capable students to come to Hogwarts. The Goblet of Fire chose her out of the dozen entrants from her Academy," he replied. "I've thoroughly investigated its magic ever since Potter was chosen as a fourth champion."

"Doesn't it imply that you should trust Harry?"

Severus harrumphed. "He was the *only* candidate for a fictive fourth school." Reluctantly though, Severus remembered how Albus had urged him to research under what conditions a school would be left without a champion if no candidate deemed worthy enough for the task.

"Ah, but some five hundred years ago, the Goblet refused to nominate any participant from Beauxbatons."

Severus huffed.

"Fred had engaged me in their research," she added, in a sort of excuse.

Hastily changing the topic, Severus encouraged Ginny to explore her new garments and went to the kitchen to store their purchased food. The bere flakes promised wonderful porridges and muesli for the coming breakfasts in Spinner's End. An exclamation of joy called him to the sitting room.

He stopped at the door as if stunned. "You look... fabulous."

In her new blue robes, Ginny gave the impression of a proud young woman rather than the fierce, juvenile fighter she impersonated on occasion. She held her head high and laughed enticingly. Quickly Severus closed the space between them and embraced her possessively.

Their caresses became urgent and demanding, their breathing was unsteady when the house alarm chimed.

"Oh, damn!"

"Mrs Snape, such language is not becoming of a young lady."

Ginny recognised the two werewolves. A frightened girl of about twelve years accompanied them. All gaped at the young lady in front of them. Severus, normally a very attentive host to the poor men, was extremely short with them tonight. He produced the twelve cakes, the rations for two, he had prepared. "I'll make more before Friday. She is welcome to join." Within minutes, they were dismissed.

"No more visitors for tonight," Severus declared with determination and pulled his wife towards the bedroom.

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Some of the Gringotts goblins greeted him; others looked away when Bill picked up his wife after work. They went to the jeweller and goldsmith. "Sir, could we see your collection of wedding rings again?"

"Mr Weasley! You are not in need of another pair just yet?" the man asked, consternated. They rapidly explained their errand. "Ah. Yes, I remember. A strange customer, I must say. Let me see..."

He opened a big leather-bound tome and followed down the rows with his agile finger. "Here, it was, December tenth, early in the morning. She had very clear instructions, and she needed them the next day. You know, Mr Weasley, I was wondering who this woman was. She wore jewellery far beyond my upper class collection and shopped her wedding rings of all things below her standards!"

"She came on account of somebody else," Bill explained.

"The young bride was most pleased with your work. She showed them most proudly."

"A *young* woman, you say?"

"Very young. Why do you ask?"

"It is unusual for young couples to take yellow gold. Also, the woman who came was... not young."

"What did she look like?"

"This was weeks ago, Mr Weasley, and she was in some form of disguise. But I recall how she was staring down at me, so she was taller than I am. And she was slim, too slim, looking unhealthy as if in grief or sorrow, if you get my meaning. The expression around her mouth was elegant, but bitter. Her own, most exclusive rings have contracted themselves over the years to fit her bony fingers. She had a commanding tone in her voice when she ordered, 'I wish to see the rings Mr William Weasley was presented!' No, sir, I don't miss her not returning here."

"This is how she described them?"

"Yes. Then she bellowed, 'Which is the band his baby sister would have selected, but he discarded?' She selected just this one, gave me the runes and the time limits. She even had the audacity to doubt I would have them ready in time." The man was clearly not pleased at the memory.

"As we said, your work was highly appreciated. Thank you for your time, sir." They had a look at his other jewellery but left without a purchase.

Outside, Bill said, "I still like my choice. It looks good on you. Do we check the clothes shop you visited for Ginny?"

Fleur made up her answer most rapidly. "Not today, Bill. My feet can 'ardly carry me."

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..*.*.*.

My betas, Coshie and esp Savine Snape, have been excellent partners in crime for this chapter. They helped develop the characters of goblins and set up the scenery of the henge. You're also saved lots of language problems thanks to their watchful eyes. You're great, girls!

Very special thanks go to Cyrielle, who provided me with Fleur's French exclamations.

A/N:

1.

The stork-billed kingfisher (*Pelargopsis capensis*) has bright-blue feathers.

2.

I've tried my best with the Orcadian specialities and the terms. When you detect mistakes, please tell me, and they will be corrected!

3.

In France, kisses on the cheeks (or in the air while the cheeks touch) is the normal greeting, a habit that is very much out of place in many other European countries. For a traditional British family as the Weasleys, this must be very awkward.

I've now heard that a 'French Kiss' can also be understood as a kiss with tongues involved. This is not what I have in mind.

Bikes, Beasts and Banks

Chapter 22 of 35

A Weekend at the Snapes' and another busy week at school.

Bikes, Beasts and Banks

The old bed squeaked precariously whenever Ginny turned in her fitful sleep. Unable to sleep himself, Severus regarded her hair, which shone fire-red in the pale light of the near-full moon, and mused about the previous day.

He had spent a whole day in her proximity and observed how she mutated from frightened to relaxed and how she first took in the local culture, Muggle and magical alike, and morphed back to the outdoor type who took deft strides and breathed deeply.

In the end, Ginevra had been tossed into her role as wife as much as a missed family member. And yet, returning to Spinner's End, the young, isolated witch had not been nearly as distressed as Severus had feared.

They had only three nights a week at Spinner's End during which they were unobserved and could fulfil the despicable curse their master had laid upon them. It was no surprise that Severus' sexual need had awoken, and the schedule didn't allow for a delay...despite any inner turmoil. He had once again admired the girl's strength when he was accepted.

Despite the mental stress and the thrice-damned mouth protection, she had even relaxed in his arms, and he believed that she had found her physical relief.

When the young witch finally ceased mumbling and turning, Severus closed his eyes, dozing more than sleeping.

A breeze of cold air called him back when Ginny was creeping out of bed far earlier than strictly necessary. Returning from the icy bathroom, she did not crawl back into the warmth but went to the chest of drawers. Opening his lower eye only, Severus surreptitiously followed her actions as she selected the one shiny, racy bra she owned, the one she had purchased from that lingerie shop in the shopping centre, Carlisle Lane. She picked up the necklace with the leopardess and donned the new, grey dress.

It was a woman, a young, but grown-up witch with a nicely shaped bust who turned gracefully and looked down herself to glimpse at how the skirt fell. When a smile lit her face, she radiated self-assurance and even satisfaction.

Severus felt the blood rush into his groin, murmuring his approval at his wife's choice of underwear.

Was she looking *refreshingly natural*? Maybe there was a hint of glee, but he was willing to count this as a very natural reaction, given her predicament.

The outer robe with the stripes attributed his young wife with the power he knew she had. In the brightening light of the morning sun, it accented the copper tones in her hair, dampening the carrot-hue just a bit.

Before slipping into the cloak, she stroked her cheek with its soft fabric. It fell gracefully over her ankles and truly charmed her. The new shoes were certainly more in keeping with a young witch's tastes than the old ones they had had to borrow for her. Severus was even more relieved to know that they were still in shape and not yet worn out by feet other than her own.

A smile still on her face, Ginny put on her casual Muggle clothes again and carefully placed the new garments into the wardrobe. Back being the sportive, feisty student, she fumbled in the pockets of her jeans, producing a crumbled piece of paper. "Damn! I totally forgot about that."

Severus allowed himself to wake up from her exclamation, and she explained about Maud's volleyball practice.

Glad for his young wife that she had made a little contact to the locals, Severus had no general objections against a friendship with Maud. Over breakfast, they worked out a common thread to follow with the Muggle family.

"I'll have to visit her and excuse my missing the date. What kind of sport's volleyball, by the way? Do the balls shoot like the darts of a Manticore? What properties do they have?"

Severus stalled, trying hard to keep his face neutral. He would not want her to be sorely disappointed of a friend she so badly needed. "From my experience, most Muggle

games are played with a single ball." *And they have no more magic in them than the traditional Quaffle from Gertie Keddle's diary* he added mentally.

"How do you associate them with a Manticore, a beast that Muggles believe to be a myth?"

She went to his shelves as she explained, "We did Manticores last year, and somewhere it said..."

Sadly, magical beasts were under-represented in Severus' collection, and she dropped her arm. "Well, in some additional reading, they used 'volley' as in 'the Manticore fires a volley of darts at its victim'. It's the only reference to the word I know."

She returned to her seat, frowning with annoyance.

"'Volley', that's of French or Latin origin and *voler* simply means to fly," Severus lectured. "The author of the book on beasts undoubtedly refers to the militaristic meaning of the word, 'discharge of a number of guns at once'. That describes the hunting technique of the Manticore."

Ginny huffed. "Yes, sir. I was trying to do as teachers always expect from us: use my knowledge and reapply it..."

"A reasonable request, nevertheless. Here, however, the game is named after the simple meaning, since the ball must not hit the ground. I believe its set-up is somewhat like badminton which we saw, although volleyball is a team sport. Every team stays on their own side of the net..."

"How does one foul then?" Ginny blurted out.

"One *does not* foul. Foul play is not the ultimate goal of any sport."

"You couldn't have told Slytherin team about that, could you?"

"The ball is bigger and played with the hands: no rackets," Severus continued, ignoring her question.

"And no brooms. Okay, I get the idea, I think. Sounds boring."

While Severus secretly agreed, he would swallow a Snitch before he said so aloud. "Give it a try!"

"I can?" Her eyes gleamed instantly. "Then perhaps next Monday...oh, blast; if we change the schedule, then Mondays will be school-days." Her disappointment was audible and visible.

Brows furrowed, Ginny added, "There is more: Maud wants to take me on a *bike tour*. Merlin's beard, what do I say?"

Severus stood and considered her for a long time. "I suppose it will not help to state that you do not have your bike here or that you are... eh... out of practice."

"Maud laughed herself silly when I said so," Ginny confirmed through gritted teeth. "I felt like a fool. All Muggles have bikes, right? She might conjure one from somewhere. Find, I mean."

"Very true. Deprived of Apparition, flying brooms, or carpets, Muggles see these vehicles as convenient for journeys or small excursions. Provided that one remains on the Muggles' artificial ways and streets... what is it?" Severus interrupted himself when he saw her grimace.

"Don't do that," Ginny blurted out, stomping her feet. "We're not at school."

When Severus failed to understand, she elaborated. "You fell into teaching mode, Severus. Look how stiff you're standing. Two more sentences, and you will conjure a blackboard and draw diagrams. But this is not a classroom; it is our home. As much as you hate loud arguments, I can't have you lecture me in here."

Our home. The statement washed over him like a caress.

Severus leaned sideways on a shelf, which wasn't comfortable at all, but as far from his teaching stance as possible. "Very well... as I was saying, Muggles use their bicycles even for transporting a picnic or shopping goods. They are silent and clean, in contrast to the motorised contraptions leaving behind a cloud of soot, sulphur, carbon oxides and what have you."

Suddenly, he moved. "I see no reason why you should not ride a bike, as long as you remain in the outskirts, on bike lanes or in the fields *not* in traffic." With a tilt of his head, he invited her outside. "Let's go into the shed!"

"You actually have a bike? You can *ride a bike*?" Severus' heart leapt in his chest as he saw Ginny's cheeks redden. Her eyes widened and sparkled in astonishment as well as excitement. He cleared his throat and rapidly moved on before he'd be caught staring at her, or worse, pull her into a fierce embrace. He wondered if their self-inflicted ban of kisses was a blessing or added more to the frustration.

The ramshackle garden shed held two bikes, a dark-green one and a smaller, reddish one. "My father insisted I learn it, and we went on a few tours," Severus provided on Ginny's questioning look.

"Did you like it?"

Staring out to the clouds, he took his time to answer. "He asked the same when I was thirteen. I had just made it into the Quidditch team. I was foolish enough to say flying a broomstick was better." His left hand had gone up to clasp his right upper arm, where Ginny knew there was an ugly scar.

"I need not learn to ride a bike if it returns painful memories, Severus," she said quietly.

"I was able to write after three days," he answered dismissively. "My dratted father is no reason to abandon everything that is Muggle. It would be all he wanted. Now, let me see." Severus didn't quite use the Muggle approach to repair and clean the red bike. It was done in ten minutes. He explained the basics and reminded her to stay on the pavement. "It is mostly a matter of balance. Given how you fly, this should not be a problem." Ginny swallowed, not wishing to reveal that she had not been flying three times a week, as he assumed. Severus applied a cushion spell on her knees and elbows before they left the little garden.

With a shiver, Ginny noted that they left behind magic as well, even if she had her new, short wand tightly fixed to her inner arm.

Severus had her push the bike a few houses down the street where the smoother pavement would be easier to negotiate with. The downside was that all houses were still inhabited and, given Ginny's age, curious heads started peeking out of the windows.

Eventually, Maud came out and walked or ran on Ginny's left side, while Severus, his wand at the ready in his right sleeve, insisted on staying on her right.

"How do I avoid tilting to the side? How do I get off quickly enough if I do?"

"Speeding up would help *you* with the balance," Maud said, panting as they stopped. "But then *we* get into trouble here. It would be easier to jump off a ladies' bike, but this one is small, which isn't bad either. Put your feet down when you must."

Taking turns by leaning in was similar to steering a broom. However, thinking of brooms, Ginny easily forgot that she needed to keep peddling. When she fell to her left

once again, Maud held her, brushing over her hand. She felt and saw the ring and double-checked. She gaped, but since Ginny was falling they were distracted before anyone noticed.

A few minutes later, Ginny rode with more confidence. Severus asked the two to continue alone. "I have business to attend. I will be in the lab. Miss Taylor, there will be excursions into town. Ginevra is not aware of all the traffic rules. Try the fields over to the east, where the path is tarmacked." Maud nodded obediently, and Severus bowed them goodbye rather formally.

After a few more goes along Spinner's End, Maud fetched her own bike. "This is a ladies' model, see?" she explained.

The bicycle gave Ginny a feeling of freedom she had sorely missed. *This isn't that different from flying*, she thought happily, when *CRASH...* she met the rough ground with a clear thud.

Her magically padded joints remained unharmed, but the heel of her left hand looked bad, her chin and cheek were bleeding. Looking at a gaping wound on her forearm, Ginny yelped, but her thrumming head, which felt about twice its normal size, did not approve of the sound.

Behind her, Maud had gone rather pale. "Let's walk back. I'll take your bike. We must wear helmets next time. Come along; I'll ask Mum to take a look at you."

While she picked up the bike, Ginny carefully rejected the offer. "Thank you, but Severus is proficient in medical treatment. Anyway, our home is closer than yours, but thank you for the offer."

There was no way of dismissing her new friend before they reached the door. "Ah, so this is the house." She investigated the front wall carefully. "Of course, I'll accompany you inside. Hey, isn't there a door knocker?"

With resignation, Ginny fetched her wand, tore down the wards and ushered her in.

Severus took in her appearance with a mix of surprise and amusement. "Acted your age." He coated her arm with a burning greenish ointment that healed the open skin rapidly, a process that Maud followed with curiosity. Careful not to touch her lips, he cupped Ginny's chin to check her pupils. "Headache, concussion?"

"Banged it on the gravel, thanks!" Ginny replied harshly. "Didn't see the bigger stone and flew off course. The bike requires your attention as well, I fear."

"Sit, I will fetch a headache... cure."

Severus located the potion easily but wondered how Maud would react to Ginny being handed a purplish, smelly drink instead of...*aspirin*, he recalled. He poured the potion into a tall, white china-beaker and pressed it into Ginny's waiting hands. "It's dissolved already."

A short while later, Ginny smiled. "I'm feeling all right now, thank you."

"Very well, but stay inside now. I need to go tend to my experiment; promise me you will rest."

The door to the lab was closing, and already Maud bombarded Ginny with questions. How on earth she had opened the doors and what fuelled these lamps if they weren't electric but didn't emit smoke either.

"Please, Maud, stop asking such things I cannot answer. I need you to accept that this is how we live, and although it is different it is just as effective."

"All right, I'll ask other things." Upon the threatening tone, Ginny felt sweat appear on her back. "Mr Snape, what is he to you?"

Dreading the reaction of her new acquaintance, Ginny started explaining that there was a struggle between two groups. That she could not go home and that Severus was a teacher and she lived with him now, in order to go to school.

Highly suspicious, Maud looked around. "Where is *your* room?" As no reply came forward her voice hardened. "What. Is. This. Ring?" She had her hands in her hips by now.

Ginny sighed as she looked at Maud. "You won't stop, will you? Yes, this is my wedding ring. I'm married to him. You are even right that it wasn't exactly our own deep desire, but we..."

With a shriek, Maud went for the door. Ginny jumped up. A red sizzling bow from her wand passed over Maud's head and made the door glow orange before Maud was there. "I'm sorry, Maud, I thought we could avoid that," she said while Maud rattled at the door that would not budge. With a defeated tone, Ginny called, "Severus!"

Ginny watched as Severus Obliviated Maud's memory of being inside their home and felt the loss like physical pain. On the porch, she said goodbye to a somewhat irritated Maud Taylor, who didn't even see their house properly.

::*:*:

When Draco arrived for their afternoon run, he found a despondent girl brooding over her books. He raised his brow. "No welcome smile for me, I take it." Ginny scribbled furiously and did not even look up.

Draco wondered why she would not come along, and Severus answered lightly, "She has had her share of fresh air and fun today."

Grimly, she nodded. "Right. I'm concentrating on my Transfiguration text. I really need to try and perfect my skills."

"Indeed."

"I'm tempted to blow you a raspberry, like Peeves. Coming from me, it would be a really wet one, too."

Relieved to see that it wasn't a dispute between them that held Ginny in the house, Draco swallowed down his curiosity.

The men renewed the wards on the house and ran while Ginny most obediently dug her nose into the books and parchment spread around her.

All through dinner Ginny eagerly told Draco about Fleur, but she didn't reveal anything Draco might have trouble keeping a secret. After a surreptitious kick from his mentor, Draco finally asked to be shown one of the dresses. Raised to play the polite gentleman complimenting just about everything a woman chose to wear, he found himself utterly surprised at the elegance the young witch revealed wearing the new blue dress.

"This is... You look gorgeous! Severus, be careful. You might quickly lose her if she presents herself like that. To me for example!" he exclaimed.

"I might have a word to say in such a process," Ginny warned him. "But I say as much: I'm grateful to the women loaning me dresses. Yet, it feels so much better to have my own clothes now. They are of today's style and, yes, I think they suit me. Thank you so much, Severus. Uh... I think I should have said so much earlier."

Severus sent her the most reprimanding glare he could manage while she had her hands on his shoulder. "Indeed."

"Oh, you, don't you try that way with me!"

Seeing that his attempt to intimidate her failed, he conceded gladly. "Your happiness was thanks enough. I agree, Fleur and Master Ironfist chose well. It was far from easy to persuade the master. As for describing women's clothes from man to goblin..." He rolled his eyes meaningfully.

:.:.*.:

Under strong persuasion from Severus, Ginny kept a strict schedule, grudgingly admitting that he had a point: she was not to risk her chance to advance in a course! But she also kept herself busy since in her spare times her mind wandered off to Fleur, or she found herself wallowing over the loss of Maud's memory, and possibly her friendship. The latter she could not even correct in the following break.

Severus was mostly found upstairs, but he came down to prepare lunch. When he burnt the toast for the second time, Ginny was drawn into the kitchen. "What's up?" He looked frustrated and pensive and had no reply.

After lunch, Severus checked Ginny's essays, adding a list of questions before he went upstairs again. *No, I will not add the stirring techniques for plant solutions to a Herbology essay*, she decided. But the powers of their wild variety in potions depended on when they were collected. The point fitted in here before potting techniques in a glasshouse. She pointed her wand to the right place, incanted, "*Addendo three inches*," and filled the created space.

A door being closed sharply brought her attention to the mysterious events in the upper floor. Severus came through the concealed door, his wand drawn. The tip was emitting blue sparks. "Sparks of frustration," Ginny testified in a sing-song voice, "indicate too much willpower paired with a wrong access."

"Yes, Professor Lupin!"

"Don't smash the door. You like these books," Ginny warned. "I haven't even read them; wouldn't it be a shame?"

"Indeed. Since the door is used by... guests, Draco and you, I mean," he added, not willing to reveal anything about Wormtail, "these books are not dangerous. Except for your O.W.L.s. How is it going?"

"No blue sparks. So, better than your work. What were you practising?"

He stared out of the window. "A spell."

"Who would have guessed!?" she huffed.

"Dinner?"

"Don't you try to change the topic, Mr Snape. What spell?" A little softer, she asked, "Care for some support?"

Severus stiffened and had his old scowl back in place in no time. "I do not need cheery bystanders," he pressed out through clenched lips.

Suppressing her first thought...that she wasn't a Slytherin...she declared, "I'm not... looking for that. I know to differ between kind support and malicious joy." Against his doubtful looks, she added, "I don't want to impose, but sometimes even a second-year can help. Observing, reminding or asking the right questions, you know."

Severus looked... frustrated...and something else. Ashamed? Ginny could all but see the thoughts circle in his head. Finally he came to a decision and explained his problem. "It's a spell you have already mastered but I cannot seem to manage."

"But then I can help! Oh, I'd so like to!" Ginny jumped eagerly on her toes. "I'm feeling so... inferior. Please let me help you. Let me teach you! Only this once?" She ran into his arms, her eyes sparkling in anticipation.

"Inferior? You?" Severus closed in. "You are teaching me every day, Ginevra." The situation called for a kiss, and they had a hard time avoiding each other's lips. Eventually, Severus took her hands. "Professor, if you would give me remedial lessons?"

"What is the spell?"

He dropped her hands and looked away. "Patronus."

Ginny's eyes brightened. "Oh, yes. We trained it in D.A., facing all kinds of problems. Willpower isn't yours. You're not stuttering like Neville. The memory then." It wasn't a question, yet she stopped, prompting for a reaction that did not come.

"Something truly positive."

Severus didn't move.

"When I managed a silver cloud for the very first time, I was thinking of my first ride on the Hogwarts express. The anticipation! Friends! Finally learning all my brothers talked about. Doing it. With them. Meeting... ah, well."

"Meeting the Potions master they had been enthusing about," he provided.

"Not quite." She punched his chest lightly, but then she became all too serious. "Places and things Tom had written about in the diary. And... Harry. Goodness, I had a crush on him, you can't imagine."

"Ginevra! You are talking to your husband!"

"I was talking to my pupil, but a teacher's crush isn't a topic for that either. Although... maybe your first crush is *suita*..."

"NO." His voice alone had her jump back.

After they had calmed down, she related thoughtfully, "Harry succeeded first with Hagrid telling him he could leave his uncle's house to become a wizard."

"At that point I feared for my mother. I had good reasons, I might add."

"Your letter wasn't as unexpected, either," Ginny admitted. "Show me then."

She waited.

Waited a long time.

"Mr Snape, I have given you a concrete enough task." Ginny's voice, her small lips and stern look imitated Professor McGonagall frighteningly well.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he finally voiced, sounding unconvinced. Something silver steamed out of the tip of his wand and dissolved immediately.

"Splendid!" Upon his glare, she explained. "Those who failed forever in D.A. didn't even get that far."

In true lecture mode, she explained, counting with her fingers, "The Patronus represents happiness, hope, and the desire to survive. Search for them individually.

Happiness? Collect a few. Write them down if it helps. After dinner you'll search for hope. Before bedtime you write down occasions when you felt a strong desire to survive. Concentrate on one at a time."

"Yes, professor."

:.:.*.*:

It was later that evening, when they had cleaned the table and the house was quiet, that Ginny broke down.

Severus had been expecting this to happen and withdrew to the bedroom with a book, giving her space to recollect herself.

Instead of reading, though, Severus found himself pondering what to do with her, how to prepare her for the next period at school, where she would have to face the crowd as if nothing was amiss. He once again cursed Dumbledore for the tasks the old strategist had assigned him. Save the innocent, indeed! Barnes wanted her to remain *refreshingly natural*, and the Bloody Baron couldn't see her being confined after childbirth early enough.

Never had Severus' lack of skills regarding how to handle a distressed teenage witch been more painful than this evening. He knew even less about the needs of a wife in despair, and the concept of future-mother-of-his-children was too frightening to even think of.

When she timidly knocked before entering the bedroom, as if suddenly it wasn't hers anymore, fear and despair gripped Severus' heart. The pain was stronger than he had imagined this tinted and long-lost organ of his could possibly hurt. What would she now demand?

Puffy-eyed, clothes creased and dishevelled, she simply stood there. Severus dropped the book and sat up slowly, but ready to jump. After a few choked attempts to speak, she breathed heavily and stated, "I need a hug."

Feeling stupid as much as relieved, Severus complied.

She snuggled until she was comfortable, and her heart and breathing slowed down. Severus marvelled how her soft, warm body felt just right next to his.

He had learned how to hug, but he had yet to understand when it was appreciated.

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After breakfast Severus produced the lists, if you could call them lists, with two or three items. He'd give any student hell if they delivered such poor work at school. "Severus, I cannot believe this. Were you looking for the right things?" Ginny had the presence to avoid asking for the lists outright, although she was bursting with curiosity. "Could you name one off the 'hope' list to me?"

He cleared his throat. "Bellatrix and the Vow. My hope to pay her back."

"No, Severus, this isn't hope. This is about frustration and a desire for revenge. You feel hope when something positive happens and you see there might be more of it in the future. A potential for that. Happiness?"

He huffed. "When a murderer is stopped won't count either, I assume."

"It won't. Nor the death of anybody, even if you feel they deserved it, and even if it prevents further deaths. We checked this from a book. Actually, Hermione did. She bombarded us with the collection of the invalid British memories of two centuries. We nearly kicked her out." The memory brought a small, warm smile to her face, and the corner of Severus' mouth twitched slightly.

Ginny imagined and combined what she knew about her husband. Sadly, she noted that he most likely would not find anything in his childhood, where innocent happiness should dwell. Later then? As abstractly as possible, she formulated, "You once made a... drastic decision in your life. Why was that? Wasn't there a hope behind it? And desire to survive?" Even inside their house, they didn't voice the name Dumbledore, but she imagined he could settle for his drastic decision to turn to the headmaster.

Severus tried again and procured an indistinct silvery shadow that morphed and tried to take shape before it faded.

"Better...a lot better. One of the components might have still been missing or perhaps you failed to concentrate. Happiness, Severus," she started again. "Hope and a desire to continue, to develop a future; what memory combines these? Didn't you take such a step rather recently?" She stroked his cheek.

"I destroyed it all," he pressed out, unwilling to continue.

"That was temporary, Severus. A misunderstanding we've solved. Try, love!"

He blinked. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A semi-transparent cloud whooshed from his wand. It hovered in the room; it took shape, developing a longish body of about four feet, two quite massive, wide arms and other, smaller extremities. Suddenly, it puffed away. Severus fell onto a chair. His shirt was drenched, his forehead shone in sweat. Blue sparks escaped his wand.

"You're getting there," Ginny said, holding a glass of water she had conjured leisurely. "Still, you're doing it with too much willpower." But Severus did not look happy. "Why the sudden end?" she probed.

"I cannot use you that way," he croaked.

"What?" She chanted the spell, and the most elegant silver-chequered leopardess prowled around them. It went over to Severus as if to lick his face. With a flick of her wand, Ginny cancelled the spell and looked at her tired out pupil. He needed a break.

On a hunch Ginny took her second wand and examined it. "I've never tried a Patronus with this one." Her right thumb glided along the smooth wood. "They aren't a Transformation and yet, maybe the magic works differently?"

Her new leopardess was a good deal smaller, but stouter, more muscular, and certainly as capable of driving away a Dementor as the other had been. "I was thinking of our wedding, Severus. All the people in the foyer, seeing you, then Percy. How nervous we were. Us, speaking the words. Looking into your eyes."

Severus tried with his second wand, and the longish body formed again. The arms developed, growing claws...no, pincers.

A huge scorpion! Its segmented, erectile tail ended in a foot long stinger. Its carapace sported the median eyes plus two pairs of lateral eyes arranged to grant it overall view. Its longish claws menacingly parted the air.

"This monster demands at least two beakers of anti-venom," Ginny exclaimed in joy. "I bet it is highly poisonous."

"Suits me, then?" Severus asked lightly, cancelling the spell. He was breathing heavily and for once his eyes glimmered and twinkled.

"Admit it already, you like the beast!"

"I do." Even more though, he liked the memory of his young wife rushing to him and pushing him to the bed after she had explained the Stimufidelius.

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After lunch Severus declared they had an errand in town and would prepare the paperwork now. He procured what he called his Muggle identity papers and cast a complex variant of a copy-spell on them muttering, "Ginevra Molly Weasley".

Ginny scowled at the result, as it was creased and smudged and flimsy compared to the pristine papers he had.

"Excellent," Severus smirked.

In town, he made her sit on an adjustable stool in a Muggle photo booth and after a few flashes, a set of tiny portrait pictures appeared that needed to dry in a warm stream of air. Considering the size of the whole booth, Ginny was impressed by the magic...no, technology, inside.

The new, crisp photos were aged to match the papers, and then Severus fixed them at the prepared square. "Here you are; please pocket your papers," he suggested, enjoying himself greatly at her disgust.

They walked up to a big office building and entered what was called the Registry office. The secretary smiled widely at them. "Everything is prepared, if you please follow me?" She turned to her colleague, adding, "Marlene, you're needed."

Half an hour later, they left a somewhat confused Registrar...he had congratulated them several times over, addressing them in various names...as a married couple.

The officials had predictably taken such insult at the state of the young woman's papers, and since, conveniently, she had had the required pictures at hand, she was now in the possession of brand-new documents. It would be valid until the EU-regulated versions could be retrieved in the same place.

"You could not have told me before why they had to look like they'd been retrieved from a Niffler's nest?" Ginny accused her husband.

"What would have been the fun in that?" he retorted. "I prefer using original documents. We will set a restoration charm on them that will return them to their original shape minutes after magical manipulation. The procured ones are more difficult to protect against the simpler forms of fraud."

"Did you add two years to my age to avoid any trouble with the Muggle authorities?"

"It was much easier this way, and we need it now again." With these words, Severus led her into another, much more impressive, sandstone building with pillars, bays and balconies.

"Let's go in here. This is my bank."

They passed by tall boxes in the foyer, strange apparatuses with red numbers, and posters with laughing, happy people in front of posh houses and new cars or elderly people enjoying the Mediterranean sun.

Although many people were waiting patiently, they were the next ones called forward to a counter. The clerk took the green marriage certificate from the registrar and Ginny's papers and went to a grey box in the corner. He returned with what he called copies of these documents, although they were only black-and-white and plain paper.

They had to sign several contracts that Ginny only hoped Severus understood in detail. The basic result seemed to resemble her access rights to the vault at Gringotts. She received a small, stiff card, and Severus asked the clerk to show to her what the card allows her to do at the tall boxes, the ATMs.

On their return, they stopped at an antique bookshop, and Severus rummaged through the shelves, but found only a battered text on arachnids in general. He decided to double back to the bigger bookshop, which was no help. They made a strike in the library, though.

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Sitting on the sofa, enjoying his tea, Severus familiarised himself on the beast that was his Patronus and its relatives. His scorpion mostly resembled *Heterometrus longimanus*, the Asian forest scorpion. *Maximus*, he added mentally. Reading on, he remarked, "Does Hagrid consider scorpions boring?"

Ginny lifted her quill mid-word. "Huh? I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"He must have skipped them in your education, judging from the fact that you missed an important point. My Patronus has huge claws, compared to its body," he lectured. "This usually means that its venom is not very poisonous. I'm disappointed you do not know more about such an important animal."

"Yes, well, I still have two years to my N.E.W.T.s," Ginevra answered lightly and finished the sentence on her parchment. Just a day ago, Severus would have found nothing at all important in scorpions, now he had to show off.

Silently she considered him. He seemed in an exceptionally good mood. "Severus?"

"Hm."

"Could you show me the enforcement spell you used on my Patronus when we were under attack?"

"After you have finished your assignments."

"Bossy slave-driver."

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All pupils of sixth year and below would leave the Academy on Monday after breakfast, but the N.E.W.T.s candidates were to remain and take exams under the watchful eyes of representatives from the Ministry.

Their teachers had to be present during the exams as well, and therefore Ginny could not return home over this break. Severus had declared he was not willing to leave her at Spinner's End alone.

During Herbology, Ginny wracked her brains searching for arguments to stay with him. "Mrs Snape! Watch what you are doing!" Resolutely, she pushed the thought away and bound the leaves of the suffocating algae tightly together so they could not wriggle themselves around any parts of a body. She could not afford a mistake with this teacher, she reminded herself. She received no further comments from her in this lesson, which was the highest praise there was.

With the prefect system in place, there was less turmoil in the classrooms or corridors, although Professor Barnes sported little green horns for two days. On the second day, his classroom was incredibly clean and organised, Ginny noted with a grin. He must have been learning.

The seventh years showed serious cases of nerves in their last week of preparation. They were allowed into the library all day, while all others were banned.

Contrary to the inhabitants of the crammed dormitories, Ginny could retreat to their own rooms to avoid the tense atmosphere in the Great Hall, and for once this appeared an attractive option. However, one evening Severus and Professors Slash and Barnes had been called away before dinner. The ground floor was empty and creepy. She didn't dare stay there alone.

Therefore, after dinner, Ginny asked Draco, Theodore, and the two girls along. Heather looked horrified, but Draco pointed out how much better their work would proceed

down there. "Severus has all kinds of books. We don't need the library, we can talk about our experiences, and we can even practice."

Florence cocked her head and gauged Draco with a sideways look as he delivered the first name of the feared Potions master.

"I even have a complementary book on Transfiguration," Ginny added.

"No need for that," Florence snorted. "How about Charms? I cannot make sense out of the textbook."

"We own at least four more books."

"Who would have thought?" Florence muttered, gathering her things. "I'm ready."

With five of them, the room was crammed, but it wasn't as hectic as upstairs. Decisively, Ginny opened the French door, so that she and Draco could sit on the bed, writing on their knees. Theodore got the desk, and petite Heather folded her tiny legs and used another chair Ginny brought from the office as her table. Florence tried the desk first, slipped down to the floor and eventually sprawled on a rug. With the window ajar and warm tea every now and then, the place was far cosier than the noisy Great Hall.

Hours later, Draco fetched the second visitor's chair from the office and discussed slicing techniques for Potions with Theodore in a low voice. Desperate, the boy reported, "Last week I finally got the chunks of the dahlia stalks in even ¼ inches, but the potion turned an ugly green and fumed."

"Oh, yes, I recall that. The chunks had been so even because you forgot to change to a flint blade. The carbon steel knife was easier to handle, sure, but at the same time it causes a reaction with the surface. NEVER use a carbon steel blade on a *Phalaenopsis*, if you have an acid brew."

The girls congregated around the armchair and trained wand movements for Charms and then the newest spells for Transfigurations. For the third time, Ginny had now successfully Transfigured one of her shirts into a glass bowl and aimed at it again to produce a rose. "Remember the thorns," Florence said. The strange object was close to a flower, all right. It even had thorns...at the rim of its petals. "Now really," Florence whispered and shook her head while Heather tried a neutral, but friendly face.

"Your turn," Ginny said, shoving another shirt to her silent friend.

Heather frowned in concentration. The shirt became a bowl, which was the easier step. Thinking of the rose already, she had made the bowl pink and not a bit transparent. "Is this allowed?"

"It would be, I assume, if the material was glass," Florence said, taking up the pliable object to regard it. She bent the rim of the bowl. "This here looks and feels more like leather. You'll never make it to a rose from here." She waved her wand, and there were two shirts again. "Right, try again," she commanded and leaned back quietly. The other girls cleared their throats and concentrated again, not making a sound.

Draco held his wand at an angle of 45 degrees while Theodore stirred an imaginary potion holding his wand at the same angle, concentrating hard to follow the eight-shaped slope they had drawn on the shelf without changing the tilt.

It was utterly silent until a rich, male voice rolled like thunder over the assembled.

"A party?" The dark undertone cut through their concentrated thoughts like a knife. Momentarily all five had lost the ability to move.

Ginny was the first to react. "Severus," she exclaimed. "You're back already!" She went over and touched his upper arm in affection while not daring to embrace him in front of pupils.

"More like a work meeting, sir," Draco reported solemnly, standing straight. "It was my idea, considering the noise in the Great Hall. I am sorry, sir. We'll clean up and be gone within minutes." The other three still didn't dare lift their faces.

Severus held up his hand. "Will I still recognise my office?"

Draco and Ginny nodded. Except for fetching the visitor chairs, they had not touched it.

"In this case you may continue for half an hour. I will accompany Miss Brookhurst and Miss Hestrop to their dormitories and excuse them." Upon their astonished looks he added, "It is past curfew for the undergraduates, but I dare say you are not misusing the time. Go on! I'd like to see a few of these... eh... roses later. And I'm bound to suffer Mr Nott's stirring skills tomorrow in any case." He prepared a jug of tea and left.

"You take my shirts for yourself, and I take his!" Ginny whispered and fetched some.

They transformed even more glass bowls into... well... something. "I don't understand you!" Florence exclaimed. She reTransfigured the odd vegetable into the glass bowls and explained with one of them. "The open side becomes the petals, of course. You need individual ones, thin and soft; fragrant, if you manage. The bottom of the bowl must elongate, change its colour and substance."

Desperate now, Ginny tried with the petals only. This didn't work at all. "What an idea!" Florence shook her head. "How could the petals live on top of the glass bottom?" She rapidly aligned all eight bowls on the floor, and after eight strong spells, they were replaced with a line of roses, each a little smaller but a shade darker than the preceding one, each with 2-4 leaves and a thorn or two. The boys looked up sharply, distracted by the scent. They exchanged a knowing look as they returned to stirring imaginary porridges.

On a hunch, Ginny went back to the cupboard and exchanged her wands. Hadn't Mr Ollivander said the new one was good for Transfigurations? She had proceeded with it until the middle of fourth year, maybe jumping a year ahead would not harm?

Florence had reTransfigured all her roses to glass bowls. Heather's training material was soon shirts once again, and she was aiming at the first. Yes, this one was certainly a glass bowl. The rose was... a flower... probably.

Nodding, Florence handed her the next shirt, not paying attention to Ginny. The boys were busily stirring and slicing air. Ginny felt the rush from the new wand as if it was eager to prove itself. She chanted the incantation and saw... a rose. Whilst not a perfect example of a rose, it was not a cauliflower either.

She tried again, and...wow!...this was a rose! Severus' other two shirts even smelled like a rose. "Got it!" she exclaimed and quickly pulled her wand up the sleeve. "Whatever it was, it is gone."

When their time was up, Severus was greeted with a set of roses and a cleaned-up room. "Thank you for having us here, sir," Draco said seriously when they made their way to the dormitories.

Ginny was frowning when he returned. She showed him once again how she had done it. Severus recognised the short, new wand immediately but didn't show any reaction. "What else do you have tomorrow?"

"Potions first, then Transfigurations and Charms. After lunch it's Herbology and Combat Flying."

"I'm glad that you'll be really well prepared for Transfiguration this time. Do try and return your books before they become all muddy," Severus said, closing the distance between them and holding her tight. "I hope the day was worth it."

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Over the long break, Ginny stayed with the Malfoys. She or Severus, who came for the nights, were freed from all household chores, which was a change and, in a way, even welcome. Narcissa gave them a guest suite and insisted on letting her elves go over all the Snapes' school clothes. While they would not admit it openly, both Ginny and Severus felt that their backs were grateful to get a full width bed all for themselves for the later parts of the night.

Upon Severus' request, Ginny didn't only do her own homework but discussed Draco's as far as she could understand it. Professor Windeye's British Beasts and Geography was identical anyway. Duelling and Charms were not a big problem. Nor was Potions, surprisingly. Although she had not heard all of it before, Ginny knew the theory of Draco's previous period well enough to follow Draco's explanations. "Theo wasn't too bad the last day, but he'll never be a great brewer," Draco opined.

The two took a run-and-hunt session through the Malfoy grounds. Draco warned her that the grounds held several traps and insisted she keep close. He took a few sharp turns, even cut the corners through some of the flowerbeds and Ginny, although panting, knew better than to deviate from his path.

By Wednesday afternoon, the last exams Severus had to supervise were over, and he insisted that they go back home. With Ginny using her new wand, they had the house re-spelled before tea, and for a glorious moment Ginny knew that she had been really up to par.

Finally alone, the Snapes could discuss the wand issue. Ginny was still 'under probation'...or whatever her status was...and their master had not authorised a second wand. He might never do so. Professors Barnes or Flank had not remarked on Ginny's different wand, but why this was so wasn't clear. They didn't really expect any difficulties coming from the friendly old teacher, although one could never know. But Professor Flank was another issue. Actually, anybody who might have spied and observed Ginny could have realised despite her care.

Ginny did many Transfiguration exercises alternating her wands and concentrated on the difference.

With the new feeling for Transfigurations in general, she felt a lot more confident with her old wand as well. This is how they decided to continue. She would use the advantage of the second wand for her understanding, but never again in lessons or the exams.

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I consider myself very lucky to have Coshie, Jingjingchiquita and Savine Snape as my betas! They not only find the prepositions and terms I'm missing, they also help develop the characters and go through every sentence to get the chapter into shape. Thank you, girls!!

Accio Firebolt!

Chapter 23 of 35

Ginny has to pay for the new bedroom furniture. Flying lesson disaster!

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters or the Harry Potter universe, but I love them. Your reviews are the only reward I crave.

It's been ages since I posted, so let me remind you of the school system at Salazar's Academy: lacking permanently engaged elves, they can't keep school up all the week through. There are only four days of lessons a week. Everyone leaves school after breakfast for three days with two nights in between. Severus and Ginny sometimes leave the night before. Students and teachers return for the night before the next set of four days schooling, called a period.

During N.E.W.T.s exams (previous chapter) and O.W.L.s exams (coming...), the school is vacated except for the year that's examined and staff. This break is a day longer, and the period shifts for a day. This fact isn't really important, but it might confuse you (and it should confuse the Order).

This generally allows five nights and the weekends full of D.E. activity for the parents, which is as much a goal of the school as is teaching. Saturday and Sunday, when the parents would not work, are among the school days.

The system comes with school days packed with lessons and a lot of homework over the free days.

Accio Firebolt!

They started the fifth period on Thursday, and after the chore-free break at the Malfoys', Severus felt new energy in his system. Despite the sunshine, Ginny dragged herself to the Apparition point in a grim and listless manner.

"We have to harvest crocuses next break," he noted lightly, but received a far too forceful reply.

"I hardly have anything else to do!"

Severus stopped and took her bag from her shoulder, efficiently braking her stomp. He tilted her face towards him with gentle pressure. He didn't need Legilimency to know what troubled his young charge.

"You have not had time to stomach the meeting with Fleur. Despite her assurances, you still don't know enough about your family, and you could not even afford dwelling on the thought because you've constantly been under observation."

Ginny blanched, her lower lip shaking.

"Ginevra, another four days and we'll be in our own place again. You will not give in now. You can hold out for these four days because you must. Breathe deep: in... and out."

Colour returned to her face.

"Others can count the days as well as we can, and they know how hard the last days have been on you. So there is no knowing who might try and break into your mind. Did Narcissa pry in?"

Now the young witch snorted, and her chin went up.

"She did. Several times in fact, and she showed the sensitivity of a troll ordered to tap dance."

With an effort, Severus kept his face straight. "Yes, her technique is lacking. But she tried. The mental dances of our headmistress can compete with Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake."

With his hand on the small of her back, Severus led her further, and she set her feet more gracefully now. He enforced her determination, saying, "I don't think we could have arranged anything differently, Ginevra. Next break will be different. We should also make time for Miss Taylor."

"For now, I suggest that we take the longer walk around the allotments."

As they walked briskly, a fresh breeze came up.

Severus sighed inwardly. Within a month the stink from the murky water in its concrete-regulated, Muggle-made stream bed and steep banks would fill the air, and by June it would become unbearable. He had never missed Spinner's End during the summer.

At Hogwarts, up in Scotland, the winds would still be harsh, but their school was considerably further in the south...although the pupils didn't know exactly where...and the weather would be much more agreeable.

With the sunshine and higher temperatures, serious outbursts of hormones would incapacitate the elder pupils while the younger ones would hardly rein in their urges to move long enough to brew a three-ingredient ointment. He would work them out hard in Defence in this period and encourage Slash to do the same in Duelling. This was the strategy that had helped at Hogwarts, provided that the Defence teacher was up to his task, which had been rare enough. Remus Lupin, Severus had to grant him that, had understood the problem and planned his lessons accordingly hard for the spring weeks.

Upon second thought, Severus concluded Lupin may have had easy access to the problem, thanks to his years as a Marauder haunting the grounds of the castle.

Severus growled. Lupin, McGonagall, the Order... annoying as they were, Severus had to ensure they reached their common goal. His letter to Minerva had been a dare, but with Fleur Weasley as a personal messenger, he had considered it worth the risk.

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Even with the seventh-years gone, the students sat with their elbows touching in their Not-So-Great Hall.

Severus finished his supper with record speed. A note in his hands, he strode towards Ginny before she stood from the dinner table. The first- and second-years around her fled in such panic that he raised his brows, wondering aloud, "And what prank have I missed here?"

Ginny smirked and shook her head.

Severus held himself in a relaxed pose...for those who could read him. "Come down to our rooms," he requested evenly.

A giggle erupted, and Severus glared at the perpetrators.

A stout, balding man, clad in black with red accents and the emblem of the carpenters' guild on his chest, and a young, gangling youth in simple, working robes, pimples decorating his forehead, stood at their door. Several tall packages were propped against the wall. Severus led the men in and addressed his wife with a serious voice. "You ordered this lot, I recall. Now you need to pay."

Never had Ginny paid a greater sum! From her husband's vault, no less! Hesitantly, she accepted the embossed, parchment sheets that formed the receipts for bed, bedside table, and desk. She stared at the crest of the company, but she could not concentrate on what was written there.

She observed the carpenters levitating their old, worn parts out of their tight space. The young one earned himself a reprimand when he allowed one to bang on the walls. "Generations back, our elders took great care in producing these fine pieces. You do well honouring them."

The cabinetmaker levitated the longest parcel and unwrapped solid, wooden boards and four plain, gradually narrowing columns with swirly wand movements, banishing the cardboard, padding and yarn right away. Whipping his wand, he conducted the parts in mid-air and assembled them to a four-poster. He steered it to its place according to her directives. It was gently lowered to the ground where its foot-long feet shortened or elongated just a little bit until the frame stood perfectly even.

The widest packet contained the rectangular tester in one piece. It was levitated on top with ease.

As the cabinetmaker took a critical look at every joint, a squashy parcel jumped into the bed and burst like an egg with an impatient chicken inside. Their new mattress unfurled. It stretched and bent like a cat, reaching for all corners to gauge the available space until it smoothed and lay still and inviting.

Ginny's new working desk was put together in an equally thorough way and placed where Severus had cleared the room. It, too, beckoned for a touch and for being used. The drawers glided softly, and their scent of cedar wood, the best material against pests on six or more legs, filled the air together with wax and finish. But a desk remained a desk, and Ginny already dreaded the many hours she would sit behind it, brooding over assigned texts. She turned back to the bedroom.

Cautiously and slowly, the apprentice assembled the small, simply built bedside table under his master's watchful eyes. The pieces touched the mattress, and his master's grunt sent shivers through the boy's body.

Ginny took in the new appearance of their bedroom. She inhaled the wonderful smell of new wood deeply and let her hand glide along the smooth, freshly waxed surface of the bedside table. Severus placed his book on Dark Detectors and *Quidditch through the Ages*...courtesy of Draco...side by side, and the room felt a lot less arbitrary.

"Vastly improved," Ginny acknowledged with honesty. "We can easily get us some matching bric-a-brac to brighten up the room." If Severus was surprised, he didn't show it.

An impatient tapping interrupted her. Expectantly, the carpenter pointed at the stapled receipts on the shelf. Nervously, Ginny read the whole parchment twice, including all the small print. "Three months warranty on the spells. Is this normal, Severus?"

"This is a standard delivery receipt," the younger man commented. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, eyeing the Potions Master anxiously. Receiving a frown, he jumped so severely, Ginny felt pity for him.

She quickly closed the distance to Severus and made him scan the parchment. He nodded. Relieved, she flattened the document carefully, signed it and prodded the sum with her wand, clearing her throat before speaking the incantation. A strong sensation seared from her shoulder into her arm and index, as if something lumpy and unwilling had been pulled out of her arm. With a gasp, she looked up. Her fearful face relaxed when Severus tried hard to keep his features neutral.

They quickly accompanied both men outside. Severus Obliviated the information of the school before sending them off with a Portkey.

Back inside, Severus kept himself a few yards behind Ginny as she joined her age-group for studies.

"Well I say, that was a quick one," Mandy commented with a sneer when Ginny entered.

"Imagine yourself in his place: would you stall?" her neighbour sniggered. Noticing their teacher at the entrance, Mandy dropped her quill. The two most rapidly refocused on their parchments.

"I received a decent desk, wandcrafted, beech and cedar, and I had to supervise the craftsmen and pay for it. It's been well over ten years since I had trouble producing a

smooth signature," Ginny commented dryly and proceeded towards Heather and Florence.

They began to prepare for Herbology the next morning. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Severus approaching Mandy but quickly concentrated on how to harvest the syrup of Virulent Veronica. "I read we tap only on the west, but why was that?"

Clearly nervous about what might just have happened in the teachers' quarters, Heather shyly replied, "It is best explained here in the 1875 Almanac of the Crazy Cropper. Remember that the bucket must be emptied around sunrise. See what happens to the harvester approaching from the east, covering the sun?"

"Yack, virulent indeed!" The plant of maybe four feet height was spraying the poor witch with its syrup, which contracted unyieldingly. Her face gradually turned shades of red and purple as she struggled and wriggled in the hopeless attempt to shrug off the sticky mass. Her eyes protruded from their sockets, her movement stilled, and she became all limp and lifeless. With a crack, the suddenly brittle mass popped off and sank into the soil. The painter must have immensely enjoyed the thought of pain and agony.

"Couldn't we then harvest in the late afternoon from the east as well? Or approach it from the north at noon?"

"Ginny, think of the plant!" Heather shook her head at so much ignorance. "It needs the sunlight to close the wounds and regenerate. This is also why we must set the Virulent Veronica isolated, on a hill or into a high crate. It was the Voracious Verbena from last week that regenerates over night."

"Oh, no! I will have to add an inch to my essay for tomorrow. Thanks a lot, Heather."

Ginny checked the topics of the following week and found Vile Vanilla and Vesicatory Vine...wasn't it just great? How could Heather tell all these plants apart?

Done for the day, Ginny passed by the girls' toilet outside the Great Hall, from where she heard a familiar voice wailing, "He said there was no need for protective gloves. He is so creepy!"

With a smirk she continued on her way to their quarters. "Severus, did you have... err... a little chat with dear Mandy Sands?" she wondered.

"Yes, and I'm afraid I will have to endure her for an hour more, but I scheduled it for tomorrow night. We've still work to do in here."

"Let me just append the Herbology essay for tomorrow."

"Who am I to oppose academic enthusiasm?" Severus retorted but was interrupted by a knock at the door. He stroked her cheek lightly before he had to endure a set of questions from a sixth-year. The insolent brat was clearly more interested in the quarters of his teacher than the answers he received.

Ginny stroked over the smooth fabric of their new bedcloth. They had opted for a budget, cotton cover, but it was new, thick, and appealing to the touch. Except for his dislike of burgundy-red, Severus had not been very enthusiastic about the details, and Ginny had selected cr me with accents in a warm gold-orange tone. With a swish and flick, she floated the duvet and had it slide neatly into its new cover. After enveloping the pillows in their pillowcases, she attached the short valances to the bed's testers. Even without thick curtains all around, it looked perfect.

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Ginny's voice was muffled through their protection charm as she noted, "Funny, this bed. Can you feel it?"

Severus threw away the duvet, shouting, "Get out! Quick!" He was about to jump up, but Ginny held his arm, laughing.

"Keep your hair on, Severus! No curse. Yet, a tingling is running through me from toe to scalp, and it is rather nice. Very nice, to be honest." At his doubtful noise, Ginny explained, "We bought a wider bed to have more space, but you are as close as you were before."

Severus pushed himself to his side, but an arm sneaked around his stiffened waist, effectively preventing it.

"Why is that so?" Ginny rested her upper head gently on his arm, adding firmly, "and why do I like it?"

Severus relaxed just a bit, but his words came out pressed. "I don't want you to ever say endearments that you do not mean, Ginevra."

"All right then. I enjoy it!"

Ginny sensed the smile crossing his face when he answered, "Well, if you truly like the sensation, be my guest."

:.:.:

Flying lessons didn't change their character at all. Stunt hadn't softened up a bit and certainly not towards Ginny. This afternoon, he commanded three frightened twelve-year-olds to levitate her between them during a flight over open land. They had to be Obfuscated, which was a first. Stunt followed them, keeping Ginny under a tickling curse to cause her twitching.

This was not only humiliating and painful, it was downright dangerous, even if they flew only a few yards high.

On a deft, curse-induced kick, Ginny's foot connected with Hugh Martin's broom, and the little boy gripped it with both hands, dropping his wand with a shriek. His fellows became distracted, and Ginny plummeted. Crashing through bushes, she rolled further and splashed into the stream underneath. The three second-years landed in shock, unable to help her out of the water.

With the searing pain from a gashing flesh wound on her thigh and an oddly hanging arm, Ginny re-emerged. It was enough! A furious, *Accio Firebolt!* left their teacher broomless.

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Meanwhile, inside, Severus stood in front of the sixth-years' Potions class. It was the most tiresome and taxing he had endured in decades. As a young Hogwarts teacher, he had right from the start declared 'Outstanding' O.W.L.s to be the entry criterion...and a wise decision it had been! Every year, the lethargic majority had surrendered in defeat.

A few, ambitious fifth-years at Hogwarts had asked for remedial lessons to achieve this high score, and they had worked hard in the small N.E.W.T.s classes. Then, thinly sprinkled between those so obviously only enduring the subject, there had been one or two genuinely curious candidates that were capable and ready to devote their time to the subject. Such perks had made his life as a Hogwarts teacher just bearable.

This year, though, conditions were utterly different. The sixth-year students had entered the Academy based on the average of their O.W.L.s grade, and every single one of them had to study Potions. In sight of their alternative, Severus had accepted as many as possible...even if they barely knew to wash their hands before entering his classroom and smashed and smeared expensive and potent ingredients around as carelessly as the mustard at lunch.

This class held four Durmstrang transfers. None of them could understand English well enough to differentiate between simmering and boiling, between grinding and smashing, or slicing and cutting. Severus had accommodated for them the best he could.

Mrs Sands and others who had mocked the newcomers had spent hours labelling the ingredients in Greek, German and Russian in addition to the Latin and English names. Barnes had helped set up charmed, multilingual reference lists, enthusing in the similarities of wizards prodding with a wand and Muggles with a mouse...whatever

that could mean. Draco...brought up bilingually himself...showed sympathy and always worked close to these students.

And yet, with the technical terms and the name of ingredients regularly traded over the workbenches in four or five languages, the noise level grated on Severus' nerves.

Inwardly furious, Severus kept reminding himself that he could not fail in his task to protect the brats and to carefully guide their minds into some sense of responsibility...and if it was by Vanishing hundreds of Galleons of mutilated rare species a week, a value that his ridiculous compensation could not afford him in a lifetime, then so be it. Every headache he suffered, every twitch he felt to ban the clumsy fingers and recalcitrant minds forever from his classroom, was preferred to delivering them early to the war-machinery their master had built up.

And so he endured the four dunderheads clustered in the back row together, fathoming cluelessly about the directives he had given, guessing more than understanding what they were supposed to do.

"Exactly why, Mr Smith, do you gather pestle and morsel when the directive is *slicing* your porcupine quill?"

The arrogant boy had no answer to this, and Severus thanked the fates that for once, he didn't try, but silently transferred the pieces to a chopping board and, after checking the instructions, took up the flint-blade knife.

Theodore Nott, while rarely holding his fingers steady enough for the task at hand, at least tried to memorise the steps. The boy truly dreaded the prospect of fighting and gradually caught up with what he had lost last year at Hogwarts. He was still a loner, trying to keep a low profile, but he showed the same respect towards his teacher that his pure-blood father had usually shown Severus...long before he had been propelled to the top of the hierarchy of the Death Eaters. Severus felt compelled to honour such a rare attitude.

When the porridge-like substance in the cauldron behind him boiled up violently, Draco reacted promptly, casting an *Aguamenti*, which bathed burner, cauldron and brewer in lukewarm water. The goo collapsed into a sticky, creamy mass that would take hours to clean.

"Mr Smith, I pointed your attention to one fault to avoid clouding the air, but this can hardly be an excuse for not soaking the cockroach-legs as indicated very clearly in your texts. What a waste of time that you'll have to clean this cauldron, but maybe it will be educational. Ten points to Green, Mr Malfoy, and thank you for saving the first row from agonising pain and the rest of us from the sight of their mutilated faces. It should have been fifty, but Mr Smith swallowed forty with his hazardous attitude."

Don't be overdramatic, Draco indicated silently.

"Yeuch, the legs are still moving," Parkinson exclaimed and jerked her arms up, sprinkling her brew and the next one with drops of the concentrated marinade for her cockroach-legs. The hiss that emerged ended two more brewing sessions.

"Parkinson, dismissed," Severus barked. "You will join Mr Smith in tonight's attempt to render our utensils usable. Eight o'clock sharp. Now get out of my sight!"

She packed her bag with a stony face and brushed against the German girl next to her, who was close to tears. Her brew had been successful before the accident had rendered it unrecognisable.

Severus knew exactly how to take advantage of the occasion.

"Miss Schröpfler," Severus addressed her, trying his best to get the name out. He gestured towards Draco. "Take over from Mr Malfoy here, why don't you? Malfoy, you will start a new brew tonight; meet me right after dinner."

Draco nodded silently and cleared his place, leaving only his finely diced rhubarb-stalk for her to use since hers were strewn all over the floor. Then he lingered around the foreigners' benches, gesturing artfully as he demonstrated the stirring techniques to them.

When the ridiculous signal ended the lesson, Severus had four less potions to assess than students in the class. He had long learned to be thankful for small favours.

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The entrance was more smudged than normal when Severus passed by. A walking pattern with a left foot turned sideways and drips of blood every other step accompanied him all the way to their rooms. Severus' heartbeat raced, his steps quickened, and the air sizzled when his wand sliced it with jagged movements to tear down the wards from afar.

"Ginevra, are you in here? Are you all right?"

She was not, and she could not hide it, even though she apparently tried. Without another word, Severus investigated her injuries, spelled the flesh wound temporarily closed and levitated her to the little medic room, holding her hand.

The nurse on duty unceremoniously yanked Ginny's displaced arm back in place, causing her to shriek. Severus alternated between speaking comfortingly to her and berating the nurse for her lack of consideration. The thigh was cleaned with rough movements, and as the wound re-closed, she was expected to leave. "Can't she lie down for a moment?!" Severus shouted.

"Certainly not. If she cannot help bringing herself into such a state all of the time, she'd better learn to cope with the consequences."

Severus glared at the recalcitrant young nurse and supported his witch under her armpits. He would have lifted her up if she had not protested so vehemently. Slowly he helped her back and forced her onto the first available chair, Transfigured into a chaise longue.

Ginny obliged, glad to be off her feet. Severus turned away from her and prepared a pot of tea, clattering loudly with the dishes.

"Drink," he ordered. "Now explain. What did she mean by *all of the time*, Ginevra?"

His rage grew with every detail she provided; he alternately paced and stood still; he clenched his fists or fingered his wand. He swore under his breath, and Ginny didn't know him.

After an unstructured monologue of half an hour, Severus called the Bloody Baron and told him...in a tone that lost the ectoplasm of the aloof ghost two shades of brightness...that he was to stay with Ginny until Severus' return. Then he stormed out to set the headmistress straight, as he put it.

Sipping her tea with shaky hands, careful to keep her shoulder straight, Ginny recalled the outburst to figure out what Severus had meant.

His being mad with the flying instructors was easy to grasp. "Irresponsible!" he had growled, his fingers trembling.

"All the times, I had lessons to give and Draco had always some to attend." Was Severus merely blaming the circumstances in their small institution? Or did he suspect a well-calculated scheduling, a scheming? Now that she thought about it, it was odd that the Flying lessons had never, ever matched with Severus' free afternoon times...always with his supervising the first-years or lessons to the oldest years.

However, from some of his outbursts..."never understood the hints", "paraphernalia", "the worthy ones", "setting an example"...she got the impression he was furious with himself.

Who had possibly been given *carte blanche* was totally lost on her.

:.:.:

The battle of words was unmatched by earlier disputes between the teachers. "I will not allow my wife to become the victim of treachery."

"Treachery?" repeated Mulciber. "You suspect *me* of treachery, when you've spent a decade in the realm of Dumbledore, sucking up to him and doing his bidding but failing in furthering our Lord's case?"

"I do not see the relation to how *you* treated Ginevra...who is a pupil in your school and my wife."

"So you admit your laziness. Thank you, Severus Snape, for your honesty."

"I have done no such thing, and I will never discuss with you what is a matter between me and our master!"

"Well, let's see then how our master will handle it. He is going to visit the Academy tonight to discuss promoting the most worthy of our sheep, and we can easily spend a minute on the black sheep among them."

She addressed the staff, gesturing with her arm towards the door. "Our Lord will arrive at half past eight."

The hours until the staff meeting were busy ones. Severus rescheduled the detentions in the classroom, and he arranged for Draco to brew in the private lab behind it. Instead of the brew from the lesson, they swiftly set up the first stages of Wolfsbane and several medical brews. They had been hoping for such a chance for weeks!

Severus alternated between the two places. He sliced, ground and stirred together with Draco to get him through the most critical stages of the complex brews. As Parkinson and Smith worked their way through the cauldrons, he graded yet another stack of illegible and superficially researched essays. He could only shortly check on Ginevra. Her wounds were healing well, and she had taken up revising Transfiguration; she would be fine for the evening with the Bloody Baron visiting regularly.

On a detour to the Great Hall, Severus hastily gulped down a few bites and changed for the meeting.

When their master had forcefully repeated the special plans he had in mind for Ginevra Snape, the headmistress lost a lot of her earlier arrogance.

All of a sudden, she found nice words for the *poor young woman*. "You informed me personally that she was not to partake in any...what did you call it...*frivolities*, Severus. I merely advised my staff according to your guidance. As you noted yourself, she has had rough lessons before this one. Are you telling me that you have not noticed anything for weeks?"

Cold sweat drenched Severus' back as she continued accusing him of not knowing how his wife passed her time.

The Dark Lord sat there in silence, which was not reassuring at all.

Stunt wormed himself out of the concrete accusation, spreading the blame over his colleagues and the headmistress. He was to report the following day how he intended to render his training methods safer. "Yes, my Lord," he managed to answer, feeling beads of sweat form on his forehead.

Ginny was sorted into a Colour; the Silver one, on Severus' request. A bed was to be added to one dormitory for such nights when Severus was not at school. Professor Flank hastily agreed with this arrangement, although she could not be pleased.

The Dark Lord finished the subject and asked about the academic progress, reiterating the purpose of the Academy as a haven for the knowledge-hungry and inspired youth. He inspected the lists of pupils to advance into the next year. His eyes rested longer on some names and jumped over others. Rolling the parchment from L to P, he commented, "Considering their fathers and mothers, I am surprised at some suggestions. However, I will not doubt your evaluations, expecting you have based them on performance alone. We need to bring out the best in every single pupil."

Severus had prepared the summary list of the Green Colour himself and suspected that there were indeed a few unjust evaluations. However, the decisions would be revised in the autumn. Then a stab ran through him: did he really believe Salazar's Academy would go into a second school year?

Their master finished the scroll and looked up. "Where is the evaluation for Ginevra Snape? In which classes is she to advance?" Obscuranta Mulciber was taken by surprise and missed setting up her false smile from before. "I... we..."

"I assume she has not even been assessed," Severus noted with a huff.

"She certainly got a plus in Duelling, that girl. I marked her accordingly," Simon Slash exclaimed hurriedly.

Their master glared at the headmistress. Quickly the other teachers gave their statements, one by one, no minus among them although Professor Flank debated with herself a long time before granting the zero.

"Very well," the Dark Lord concluded. "You will figure out a timetable so that our capable students can advance in one, two or even three courses. We cannot risk the eager minds being bored and losing interest. How do you plan the exams?"

The headmistress replied eagerly, "Pupils take O.W.L.s according to their regular year but end of term exams for all courses they have participated in."

The Dark Lord nodded and closed the conference. "Severus, a word," he added tersely, and they left together.

Severus suggested the Defence classroom and put up his Muffliato. "I assume they will not penetrate our spell," he said casually.

His master's right eye opened, and above it, his usually smooth forehead contracted with a hint of folds. "They? Who does?" he enquired with false, fatherly sympathy. Now Severus recognised the face for what it was: the Dark Lord would have raised his eyebrow, had he been in the possession of one. Disgust washed over Severus, and he surreptitiously Occluded his mind.

"It is no matter, my lord," Severus replied. "You wanted to speak with me?"

The discussion was unnerving, and Severus was most concerned when they parted. He was glad he had been alone with his master for this topic.

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Down in their rooms, Ginny tried to read Severus' stance already as he built up their wards. He said no word. When he sat down opposite her with merely a sigh and picked up his book, she exploded.

"Care to enlighten me about whatever was going on all evening?"

"Our master has been visiting."

"Tell me about things I do not know already! He was, after all, eating with us in the Great Hall, while you were not. Nor was Draco, and a few took notice of that. Then you had a three-hour staff meeting. From the looks I got when your dear colleagues left, I was a topic."

"You are now in the Silver Colour, and you are granted two advances in either Duelling, Defence, Charms or Potions."

Ginny's mood brightened up. "I truly may advance?"

She felt her smile freeze on her face at Severus' indifferent stare *Not even a nod of recognition?* If she hadn't been aching all over, she'd be pacing the room in agitation. As it was, her undamaged leg drummed on the floor.

"Well, I'm certainly not asking for much, but you know, Severus Snape, a small, verbal acknowledgement from your side would not be misplaced!"

"Leave it for later, Ginevra."

"Right then, ignore my achievements." When Severus still just stared at the far wall, she went right for the jugular, huffing, "Who cares, really, as long as I'm fertile as a rabbit?"

Severus twitched, but then snarled with a dangerous undertone, "I'm not willing to discuss *that*, Ginevra." He looked around meaningfully, adding, "Or in fact anything else. Although I will say that I am very relieved and... impressed how well you're doing."

He was right in parts, but Ginny was too angry to relent completely. "Six hours ago, you burst out of here with clear intentions. You hardly chatted with the Headmistress about nothing. Then a meeting with our master. What else was there, and how do I behave tomorrow? I will face these teachers, Severus, I cannot be the one not knowing."

Clearly unwilling, Severus reported in staccato-style, "The Dark Lord reminded all staff that the pupils ensure our future. He has no use of dead students or untrained ones. We teachers are entrusted with the task of teaching all of you and not for following our own agenda." Here he paused. "I don't see imminent trouble for you."

When nothing more was forthcoming, she stood and glared at him. "That summary of a three-hour meeting is what dad would *cabing economical with the truth!* But I clearly see that I won't hear any time soon what exactly is going on."

Silently she made her way to bed, which tonight felt three yards wide for all the warmth it provided.

Severus was already dressed when she woke up the next morning and shortly informed her that she was to move to her new dormitory for the following night because he would be in their master's service.

With a nod Ginny slipped her toothbrush and pyjamas into her shapeless, grease-stained bag and left, her head as high as every day. No one would notice any difference!

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For several days, three groups of Death Eater novices had been investigating a division of the Royal Army.

Tonight they were to observe tank movements. Thanks to the average Pure-blood's ignorance and instinctive fear of Muggle weapons, Severus had a hard time keeping his group of poor-witted minions concentrated. His two colleagues did not fare any better. One overweight bully literally wet himself at the sight of three tanks approaching him as if they could follow him even through Apparition. If it weren't so beneficial to Severus' personal goals, he would have berated the cowards to no end.

Hours later, with truly lousy reports in their hands, they went to check in with their master. The Dark Lord's viper-like face showed no emotion as he ordered the three officers in charge to pour out their anger over the body of men.

"Thick as pigshit, the whole lot of you," Severus' neighbour roared, and the room flickered from blue, sizzling spells before a stench of sulphur and burnt skin wafted towards Severus.

Severus fought his nausea down. With the reputation he had built up, he was expected to choose punishment of an appropriate level and deliver it with cool blood, grace, and exact wand movements. Refraining from hurling Unforgivables, he judged the horrified, disordered witches and wizards from the events of the evening as well as their general attitude. Some of his men were known to be unthinkingly brutal against captives, their less talented mates, or their family and charges, and Severus selected such curses for them that would deprive them of just the advantage they liked to explore. He left anyone's attitude towards elves or Muggles out of the question to not raise suspicion with his master, but he generously assigned menial tasks to the biggest bullies while withdrawing their rations of stamina potions. They should build up muscles the Muggle way!

Severus also shortened the disgusting lust potions for those boasting most with it. To himself, Severus acknowledged the very egoistic motivation for this step: less potions to brew.

Lacking this leverage for the witches in his group, Severus made sure that they were left without an elf for a month and redirected the servants to the pregnant women or to families with small children.

Delivering pain to the few he suspected unwilling more than unable felt worse than the prospect of his own pain to come. Severus made sure not to inflict permanent damage and delivered flesh wounds, bleeding more horribly than dangerously, to some who knew the spells to close them.

The gathering ended predictably: their master left the moaning, bleeding half-dead creatures in the hands of those still able to keep upright and retreated to a separate room. There, he dealt with the three group leaders.

Stoically, Severus endured his own humiliation and the pain searing through muscles and bones. He would have access to an equipped lab that promised relief within two days. In the end, Severus dragged his body forward to his master, thanked him and kissed the dusty hem of his robe, nearly choking on it. Waved to move aside, he chose a high window with a wide sill, where he could support his shaking body with one arm at a time.

Their master punished one of Severus' peers with pain and humiliation for not being hard enough on his charges. "Maybe you should join the lower ranks to remind you what can discipline the unthinking hordes? For this time, let me show you new ideas. *Nemnisus Tremulus!*"

The other officer had to suffer burning spells, itching and boils on inner tissues because he had risked the lives of his men with his overly harsh administrations.

Both of them lay in a puddle of urine, puke and blood, unmoving, when their master was finished. With disgust, the Dark Lord remarked to them both, "You're exempt from honouring your master until such time that you can do so with a minimum of dignity. Get out of my sight, you unworthy creatures."

With a dragging gait, Severus walked along the corridor of the Academy, which this night appeared longer than ever. Was it honourable to have found the right measure of punishments according to their Lord's scale? He stopped to catch his breath. Another five yards, first to the bathroom, then quickly over to their quarters. He applied the mouth protection while he still had his wits and looked forward to his bed, pre-warmed and cosy.

It was not! Ginevra had spent her night in the dormitory rather than down here all alone. His bed felt huge, cold and empty, void of all comfort. How he missed his little witch! Her hair tickling his cheek. Her sweet bum pushing into his side and cheekily reminding him not to take more space than his share. Her arm reaching over, sometimes unconsciously, but at times also quite purposefully. Mostly, however, it was his left arm holding her tight. Not last night, though, and not tonight either.

In his misery, Severus recuperated only marginally in the three hours until dawn.

Half an hour before his alarm would wake him, he felt a cold shiver and then soft, cool skin pressing into his side. She was back, and she was unharmed!

Severus relaxed and closed his eyes for just another moment.

The alarm roused him an hour later than he had set it, less than thirty minutes before class began. He swore as he grabbed his clothes. How dare she reset the alarm?

A smell of coffee and bacon wafted to his nostrils, and his stomach welcomed it with a rumble, clearly not caring about his anger. He also found oatmeal under a warming charm, pumpkin juice, a slice of dark bread and a crumpet with honey waiting for him.

Revitalised, Severus stormed into his classroom just in time to dock twenty points from Silver before he announced the brew of the day.

The commotion at the far end didn't resolve, though, and Severus glared at the assembled. "Haven't you mastered simple arithmetic yet? Five students can't arrange themselves in pairs around two cauldrons, no matter how hard you try."

Severus gestured with his arm towards Ginny. "And for your information, Urquhart, the only other Silver student without a partner resides on the window desk."

He paid his wife no attention, other than ensuring that Urquhart's and her brew would not spray into her face. As the boy delivered their phial for grading, Severus demanded, "Meet me before lunch, Mr Urquhart."

When he looked up, Ginny had already left the room.

A/N:

Can't thank my betas, Coshie and Jingjingchiquita, enough for the great help and support they offered. They gave me great ideas, asked just the right questions, and imposed a strict discipline on my commas and prepositions. Hugs, cauldron cake and mulled wine for both!

However, real life is very demanding on them these days, and I am struggling to find a replacement and also a new Britpicker.

Some more notes:

1. Tester: the four vertical columns of a four poster bed support the so-called tester or upper panel.
2. Draco is fluent in French. Draco has been pronouncing wine-related terms in French earlier in this story, but I didn't work this fact in as well as I should have before I needed it here. Why French? French is the old lingua franca in Europe. The name Malfoy is French, and the family keeps this language up to distinguish themselves from lesser people. They have orchards there and other estates that Narcissa visited in the prequel.
3. With "*Nemiscus Tremulus!*" the Dark Lord applies a curse that makes the nerves rattle and shake.

O.W.L.s

Chapter 24 of 35

Our couple solves their differences. Ginny's O.W.L.s exams are far from smooth.

O.W.L.s

Unsure how to address what he called The Flight Disaster at the Academy with its many ears, Severus had restricted all communication with his wife to the unavoidable until they were safe at Spinner's End. Hell, it had been too chaotic there to even think how he would address it in safety.

And even back home, Severus first visited the cellar. The rote of brewing the medical potions and a few batches of the thrice-be-damned Ludwig's Lust finally allowed him to ponder how to proceed.

How could he make Ginevra see what she had risked by her actions? For four days he had alternately cursed her heroic Gryffindor mindset and admired her steadfastness. She had not given in to Stunt for weeks, and despite the risk, this attitude **had** garnered the respect of some of her mates. Flint for one would howl in glee if Ginevra returned to class meek or broken.

She would not give in to him simply because of his position. He had to steer the discussion cleverly. How he hated it all! Cunning was all fine and well, but not this manipulating of people he would rather be honest to! A teenage girl, and completely dependent on him alone!

As he was wont to do, Severus started cursing Dumbledore and Merlin for handing over another impetuous teenager, for trusting that Severus' mind, body and soul would stretch and bend to bring them through whatever peril they ventured in. He wanted to blame the fates that had weaved yet another net around him. But Severus found that his heart wasn't in it this time.

This time, Severus wanted to save a person because they'd proven themselves worthy and because he... he cared.

Severus' best flint blade and carbon steel knives descended on the ingredients with vigour, and the pestle of finest Oriental alabaster ground the crickets into the finest dust. Yes, he cared deeply for Ginevra, and he badly wanted to see that smile on her face that made his heart jump.

Finished, Severus filled phial after phial with steady hands and headed upstairs. A considerable number of containers clinked in the basket *How long have I been down here? I should have forgone stocking Ginevra's hair conditioner or lotion! At least we can leave this afternoon and go looking for crocuses. Maybe even coltsfoot.*

But Severus found Ginny sitting cross-legged on the dusty floor, next to a stack of dirty trousers and carelessly rolled-up robes, whirling her wand sharply over four damp socks to have them march over a pile of unwashed shirts. Two lonely socks were floating in mid-air over the bathtub, obviously cleaned.

As the door behind Severus snapped closed, she lost control over the parade but didn't seem to care at all.

Severus swallowed down a sharp remark, flicked his wand at two of the socks, and they found each other. The second pair even folded nicely.

He Banished the washing into the bathroom, saying as casually as possible, "To be dealt with."

Ginevra did not look up. When nothing more was forthcoming from Severus, she addressed the scratches in the floor, asking dully, "What now?"

"Sit."

"I am."

"Ginevra, look at me."

"The way you looked at me in the last days?"

"I didn't..."

"My point exactly!"

Severus chose not to answer, but decided to test Molly's claim that tea soothes the nerves. He conjured two mugs of water and Accio'd two teabags of the fruity type his wife preferred.

"*Fervefacio!*"

He sat down on the wonkiest chair, gesturing for her to take a seat as well. Reluctantly, she complied and heated her water.

Severus leaned forward, setting his elbows on the table, steepling his fingers. The tension it took to keep this position on the rickety chair matched his inner tension. Leaning back and crossing his arms would precariously endanger his goal here as well as his dignity!

"I wonder how you see the Academy for yourself," Severus started.

"I... You think I don't want to learn!" she blurted out. "I don't achieve enough, I don't fulfil your expectations. That's nice to know!"

Severus squinted and stroked his chin. Aiming for a soft voice, he replied, "I did not say that, Ginevra."

"You didn't say much about anything."

"True."

His unconditional confession finally drew her eyes to him. They looked so empty and sad that something constricted around Severus' heart. He wanted to cross over and... no! She'd blast off his hand without hesitation.

"That was," Severus began calmly, "because I didn't know what to say, or how. We're not free in that place. Only in this hovel here we are safe. I renewed the wards the other night."

"We could have left," Ginny spat. "You leave all the time, the Sands took their spoiled daughter to a concert, and Albert Flint was Merlin-knows-where with that troll of a brother."

Severus looked up sharply at the last piece of news.

"I did not notice this. I'd be glad to hear more, but now is not the time. You realise that Mulciber kept me busy all week. We have three days now. I'd like to use them."

"For brewing?"

"Ginevra, please. I needed some time for thinking and for wondering how we shall proceed."

"Aah, the Slytherin approach, letting me brood until I'm easier to... *handle*."

"Maybe we should indeed have left. We might have..."

Ginny jumped up, knocking over her chair. "Oh, spare your noble words, Severus," she said. "I do not need them. Just leave me alone. Go down to your knives and phials. Or go harvest your precious crocuses."

Only Severus' well trained reflexes saved the tea from spilling, and seconds later Ginevra was curled on the sofa, showing him nothing but her back.

She stayed that way while Severus called for a rapidly improvised lunch and as he handled their dirty clothes.

Severus announced he'd be preparing tea and closed the kitchen door to leave her a chance to use the bathroom, which she did. She had changed into soft, college trousers when Severus returned.

"Ginevra, will you join me?" he asked and stepped over. He bent forward to see her face, but her wand emerged from under her armpit and deftly cast a deflection shield. A pungent stench wafting from his own, smouldered hair set Severus back on his heels. "I see."

Angry as well as depressed, Severus retreated upstairs but could not concentrate on whatever work he tried to accomplish. Her sad and disappointed eyes overlaid every roll of parchment he opened, and he found her face in every graphical illustration. Had he not tried to be civil? And, why was he even trying to accommodate for her mood?

When the sun stood low, Severus emerged from behind the book-covered door. He saw a book that must have toppled onto the floor. Ginevra was asleep, but tilting and turning and rubbing her knees against each other although it certainly was not cold. An odd whimper escaped her mouth every now and then.

Purposefully noisy with the dishes, he prepared a light soup for the night, which was all he could stomach and also all that they had in stock. His invitation was ignored as before, and he stared at his chipped bowl.

His nerves continued to fray as the old, worn spoon scraped loudly, round after round, over the bottom of the dish that just would not empty.

With a clang, the tool dropped out of Severus' hands. "Ginevra," he started in harsher tones than earlier that day. "You are certainly more reasonable than that. Do stop this stunt. How can we address the issues at hand if we're not communicating? I have very obviously severely failed you, but not willingly and in ways I'm unsure of. In two short days, you need to be fresh and rested, prepared for your O.W.L.s as well as facing your peers.

"Furthermore, or no, foremost, I want you to feel well," he added, still staring into his soup. "Nourishment is one part I will ensure, if I have to. You've proven yourself to be made of sterner stuff, and I will select my methods accordingly."

Ginevra rose hastily and left for the bathroom. She still had that haunted look when she returned, but she smelled of her soap and skin ointment and sat down opposite him primly and took up her spoon.

No words were spoken through the meal or washing up.

When Severus opened the bathroom door after his evening ablution he froze on the threshold. The sofa was turned into a bed. "If you are certain," he murmured and retired, leaving the door ajar for fresh air.

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Dreams of the Dark Lord's amusement dinners, complete with captives serving and being tortured for entertainment, accompanied Severus. When he jerked up, the stark image of Ginevra being questioned, Ginevra wriggling helplessly on the floor, Ginevra nearly broken, but stubbornly standing remained as though burnt into his retina. He shook himself to get it out of his mind, and then he heard what had caused the dream. Whimpers of pain and groans of frustration came from the makeshift bed next door.

He padded over in haste. Even under the warm blanket, she was rubbing her thighs together while her upper body, arms tightly crossed around her torso, turned and tilted. Without thinking, Severus put his hand on her shoulders to pacify her, but she shrugged him off violently, annoyed when a sigh escaped her.

Disgusted by his very inadequate thoughts of how he would love to touch her, Severus returned to the bedroom and stared out of the open window until he shivered in his simple nightshirt. He stayed awake a long time, listening to Ginny's agitated suffering until finally she found sleep.

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Heavy drops prattling and splashing nearby woke Severus to the first rays of sunlight. The sound came from the wrong direction though, as the first green on the misshapen, small apple tree outside was very obviously dry and dusty.

Along with the prattling of the water, an alarming rattling and hissing came from the bathroom. The shower had to be running on full power, straining the old, lime-scaled plumbing until it complained loudly in spite of delivering more water.

Severus frowned. *It is not like Ginevra to expose herself to the elements like that.*

Grabbing nothing but his wand, Severus reached the door to the bathroom in no time and knocked. "Ginevra," he called. "Do answer me that you're all right or I will break this door."

"You stay out of here!" she shouted more decisively than he expected. If nothing else, it at least indicated that she was well awake and not in danger.

Satisfied for the moment, Severus dressed and converted the sofa back to how he wanted it to stay. The sound of water stopped.

Porridge and tea was all they had left for breakfast, but it was warm and inviting when Ginevra came out, fully dressed but as agitated as she had been all night. Her skin was scrubbed red where it disappeared in her sleeves, and the scent of ample amounts of body lotion tickled Severus' nose, but he decided not to broach it, as the cream or the creaming seemed to comfort her.

"We'll have porridge now and go shopping for the rest of our stay. We'll return to have deft elevenses," he declared in a tone not to be disobeyed. She nodded meekly.

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Paul and Theodore Nott surprised them with what could only be a check-up visit as they were about to leave the house. Being under this dubious supervision unsettled the already strained couple, but they dutifully played along with the small talk as they walked. Theodore once asked Ginny about her upcoming O.W.L.s but was otherwise his shy self.

Outside the grocer, Paul Nott stopped and observed Ginny sharply. She had kept up mum while walking, but standing still she became all twitchy again. The older man glared menacingly at Severus, very obviously little impressed by the other man's standing. "Don't you dare! I will be back in two hours."

He took hold of his son, and they Disapparated without a sound.

What the blazes does he think he is, Severus thought, playing the guardian angel, but taking his son along for backup. Is Ginevra in on the plot?

A woman in her late forties, hair rollers barely covered by a thin, lilac scarf, was warbling along to the catchy tune the infernal radio imposed on everyone. "Move over, and let me get at the greens!" she admonished Ginny. Scrutinising the girl more, she added "Blimey, you're an odd lass, dancing as a jaunty Charleston to that lovely, tragic tune."

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After her first full meal in two days and three visits to the loo, Ginevra opened the conversation.

"You asked about the Academy. It is a horrible place at times. But it gives me a chance to learn a good deal. I want to pass my O.W.L.s, which you said would be filed at the Ministry and be valid to whoever wins this war."

Her elbows supporting her weight, she held her tea mug with both hands. She carefully slurped a sip, wary of the hot liquid. "Most in my year do not have this opportunity."

Severus took a sip himself and nodded. "Yes, to both. However, let's leave the academic aspects for now."

She continued, clearly probing where to go. "Since you are teaching there, it also allows us to stay together. I like that. Normally. I would be utterly alone here, though, and unprotected."

Here we are, Severus thought, considering her intently.

"Protection, then?" Ginny copied his head movement and slung her left arm tightly around her upper body. "It is quite a safe place, I should think. All kinds of security are in place. They control everybody's whereabouts; the headmistress made sure we know that," she grumbled.

"The place is protected against ill-wishers from outside," Severus corrected.

Her head tilted more, and she continued, forming sentences while thinking. "Could we be at a risk from inside? Well, we certainly cannot know whom to trust." Severus nodded gravely, and now she understood. "He had been after my life; do you mean that?"

"Even if not Stunt himself..." Severus hinted.

"...then one of the students could have... provoked a fatal accident?" She paled. "Do you really think they would get away with it?"

"Not by me!" Heat threatened to rise to his head, and Severus swallowed it down as he was wont to, but he had stood without noticing. He strode over to reach for her shoulder, but the girl hastily gathered the sandwich platter and went to the kitchen.

This has to end! Severus purposefully blocked her way and touched her elbow. Ginny groaned deeply as Severus suddenly felt all blood gather in his guts, and he wanted nothing more than to ravish her on the spot. How he had missed her touch! Now she melted against him, sighing deeply.

With a pained cry, "No!" Ginny suddenly pushed off him and stumbled away.

Severus finally cottoned on. "The curse! Ginevra, are you... but of course you are!" How could he not have noticed that it was ~~sexual~~ tension she was suffering? He caught her in his arms awkwardly, saying, "I had never considered that it could affect the women so badly."

Severus carried a sobbing bundle to his bed. Their bed. When he lowered her gently, she buried her red face to his body and fumbled frantically to get her arms under his robe and shirt. Severus abandoned the offending layers, toed off his shoes and socks and applied the mouth protection on them both. He hissed in need when she reached for his hard member and hastily banished her trousers and knickers.

Not a minute later, he collapsed over her, spent but certainly not satiated.

He rolled aside, drawing her with him before she could flee. "Ginevra," he started, but he could not find the words to express his disgust over their situation.

"Are you better now?" he finally asked.

She nodded into his chest.

"Good. I will get you some healing cream. Then we will finish our discussion, because it cannot wait either."

Severus was a lot more relaxed than months back, as he once again applied the ointment to raw and irritated skin. "Please don't do this to yourself again," he murmured and handed her a soft sweater.

On the sofa, Severus opened the discussion. "As I said, I'd prosecute anyone who harmed you, but it is rather futile for you to wonder about that, Ginevra."

She swallowed. "You're right, of course. The way these lessons are organised, even a pair of overconfident second years can plot an accident that would end fatally."

Her view unfocussed, she finished her thought. "They might receive backup from home. Or they only believe in it."

One of Filch's spiky, well-oiled vices must have clasped Severus' heart; it was so difficult to press his next question out neutrally. "How would this difference matter to you?"

"I might not have survived it to know. So... it makes no difference."

"Indeed."

"I... I should not have taken such a risk."

Severus found himself cradling her gently as he implored, "Ginevra, your Gryffindor way can only go so far."

With a huff, she sat straight. "This has nothing to do with any founder of Hogwarts. Not even with pride."

Severus caught her arm before she left. His tone very matter-of-fact, he said, "Then explain yourself." He was about to cross his arms, but he quickly stopped himself from the provocation. He wanted her to feel as if she was taken seriously. No, he *did* take her seriously. Everything else was dangerous and unthinkable.

Ginny's face changed expression as she was so obviously searching for the right words. "I might be young in your eyes, but I have been a student for more than five years. I have always thanked my brothers to let me take care of my problems by myself. You of all people do not want someone who annoys you with petty little problems. I don't expect you to arrange a solution for me!" She went silent and almost glared at him.

When she started again, she put on a softer and calmer voice. "You have so much to worry about. Too many lessons, struggles with colleagues, not enough information on what is going on and little chance to influence it. Do you think I did not see that? I could not load you with more than the obvious."

"Hmm."

"You noticed that I have trouble, too, and honestly how could it be otherwise. You considered me capable of handling it, and so I did."

"I often must leave you to yourself for *I have no chance to be present* This does *not* mean," he added before being interrupted, "that I doubt your abilities. However, others than me were involved here."

"You don't care much about the opinion of the staff."

"Not their opinion. But I do care what they say about you or me, and to whom."

"Who listened? Not the Dark Lord?"

"Indeed he did. He was planning to visit anyway. Our master asked me how it could have come to that situation. At first we were not yet discussing anyone in particular. I insisted that pupils must learn to gauge danger, not ignore it. But he redirected the focus, went personal, suspecting that you... would not trust me. That you would *withhold information* from me. Ginevra!"

Now she understood fully. "He must not think that!" she breathed. "Firstly it is not true, but secondlyâ oh, this can become so dangerous. What did you say you would do, Severus?"

"I would have a word with you, which I'm doing now."

"He did not leave it at that, I'm sure! I know the boy Tom Riddle; he was always inquisitive, always searching for an entry. He was always prodding, 'Tell me! Tell me now!' He pressed you for your view right at that very moment, did he not?"

"He certainly has not changed. I replied that I knew very much about your academic progress, and we shared whom you avoid or who avoids you. I mentioned that you socialise with selected few: Malfoy, Nott and Hestrop. I preferred not to mention Heather Brookhurst."

Ginny nodded sadly, and Severus continued. "He asked how I could have missed your considerable problem in flying lessons over weeks. I had no ready explanation myself. I argued along the same lines you did: that I was busy, and you would not want to add to it. That you are generally a very capable witch. I even admitted that I am easily annoyed. I knew of your flying abilities and had not imagined a problem in that area at all."

Without realising it, Severus had approached the window and gave the chimney with its yellowish exhaust a glare before turning around. "But we are not talking about a torn robe here, Ginevra. You could have fallen only a little differently and hit a stone, fainted, and drowned. Don't you see?"

"I saw it clearly that very day. But Stunt? He should have seen that, too!"

"I said as much. Our master reprimanded me, pointing out that he would care for that separately. I had to apologise. I blamed your juvenile spirit for misjudging this danger as a mere annoyance. And your Gryffindor stubbornness, which, after all, amuses him." When she started with an answer, he held up his hand to stall her. "We can both be glad if he went for it. But remember that you are only one witch out of so many for him. Provided he even sees you as one of us. First of all you are the coming mother to lots of Snapes and a means to keep me in good mood. If he ever suspects that you could have an agenda of your own... Your status as my wife is a fragile one."

Severus continued after a while, as much to himself as to her. "When others sneered at you, I blamed your extraordinary status or the decades-old, house-based rivalries. In the future I will probe deeper. Miss Sands was still lucky."

Severus sat back down purposefully. He had to incur a sense of belonging. "You now have a Colour to associate with, mates who consider you a part of their group. They expect you to gain credits for their Colour and will want you unharmed."

She huffed. "Albert Flint declared in his dorm that you were too disgusted to have me in Green."

"He comes right after Miss Sands on my agenda then. Even with people like him breaking the pattern, the pedagogical concept of grouping the student body is beneficial in general. Yet it does not replace my responsibility. That is what I told our master. I still do not understand how you kept going with such treatment, or how you managed to hide it from me."

"You were close, at times... Maybe it is pride after all that made me keep quiet."

They each followed their own thought for a while.

"Severus," Ginny finally tried, and he looked up. "Stunt triumphing was no fun, but having you solve it for me would only have made him find vile means to get back at me. I shudder to imagine his next lesson."

"He does worse than shudder as we speak. A war depends on skilled leaders and on group work. Stunt did not spread that spirit. I trust the Dark Lord has his ways to remind him."

There was another pain Severus wanted to resolve. He took her hand and made her stand up, close to him. "Do not put your life into danger, Ginevra. I could not stand the thought of losing you, having failed you."

For a while, she relished in the caress. Then she drew back. "What should I say about you then?"

Severus swallowed hard. "Yes, I'm a warrior. You depend on me more than I can bear."

"That is not what I mean, Severus! I never know if you return or what shape you might be in. Last time, it was frightening."

Severus growled as he recalled that event. "You took the liberty of changing my wake-up alarm."

Lifting her chin, Ginny retorted, "Of course. I cannot well rouse you and ask for your permission to let you sleep. I'm not only your pupil or responsibility, Severus; I'm your partner. I will decide when I'm the one who can. There was no risk."

"There was no need either."

"You were twitching in your sleep and so exhausted you didn't even notice me rummaging in the drawers. You must promise me to be careful, as careful as you possibly can be. I can promise the same. I was not careful with Stunt, I agree, but I decided for your best on that morning."

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True to his announcement Paul Nott checked on them but left soon, satisfied.

"Let's go for crocuses before the sun sets."

Her skin and mood all better, Ginny thoroughly enjoyed the time out.

Hours later, she did not oppose being gently seduced. "Last time was for the curse," Severus explained, "but this is for you."

"For us, Severus."

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Two days later, her long essays furred up when Ginny finally leaned back and stretched her arms. It was done, and there was still half a morning and the whole afternoon to relax.

The memory of Orkney didn't hurt as much anymore after she had mentally gone through the details again.

"Have you been thinking about the courses you want to advance in?" Severus interrupted Ginny's musing.

"A little, but not concluded yet."

"I suggest Potions and Charms," Severus told her. "We train in Defence and Duelling at home."

"I would prefer Defence, though. And for the record: we are not duelling here!" Ginny protested.

Severus almost smiled. "Charms are mostly not applied on yourself, so you can continue Barnes' class even... " He still could not say it.

"When I'm pregnant. Good thinking, but it won't explain why I should advance in Potions. I could certainly not stay in this class."

"No, you'll face restrictions then. But many potions in the syllabus are useful in daily life. A capable brewer will always save money. This is why I want you to learn the recipes and see many brews before you must indeed be excluded. The lab at the Academy is better equipped than my cellar. We can always refine your techniques with any salad or stew for dinner."

"You let me advance to allow you to turn dinner into remedial lessons. Merlin, how charming."

"And if I'm very demanding with you, it will divert the doubts I might be favouring you." He smirked.

"As if you ever had! I would have been the first Gryffindor you ever favoured."

"Year after year I have allowed Mr Longbottom to stay. What more favours could I give to this house of unthinking heroes?"

Ginny snorted with what sounded very much like Drillstrand, the worst brewer in her own year, who was a Slytherin. She sobered quickly. "Severus, do you seriously believe I'm up to advancing in Potions?" she asked hesitantly. "For a N.E.W.T.s class in Hogwarts you required Outstanding. Not that Percy disagreed, mind."

"I hardly crave for approval from the most ambitious Junior Assistant to the least ambitious Minister of Magic. But think of what happened to those who failed to gain access to advanced Potions at Hogwarts?"

"Why, they took other subjects. Oh, I see. The Academy does not allow dropping a subject. They would graduate with O.W.L.s, and that is it."

"The Academy has very different goals from Hogwarts. I cannot stick to my old principles. Your performance in Potions is nevertheless adequate at least. You gave me the hint that the magic was lost if we worked like Muggle chemists."

"Now, did you want to meet Miss Taylor?"

At Maud's, Ginny could not mention much about her last weeks, but the other girl was more than happy to talk about the street and what she knew about the district's past.

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Ginny was glad to have Heather in her dormitory to talk to. Further, there was Millicent Bulstrode and several younger girls who were often too shy to address her. Quite a few of them were haunted by nightmares. Millie and Heather could already predict the dates: Group One had Combat Flying rehearsals. They arranged to check on them, but didn't really find anything amiss with John Missile's lessons.

Professor Stunt severely lacked body control during the next lessons, and rumours spread as to how he had been put into his place. Together with him, the pupils also corrected their attitude towards Ginny, starting with her mates in Silver Colour.

About one out of four pupils had made it to a higher class. To nobody's surprise, Albert Flint, Darren Urquhart, Heather and Mandy had not been granted any advance.

In her different subjects, Ginny now encountered one Hufflepuff, three Ravenclaws and three Slytherins from fourth year who, after a short period of adaptation, made good progress in the fifth year. Ginny was accompanied by Larry Thompson in sixth year's Potions and, to her great pleasure, Bernhard Hunt, the kind and shy Hufflepuff, was among the three who joined her advancing in Charms.

No fourth-year had advanced to meet them in Duelling, and they fired hexes freely and with force. Oddly, Urquhart managed twice to include Ginny in an extra-wide shield, effectively startling her.

Larry had also advanced in Transfiguration (with Florence) and in Herbology. He would have preferred Arithmancy or even Astronomy, he told Ginny over lunch, but neither one was taught at the Academy.

In Potions, Severus preferred to partner students of different strengths, and Ginny often ended up with a weaker sixth-year, which reassured her of her knowledge. It excluded working with Draco, but then there was Theodore, or Millicent. They managed a workable collaboration around a cauldron, as long as Ginny took over the trickier techniques.

On Ginny's plea, she was forever saved from pickling frog kidneys together with Pansy Parkinson.

With two more subjects, Ginny's evenings were crammed up with work, but she braved herself through it.

Only three periods after the N.E.W.T.s students had left, Ginny and her year was to take their O.W.L.s. All of them were very busy, and one of her mates resigned from the sixth year Charms class.

Severus left twice for the night. On these occasions, Ginny invited the small study group into their chambers until her curfew. It was easier now that she had her own desk and the old bed had been Transfigured into a small sofa. Bedtime arriving, she went up with them to sleep in the Silver dormitory.

Finally being able to show and refine her flying skills, Ginny quickly advanced to a respectable member of Group Two. Hermione or Neville would not have stood a chance. Or, Ginny mused, maybe they would finally have learnt it. Some of the Ravenclaws hadn't looked promising on a broom a month ago, but truth be told, all of them had built up considerable confidence and skills. Slytherins were generally quite skilled at supporting each other to reach a group goal, if only their goals had been nobler.

Stunt's lessons being revised, the more dangerous subject, but enjoyed by many, was now Combat Flights. They flew an obstacle course and shot strong spells on targets on the ground. Group One aimed simple colouring spells on each other that they were supposed to dodge. Group Two were given a frightening amount of freedom on the provocations on each other, ranging from spells on the nervous system that made it hard to remain on the broom to severely injuring cutting spells that had to be blocked well.

They also discussed broom manipulations, which reminded Ginny strongly of Harry's problems with the traitor Quirrell, that the three older pupils had related to her.

Only as a reward for excellent performance did they get opportunities to play Quidditch. Their trainers typically selected two weak captains who then took turns to call in the other team members for the day. After Severus' interference had cleared her name, she found herself more often in a team than not. Mostly she was a Chaser but a few times even the Seeker.

Most of her peers accustomed to her hermaphroditic position in Salazar's Academy, on one hand wife of a teacher and student on the other hand. Loaded with work, she didn't feel too awkward any more for now, but was most apprehensive about her future. She would soon take her O.W.L.s, turn seventeen in August, and with her pregnancy she would have to stop her participation in most subjects. The bleak prospect of socialising with Serina Flint and the like left her cheerless while the idea of a baby also shot adrenaline through her system.

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In the first week of March, the last teaching period, lessons were devoted to revising those topics that had appeased the examiners most.

School emptied on Tuesday morning, and Draco gave Ginny the thumbs-up, as did Theodore. Even Millicent found encouraging words before she activated her Portkey.

Nearly empty, the Great Hall deflected sound very differently and almost deserved its pompous name. Salazar Slytherin scrutinised everyone passing through.

Ginny's problems with written exams were the same as ever. She walked in on wobbly knees, but once all the quills were running over the parchments, she usually calmed down.

At Salazar's Academy, the anti-cheating measures rivalled those Ron had complained about one and a half years ago. On the Dark Lord's order, they even faced a complex system for anonymity in the written exams. Pupils found a spelled stamp at their desk. They stamped each parchment they delivered and a reference slip they kept. After a week, when all exams had been graded, the stamp would become visible and the grades could be assigned to the authors. Severus and Ginny appreciated the system, as it excluded favouritism or repressions.

In each three-hour session, Ginny frowned at the long roll of parchment, crowded with questions. She was sure enough of her knowledge in the theory of Defence, and the questions in Charms and Hexes held only a few surprises, now that she had better access to the Muggle concepts involved. With a bit of luck, she had managed an E.

Even in the theoretical exam of Transfigurations the next morning, Ginny felt less lost than in many lessons; the questions made more sense to her than those in the lectures. With the few students present, it was easy to take lunch far away from Florence, who discussed the finer points of questions 16b and 23 with whomever she found.

The closer her turn in the practical test came, the stronger Ginny's urge to use the loo became. Being called in was mostly a relief.

"Shape, Thompson, Urquhart," Professor Flank called, indicated three desks with an examiner each and retreated to the back of the room. Gallantly, Darren Urquhart left it to Ginny to make her choice, and she opted for the wrinkled, old lady to the left, who must have been overseeing exams for a century.

Ginny was given a mole to demonstrate Switching a body part and make it function on its new host. She considered the creature for a moment, asking herself *What body part will make a significant-enough difference?*

A high-pitched squeal from its overexcited sibling scurrying around on the next table interrupted the test. Seeing the world through owl-eyes left the poor thing scared, which proved Larry Thompson's Switch successful.

Moles don't use their eyes, of course. What else than their eyes are degenerated? If it were endowed with bat ears, how am I to prove they are functional without having it fly? Fly, that is it!

Ginny Switched its shovel-like hands for leathery bat wings, but nothing happened. She prodded the creature, and it spread them a little for balance. At the rim of the table, it bravely launched itself into the air. A fluttery, uncontrolled flight made it thud a mere foot away from the table leg, from where it could not get airborne again. A small minus decorated her exam sheet. *The wings have unfolded all right*, she thought in anger.

Vanishing was next, an exercise McGonagall had had them repeat twice each term. Professor Flank, though, had never even touched the subject. With a sigh, Ginny gave it a try. With its hindquarters suddenly Vanished, the bat-winged mole fluttered off the table with ease, and she was forced to chase after it. Returning with the fluttery creature in her cupped hands, she found her examiner steadfastly rebuking Professor Flank and rounding out the minus into a zero.

The owl-eyed mole was Vanished before Ginny started her secondnd and lastst try on a new, complete mole. Urquhart's mole, void of all legs, rolled over the table and squeaked helplessly, distracting her.

She regrouped and firmly pointed her wand at her own brown dirt-tosser. Recalling what feeling her shorter wand could create in her, Ginny chanted, *Evanesco!* Only three lonely strong talons remained on the table. She received a plus and a nod this time.

Next, Professor Flank produced three shirts, and the dreaded multi-stage Transformation began. Ginny quickly produced a very Muggle, sturdy, glass bowl^l Flank tsked^d and her first rose was a brittle and transparent thing that swiftly reversed itself into the glass bowl. Furious with her carelessness, Ginny brandished her wand again. A vision of the strict Head of Gryffindor House, tight-lipped and disapproving, called her back to reality. The flower she produced in the nick of time showed a small bud in a deep shade of red, a single small leaf and five thorns around a too thick stem. Professor Flank eyed the specimen suspiciously. "Undoubtedly a rose," the main examiner said, picking it up. "A truly rosy fragrance. Ouch, but these *are* thorns!" he exclaimed and dropped it, eyeing his bleeding finger and then Ginny. "Dismissed."

The tea and pumpkin juice bar in the Great Hall was never more welcome than this time.

The Practical Charms exam had her align a pint of sand along a line on the floor, and then levitate a pitcher of ink along it so that it poured an even, black line on the sand. Finally, they Charmed a tablespoon to cartwheel back and forth over the line of sand. Short, easy to grade, and certainly testing the topics they had covered. Ginny was a little disappointed, but grateful for the extra hour of afternoon rest.

The next morning, Ginny found herself placed on the left side of the Great Hall for her Potions exam. Severus had selected two mandatory ointments and a set of four further brews out of which they were to select two. Out of the four extra brews, one was very simple, but it required far too much time of chopping and stirring to allow working on it in parallel with another brew. A strange idea to even suggest it, she noted to herself, but then she remembered Severus hinting at it. "I'm tempted to say that everyone in this class manages to produce Stone Softener Solution, but one of you will inevitably prove me wrong even there."

Three Ministry examiners walked around, and Severus kept himself at the right side or the middle. The officials from the Ministry examined the time schedules and bent to see the slicing and grounding techniques. They made notes on a journal, a parchment at each pupil's desk that somehow hid itself from the pupil's view.

Ginny decided on two medical brews. She was confident and found her ingredients easily. She made a time schedule to see where to start so that she would fit the busy times of one brew into a simmering period of another. If you blindly rushed into the first potion without such a plan, as the dark boy in the second row did, you could get into timing problems. Ginny couldn't remember such a task from Hermione's detailed descriptions of her O.W.L.s, but she found the idea most realistic.

They were to describe the significance of the kind of cauldrons, knives and stirring rods they had used for one of the mandatory brews. Ginny checked her schedule. If she didn't use the time while the Blood Replenisher simmered and the Shrivelfig for the pus-extractor steeped, she would not get it all down. She ground three-eighths of an ounce of Bicorn clove clippings while formulating sentences in her mind.

A sharp bang to her right and orange fumes filled the air. *"Scourgify!"* one examiner called and *"Evaporedux!"* another one. The shivering delinquent was unharmed, but one brew short.

Six clockwise stirs later, Ginny jotted her knowledge down on parchment. *Use a copper cauldron rather than pewter because of the acids, but if available, use gold for it reduces the risk of excessive foam when adding the 20 drops of black henbane essence. Select a thick one with straight walls rather than a bulgy one with narrow opening to have the heat distribute evenly.*

Oily ingredients of animal origin are cut with a flint blade...

The orange light of her timer asked for four stirs in shape of an eight.

She checked the Blood Replenisher: it was almost clear. *Better start slicing the oak roots now.* With the newly sharpened stainless steel knife, she went for cutting the lacewing. Half done, her eyes took note of the hue of the Blood Replenisher as it lost its last grey. *Add the roots and heat up.*

The whole room was damp, but it was nothing compared to the inside of Ginny's robe. Strands of hair stuck at her neck, tickling slightly. An examiner passed by, smiling but rapidly forcing his face neutral. He made a lot of notes on her parchment.

Three stoppered phials with potions stood on her desk, and she was filling the last stamped phial when a commotion broke loose at the table to the right of her. A cauldron melted, and sickly grey-green porridge covered the table and splashed down to the floor where it turned bright pink. The girl working there collapsed in tears. Ginny went over to pull her away from the place, afraid that she might breathe in the fumes. One of the other cauldrons was set far too hot. Should she regulate it down and reduce the risk for an explosion? The decision was taken from her when an examiner levitated the cauldron from the source of heat.

"Come, sit down at my table now," she said to the trembling girl. She nodded and slowly, very slowly moved her chair closer. When Ginny returned to stopper her phial, it felt damp, almost greasy from the outside. She frowned; had she not cleaned it just seconds ago!? Carefully Ginny peered inside and jerked back. "Sir, sir!"

The closest examiner stepped over. "Sir, this is not what I have brewed... here is my caul..." The cauldron was cleaned! Not the least bit of her last hours' work was left inside. An empty feeling took hold of her.

"Rest assured, young lady, we will investigate this. This is not the first time something like this has happened." He looked up and reprimanded all students around Ginny sharply. "I am disgusted. Do any of you really think you can outsmart Ministry examiners, who have been doing this job since before your parents sat their O.W.L.s? We have the sitting order memorised, and we also have a doubled version of all journals. We will find the culprit and rectify this."

He asked Ginny if she was positive about the other three phials. She took them up and regarded them against the light. "I had mine stoppered and stamped before anyone could have exchanged them. I don't know if it's them though."

"Then they are genuine. What about the cauldrons themselves?"

"These two are mine, sir. There is no doubt; I recall how I scraped around the well. I'm not sure about the cauldron of the wart ointment, but nothing looks wrong."

"It will suffice," the examiner said and asked her to identify her written answers. The scroll was hers, but it had looked cleaner before.

Another supervisor declared the first ones could turn in their work now. He ordered them to also bring the cauldron with the Blood Replenisher along.

One by one, they were sent to the next room, cauldron in hand. Inside, the headmistress greeted Ginny, or rather she skipped doing so, scoffing, *This is your Blood*

Replenisher?!"

There was nothing amiss with her brew, she was certain. "Yes, madam."

"Well, if you're sure, go ahead, drink the foul stuff already!"

Ginny ladled a little into the beaker that had sparkled into existence. "Without an actual blood loss, I should not drink more than that," she declared. "But I've no problem drinking this much." In the last moment, she hesitated. "Am I to describe the expected symptoms?" When the Ministry observer shook his head, she looked around. No chair. She opted to sit on the floor rather than the examiners' desk to drink her brew. Dizziness fogged her vision and the blood was drumming in her ears... exactly as her book told her. It was gone in seconds, and she bade them adieu and left.

They received their lunch sandwiches and went outside in the yard, glaring daggers at the greyish sky, daring it to drench them. After all the excitement, Ginny wasn't feeling social and retreated to lean against a single tree, somewhat aloof.

Ginny was still trembling from the morning's events when she was called in for Defence. Demonstrating blocks or curse reflectors against her examiner's polite attack wasn't a big affair, though. Her examiner spelled her and made her set up different blocking shields, which didn't pose any problems. She was to explain the properties and application of each of them. Spherical ones and such with a preferred direction, wide ones and narrow ones, absorbers and deflectors.

The Ministry people put a medium amount of power into their spells. With her few own attacks, Ginny made clear what she considered a curse and had the man jump back before he could parry her full Body-Bind.

"Sir, I'd like to get some extra credits," she announced at the end.

The examiner sighed and drawled, clearly repeating himself, "We are examining Defence in the O.W.L.s, not attacks, young lady. You may not show curses that can cause irreparable damage."

"Of course, sir."

Ginny placed a stone pillar near the examiner and positioned a few light, random objects in the back of the room. She asked him to send five different, but very focused spells at them.

"Not at you?"

"That is right, sir. I will set up a deflector before the curse hits the objects."

Still confused, the examiner sent a narrow vibration curse at a phial. Ginny's acoustic bouncer directed it to the bottom of the pillar, which rang at the impact. "Something that leaves a mark on the stone, sir."

Relieved that he would not have to endanger her, he attacked the sheet of light vellum with a strong burning curse. Reflected by a green wall of magic, it left a dark, smoking spot on the pillar. A cutting curse marked the pillar three inches higher, and the examiner's face lit up. The drill, for which Ginny conjured a silver mirror-shield, bored itself half an inch into the marble. Imagining this curse on a human, she shuddered.

In a gamely mood now, the examiner cocked his head, gauging her. His last curse was a sizzling, but oddly slowly proceeding modulation of the Blasting Curse.

Ginny noticed just in time that it would not reflect properly on any surface, but blast any deflector. She jumped towards the front to erect a concave, bluish orb at the far end, a foot before the glass flask she protected. It surely exploded at the impact, reverberating like a brass gong, but it focused the deflected frizzy spell enough to crack the top of the pillar. The phial swayed, but did not fall or crack.

The examiner beamed at her and asked if he should take her N.E.W.T.s the next week.

At tea, Severus didn't need long to find his wife. In measured steps, he approached, just to make sure nobody saw favouritism in his actions. Heather retreated instantly.

"How do you feel? Exhausted, of course," he answered his own question, wishing dearly he could brush through the clinging hair. Instead, he could soothe her verbally only. "This cheat... don't let it get to you! It is all they want. Remember that the system ensures the culprits will be found, or at least the damage is minimised. Did you drink your Blood Replenisher?" Ginny shortly told him what had happened, and his eyes sparkled just a bit "just for her. "Very good."

When it came to Duelling, their examiners were already expecting quite some force. Still, the girl before Ginny took the wind out of the tiny wizard. They were to keep the protocol of a sportive duel, dodge and pare curses, and send their own curses to disarm the examiner, and their mates from the same Colour cheered generously.

Even Ginny got a few whoops for her quick parries and agile dodging. She used her deflector wall once again to direct a twitching curse at the ceiling. Whatever it was that the house was spelled with, it reflected the curse to have it hone in at Ginny's examiner from above just when he ought to put up a shield in front of himself. His shoulders twitched severely, and Ginny's iron chain passed through unblocked to furl twice around his knees. Together the two curses knocked the wizard over. Quickly Ginny shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The room had gone dead silent.

A tad frightened now, she approached him, holding his wand in her outstretched hand. Growling and scowling, he accepted it.

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With the late-night conference to be expected, Ginny stayed her last night as an O.W.L.s student in the dormitory and chatted with Heather for a long time. The girl was frustrated. One of her potions had been off-colour, and a foul stench had come from another. In Transfigurations her mole had barely become translucent, and the stem of her rose had been leafless with a single, blunt and bendable thorn. The petals had fallen off after shaking it.

Defence and even Duelling had gone well enough after all their training, but in Charms and Hexes nervousness had overruled all her senses. "That man was just awful!"

"You'll be fine in Herbology. What are your plans for the future?" Ginny carefully asked. "Something with plants?"

"Herbology is my best, certainly. I'm not afraid of tomorrow's tests. But who grows herbs in these times?"

"Don't say that. Our potions depend on them. Mum used to buy our home needs at a farm in Kent. There must be plantations with greenhouses. Hey, such a profession might even allow you a bit of travelling!" She tried a positive thought.

Sad eyes met hers. "Ginny, it won't work this way. The Dark Lord needs a whole army of new little Death Eaters. Within a year, I'm to be married and pregnant. Someone will take me, be my O.W.L.s whatever they are. I had only hoped I would do better and have a little to say in the matter. As it is, there aren't many I can refuse."

Then she looked up and realised who it was she was pouring her heart to: a girl who had not had an alternative either. "How is married life? How are you getting along, Ginny? With Professor Snape, even?"

"I... I was lucky," Ginny whispered but refused to elaborate. "Good night Heather. You'll be fine tomorrow. We'll keep in touch, won't we?"

"Thank you, Ginny. Good night."

:.:.:

Herbology wasn't exactly as Ginny had expected, asking a lot about generally poisonous plants like the differences between the various henbanes. Which parts of the plants would she use for pain killers, which ones contained haluconogeles. Where to find and how to collect them. She did remember the botanical names *Hyoscyamus albus* and *Hyoscyamus niger* but couldn't come up with the third.

Hellebores were to be described likewise before discussing yews and their applications against various Dark creatures.

Where to find and how to grow Jimson weed. The smell of the key ingredient to Ludwig's Lust Ginny knew all too well, but she had never bothered knowing more about the plant.

Ginny had learnt the cultivation and exploitation of Virulent Veronica for weeks, but it was not required.

The Vesicatory Vine she had repotted looked poorly compared to Heather's, but it did not lose its leaves as some did. She pruned her Shrivelfig carefully but had to use an oil-based wound healer on a cut that went too deep. At least she remembered not to use the wax that would have killed the plant.

Eventually this was over as well.

Ginny had no idea how she might have scored, nor did she feel an urge to find it out.

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My warmest thanks go to to Coshie and magicAlly for their effort in improving my language.

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A/N:

I'm assuming that Hogwarts is under reconstruction. It turned out not to be (in DH), but I understood HBP as if it could be so.

In Flitwick's Sorcery College only the most ambitious and skilled will pass into years 4 or 5. Next to it, Salazar's Academy is the only school in Britain.

The Ministry certainly doesn't pay or govern Salazar's Academy. But the syllabus for the O.W.L.s conforms to Ministry criteria. Barely, but it does. Voldemort is calculating that this gains him some extra students from at least Slytherin and Hufflepuff Houses who can't be home-schooled and would not make it through the Sorcery College.

Switching as a form of Transfiguration is discussed in Harry's fifth year, and he has to Vanish an Iguana in his O.W.L.s.

The mole used to be called mouldywarp (Germanic), which reflects the fact that it throws soil behind itself when digging.

Maud

Chapter 25 of 35

Maud is being attacked.

Dear reader, a rape takes place in the timeline of this chapter. However, as I do not describe any details, the rating did not increase.

To remind us all: The Snapes may not kiss because of the Stimufidelius charm. It remains volatile until the fourth new moon after the wedding, which is Sat 28th March. Chapter 25, here, is placed in the first week of March.

Maud

"The Transfiguration examiner insulted me," Ginny reported lightly as they reached Spinner's End. Severus' fist balled around his wand. He looked around, ready to grab the man at the scruff of his neck or his ear. "Don't fret, Severus." She smiled. "He's not here." Relenting, Severus asked dangerously what it had been she had had to hear this time.

Indoors, as the wards were reinforced, she explained, "When he saw my rose, he mentally accused me of being all too much a Slytherin." She grinned.

Severus felt somewhere between amused and insulted himself. Had she not approved of some Slytherin approaches during the last weeks? Why was it always the whole house that got the blame? Thinking further on her report, however, he dropped the house rivalries. "He accused you *mentally*?"

"His mind was as open as a straight-walled, size four cauldron. I almost couldn't help laughing. If he didn't take the thorns personally, I should have passed well enough."

"Be careful, Ginevra!"

Predictably, Ginny rolled her eyes.

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Severus left on various errands. With a sigh, Ginny straightened the bedroom for his return, whenever it would be. Pictures of The Burrow in her pre-Hogwarts years formed in her mind: about her mother who had always been kissing her father good bye. *I'm a housewife now, just like her. Just we can't kiss, thanks to that arrogant pink toad.*

Ginny met Maud, and they went to the park to chat. Noticing her friend's exhaustion, Maud held back whatever questions popped up in her mind. Ginny seemed vague as she told Maud about the trouble she was having interpreting the questions and went into some of the detail of her exams involving the comparison of sand and liquids and also a practical involving mixing liquids.

Maud, thinking her a bit strange, kindly corrected her opaque ramblings. "So you had tests in Natural Science. Physics and Chemistry, to be precise. Lots of vocational elements, I see." Trying to emboss the terms into her mind, Ginny nodded.

Then she encouraged Maud to talk about her school and the upcoming exams. Maud proudly reported on her renominated school for which she had a scholarship. In a flashback accompanied by a bout of sweat, Ginny recalled that this was how Tom Riddle had financed his studies at Hogwarts and what her father had vehemently refused to consider. Interestingly, Maud didn't seem embarrassed at all.

"I passed my GCSE with a Triple Award in Science, plus one in Latin. I'll finish sixth form college the summer after next, but if you ask now, I have no idea what to do then."

"What options are there?" Ginny prodded, hoping the answer would take long and allow her to rest.

Maud shook her head. "One day you'll need to tell me what world you're from." She smiled, blissfully ignorant to the inner turmoil that stirred in her friend.

"Well, you already noticed that I wasn't born into high society, so let's forget that."

She talked about colleges, universities and polytechnics, whether or not to take a gap year, industrial placement or purely academic. "Either you study hard with little money and no social life and maybe at least get a challenging job later on with better opportunities and hopefully enough money too, ending up in a middle-class semi on Acacia Avenue..."

Maud's longing eyes followed her arm swaying to the western outskirts on a hillside, where the houses were more spacious and the streets wider than around Spinner's End.

"Or you get some money quickly but never a really high salary. Your job holds lots of routine, you're losing it at the whim of your employer and you're forever being bossed around by those with a higher education. You can never leave Spinner's End. No thank you!"

Maud ended her report, saying with determination, "Then many say women have a third option: marry strategically. That's not for me!"

The concepts sounded familiar to Ginny, and she had never considered that third option for herself either. She shifted on the bench, and her left hand with the wedding ring disappeared under her shirt.

They decided that even in early March an ice cream would be a treat. Licking happily, they strolled home.

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The first dinner back at the Academy was a loud affair, thanks to the longer break with little work which the rest of the students had enjoyed. Draco and Theo were asking about the details of the exams and most others of his year did the same. Theodore became frantic at the thought of synchronising four potions. "And you jotted down the theory in between that? I'm a goner if they design the end-of-year tests in the same manner."

"Let's just see how they grade me, given that one potion was lost," Ginny grumbled and then had to detail the whole event. Draco wanted to know exactly who had sat around her.

"Don't go there Draco," Ginny said and explained the complex stamps system. "The examiner said they'll catch them, and Severus was also positive."

Very quietly, she added, "The Dark Lord was furious, Severus said."

Thankfully, most of the teachers gave the fifth-years an easy week. Other years weren't that tired but had, on the contrary, enjoyed an additional day off and little homework. The headmistress informed them that all students were still considered in their old year until Easter. "Then the O.W.L.s results will decide who of the fifth-years have made it to year six."

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The last hour of sleep was interrupted by Severus' hiss. He grabbed his left arm in pain. The unexpected call was urgent. Gulping down some water, he shook off his pyjamas. Ginny fetched his gloves and the Death Eater robe. "Go via the Great Hall and take a sandwich along, Severus." But there wasn't time; the Mark was throbbing violently.

"Inform Mulciber. Proceed with your normal routine. Don't wait for me," he ground out through the pain and he was off. He did not hear her anxious wishes for him to be safe.

Stunt was gone as well, and for the second years' Defence & Combat lessons, Ginny and Larry were to replace Severus on Professor Mulciber's orders. Darren Urquhart insisted on joining them.

Having covered nearly the same elements under Remus Lupin, and being drilled up to N.E.W.T. level herself...according to the Ministry examiner...Ginny was very familiar with the lesson they were to present. Severus' notes paid meticulous attention to every detail, and it wasn't difficult to teach them. On the contrary, she gained the respect of a few of the strictest Slytherins. It was a perfect occasion to strengthen her position among the group she was forced to socialise with. While she didn't seek any admiration in the fields of Dark Magic or prosecuting the Dark side, daily life was easier if they respected her. They might even slip some useful bits of information if they felt more comfortable around her.

Besides all this, the skills to defend themselves were certainly useful for the children.

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A replacement for Severus in Potions was not available. Instead, Obscuranta Mulciber took the students at O.W.L.s Level and beyond, researching the theory of the use of human and giant blood in dark potions. Severus had fought hard to exclude the topic from the syllabus. Now Ginny started to understand why.

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Severus arrived late, exhausted, covered in mud and thirsty. Very thirsty. Scrutinising him while he washed and drank, Ginny saw the symptoms of other tortures besides Cruciatus. His ribs showed two fresh wounds that would become ugly scars if not treated. Quickly she fetched what ointment they had. SilkSkin would be best, but it wasn't in their stocks.

Ginny had gathered most of the ingredients on the table of the teacher's lab when Severus stepped close. "Yes, this would be best for the scars," he said tiredly but full of emotion. "But tonight I need another medicine." Gently he pulled her over and onto the bed. "Don't expect much though," Severus warned her. He fell asleep under her caress.

"No, I won't," Severus muttered in his sleep, tossing left and right. Ginny woke up when his elbow contacted with her ribs. Hearing his rebellious ramblings, she quickly woke him. Whatever he rejected or despised, it would not be wise to spread such information at school. "Are you awake now? You were dreaming. And speaking," she offered.

"I'm not about to get involved with these Muggle women. Why would I?" he continued the ramble, still half asleep.

"I bloody well expect you won't!" she burst out loud now, to make sure he woke up.

Severus shook himself. Fully awake he checked briefly around and then ranted. "You? You have no right to expect or demand anything." He sounded hard and unforgiving, but at the same time not like his real self.

"Well, I thought..."

"Don't think, then," he spat.

For just a moment his grip on her had a menacing strength, but his eyes betrayed him. *Think, Ginevra Snape, she scolded herself, this isn't how he handles our relationship, and you know that! We're not alone. Is he putting up a show? What will help him steer the topic safely around his refusing to... rape? Visit a brothel?*

"Don't risk the health of your children bringing us some nasty infection!" she retorted.

"Indeed not." Severus let out a breath.

"And, thinking about it, how would an average Muggle slut know what you like?" Ginny purred while her hands groped deftly into his boxers. "Ah, no, she could not."

"This is not about..." Severus started, but parts of him contradicted his brains, signalling *Maybe it wasn't three minutes ago, but now it is.*

Half an hour later they were soundly asleep, and no bad dreams woke them till morning.

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Charms and Hexes for the fourth year had not nearly drained them of their energy, Ginny noticed in passing. Instead it must have supplied some with lots of new ideas that they implemented right away in the corridor. A group of them soon sported fur and retaliated with casting an itching hex on their opponents, who started brawling.

Another set of sparkling hexes sizzled through the air, bathing several heads in a bright light. The more reasonable part of the class left before being drawn into it, but some were too incapacitated to do so. Pupils dilated, they walked back and forth, slurring nonsense. Glass from a broken window injured two of them, not causing any reaction from them.

With quick strides, Ginny reached the spot and put three fighting pupils into a full Body-Bind. She crudely shaved one face to see whom she was dealing with before she checked on their bruises. Finally, she convinced the confused ones to sit down so they would not reach the stairs.

Meanwhile their professor tempered a few haloes and bound these pupils. He turned to Ginny, panting. "Thank you, Ms Snape. If you would help me escort them all to the nurse?" He looked around for more help, but there was none left.

Without hesitation, Ginny called, "Baron!"

The much-feared ghost dropped through the ceiling almost instantly, ignored the amazement of the bound students and turned to Ginny. "Mrs Snape?"

"My Lord, would you go to the medic-room and warn the nurse on duty that we're coming with a set of casualties? It will be slow going," Ginny asked with a small curtsy.

"Of course," the Bloody Baron replied, with a curious look at the group. "The Epliatio hasn't been developed since my time, I think. A nasty business awaits you for two weeks. And the halo of the curse attractor is just as persistent as the hex itself. Very much so in this case then." He smirked nastily. "Shall I call for their Heads of Colour?"

"If you would, sir," Ginny answered, and the ghost bowed and left through the wall.

The nurse had already conjured four more simple cots when Ginny and Professor Barnes arrived. She shook her head at the sight, but since she had the required remedies at hand already, most were able to have dinner with the rest of the school.

After releasing them, Severus sent his three good-for-nothings to the Herbology teacher. "She has a lot of important tasks waiting just for you," he sneered. "I will inform her to expect you at 7:30 on the next six school days."

The incident hadn't been a big deal in Ginny's own eyes, but the sheer fact that the Bloody Baron had followed her request spread over the student body in no time. It inevitably reached the teachers, too, which didn't exactly improve her reputation with the headmistress, whom the ghost refused to heed. But in the students' minds, Ginny had gained some welcome credits.

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At home, Severus told her that they had once again been on a raid against Muggles and Muggle-friendly wizards. "I had to steer them clear of the one Horcrux that I know has been retrieved."

"Wow, I didn't know! Who found it? Where?" She was all excited now.

"Ginevra, do not ask for more," he pleaded. "It has been exchanged for a while already. Now it is safe to tell you the fact. Someone might even know that it was me who has helped."

With two steps she was close and embraced him, cursing again that she had to tilt her head unnaturally while he kept his chin up as if avoiding her. "Oh, but this is wonderful. You wait and see, they'll start trusting you." A shiver ran down Severus' spine at her happy outburst. Would he ever get used to her spontaneity?

He continued telling Ginny about the raid the other day. Their old visitors had been in the lead, many engaged in the raping. "Young Goyle and Flint among them. They are walking hormone tanks, devoid of all brains. It is getting worse every time."

Then Ministry members had found them and arrested three young husbands plus a few others. "Not Goyle or Flint, but Sullivan was caught." Ginny took that in with satisfaction. One of those in the Dementor attack was no threat any more.

"And Edwin Suller, who married with us. He had not even been aggressive." This wasn't good news. Ginny had been glad to hear from her classmate Lisa that Linda and Edwin Suller were getting along well. He could have tempered the mob a bit.

Searching for a diversion, Ginny said, "I'm glad Draco will remain at school. But Theodore? Severus, can you keep him?" *So much for keeping it light,* she added mentally.

"I will try. He is a good enough guy. I do not want to lose him on an occasion like this. He will never become a potioneer though."

Reminded now, Ginny told him about the essay for Mrs Mulciber and how disgusted some people had been. "Theodore was white as a sheet. As was Millicent Bulstrode, by the way." She gave up more names of students who had continued whispering on the subject the day after the essay, knowing more than Mulciber had ever told them. It was by these paltry actions only that Ginny could support Severus and their mission.

Severus was frustrated at the headmistress' interference but focused on the reactions of the pupils. "Bulstrode you say? This is most interesting. I started suspecting her to be more than the clumsy mammoth she impersonates at times... She *did* own robes just like the ones you received from whomever."

"She helps with the younger ones when they are having nightmares."

"They do?"

"You call yourself Head of House? Or Colour? Ah, don't tell me a Slytherin doesn't have nightmares. Millie is quite adept at the task, I dare say. They trust her. Personally, I'd not want to be coddled back to sleep by Pansy Parkinson."

"Do not give *me* nightmares!"

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With a long shopping list, Ginny went out, happily breathing in the spring. She would have to ask Maud to help her with riding the bike, she decided. It would be nice to dash along the streets with her hair streaming. But then she remembered that most Muggles wore protective helmets. It was dangerous then.

Ginny walked past the dingy, deserted street with the abandoned mill in which Maud's father had been working before it closed. Should she take the shortcut? Three guys with rickety motorised bikes stood at the deserted entrance, shouting obscenities at her. She shook her head in disgust.

"Don't want to take them on their invitation, Weasley?" It was Marcus Flint, showing off to his little brother. "Oh, but you're a... POORblood, aren't you?" They closed in on her, smelling of sweat and... yes, lust potion. Both of them. Albert stood with outbound knees and nearly drooled from the effect.

She'd have to handle them both, and even in the visibility of Muggles. Ginny retreated a few steps and blasted a full Body-Bind at the younger Flint. He fell like a log of wood, and his head crashed badly on the broken asphalt. Marcus Flint was slow off the mark, allowing Ginny to get up a shield before his cutting curse hit.

"Leave me, Marcus, and care for Albert," she beseeched him.

But Marcus wouldn't hear of it. His breath came ragged when he got closer, reaching out for her. "You won't escape this easily. You're finally mine." He pushed her roughly into the side street but quickly cast a Disillusionment charm over the still form on the pavement.

It was time enough to bring up her wand again and hex him blind. A swift move up with her knee between his legs, and he let go of her in a howl.

Ginny was out in Spinner's End in no time. She levitated the hardly visible Albert around the corner, closer to Marcus Flint and hastily continued round the corner, continuing her shopping trip. From the other end of the dingy street, she peered in again. It was empty.

Just in case someone knew her habits, Ginny went to a little grocer that they did not usually frequent. Sooner than she had hoped, she found herself on her way home *Are they gone by now?*

She took the long way around the street, and when she passed the place where the Flints had assaulted her, she heard a shriek and then whimpering. Carefully she inched closer. Albert lay where she had left him, and very still. The voice could be heard again from the first house, pleading now. One of the teens was outside, wide-eyed, barely able to address her. "It's a madman in there. He... he did something strange to these two." he pointed at his two Petrified buddies in the entrance. "Now he has her, and n... nobody can help her."

Resolutely Ginny pushed by. "I know him, I can handle him."

She slammed the door open and saw Flint on top of a girl, grunting. "Get you filthy hands off her! And every other part of you as well!" she raged.

He panted stupidly, "Coming back for your turn? Please queue outside!"

"*Accio Flint's wand! Stupefy!*" Ginny shouted, then paled. It was Maud, scared and assaulted. "Gather your belongings, Maud. Quickly! I'll deal with those outside and come back."

She Stunned the still lucid Muggle boy, stopping the fall of his rigid body with her foot. She levitated him inside. Albert's head looked a mess, covered in blood, and Ginny carefully manoeuvred him inside as well. She conjured a cushion but didn't dare do anything else for him.

"Maud, come here. It is over now. Come and we'll get you out of here, all right?" The girl had no objections, no will of her own. Covered with Flint's robe and Obfuscated, they reached Spinner's End without drawing anyone's attention.

"Severus, quick!"

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Severus would not risk irregularities in his neighbourhood that could attract the Ministry of Magic. He hastily cleaned the place and freed the three Muggles. They were never to remember anything out of the ordinary. He transported Marcus and Albert a few miles away and then owed the Flint parents, ordering Pöllö to throw the slip rather than be caught. He couldn't care less what happened to them.

Maud, though, was a different case. When he returned home, Ginny had comforted her, healed her wounds and repaired her clothes.

Severus cursed himself for not telling her better, but what was done was done. The girl was traumatised, but externally she didn't look harmed.

As the girls drank tea, Severus reverted the clothes to their ragged blood-smearred state but could not bring himself to have her suffer again.

He applied a short-term nerve rattler on Maud's mother to cover over the girl's too-clean state. She promised she'd take her daughter to a doctor.

:.:.*.*:

"She's crying all time, telling me of horrible visions she has," Ginny said yet again after returning from Maud's. "The animal must have had her run after her flying clothes and levitated her off the ground to stall her. Then again she sits around staring unseeingly at the wall. I wished we could Obliviate her as well."

"I understand, but it must not be done. Rape manifests itself into the brains and soul. She would be worse off feeling her depression and anxiety but no reason for them. Often these Muggles end up in St Mungo's to regain their memory. Or later in what they call Psychiatry in their world. Go, visit her once again, and I'll... have a chat with her mother."

Ginny didn't like leaving Maud on Friday afternoon but they had no excuse to not go to the Academy. At least her mother would be home for the weekend and had shown them the appointment with a counsellor.

:.:.*.*:

At dinner the headmistress announced solemnly that their mate, Albert, youngest member of the most honourable and pure family Flint, had passed away in St Mungo's. "He and his brother have been found unconscious near a Muggle area. The family will not disclose any details."

Good for them, Ginny thought, while the headmistress ranted on about Muggles.

Ginny avoided looking at Severus for the whole meal, instead catching up with Heather and Florence. Both had been very silent the week before. Now Florence looked marginally better. "I checked at home, I should receive acceptable marks in Charms and Hexes after all. And Stone Softener Syrup is usable even if it turned orange.

Drafted ferret kidneys. No O in Herbology either, what with the mistakes I made..."

Ginny gratefully turned her attention away when Bernhard Hunt received an owl from his parents. He informed the table in a hushed voice that Greyback's pack had lost a couple of men on Friday, the first day of the full moon. It made Ginny realise that she had not heard or seen anything of the Wolfsbane cakes Severus should have made in abundance two weeks ago. Had he managed, had he sent them?

She fell silent, remembering Bill and Remus and wondering if the men she knew were amongst the losses and what might have happened to the girl. "Are they all dead?"

"No, five or six left the pack, mum writes. Two are dead. You're not feeling sorry for them, are you?" Bernhard asked lightly.

"If I felt any sympathy for Greyback, I'd have chosen him over Severus Snape," she snapped and stood.

Later in the boys dorm, Bernhard noted to Theodore, "For a while we thought Snape's colour was fading, but I dare say his wife's taking up every bit of what he loses."

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My betas are invaluable in setting my language straight, finding just the right terms and commanding my commas into place. Hugs and smooches to Coshie and magicAlly.

Horcrux on the Sea

Chapter 26 of 35

The Order attacks to retrieve a Horcrux.

Horcrux on the Sea

Draco entered their small house and Transfigured his Muggle-proof jacket back into shiny, black robes. He pulled a roll of parchment out from its folds, declaring, "My extra-curricular assignment, sir."

Severus pocketed it with a curt nod. "I will have a look at it right now, despite this being my free time," he declared. Not bothering to draw his wand, he waved at the shelf concealing the stairs, without breaking stride.

"Show-off," Draco snorted.

"You're one to talk," Ginny retorted, rising from her own work. "Just look at yourself." Her hand was reverently travelling over the Slytherin emblem on his chest. It was artfully embroidered tone in tone, the snake just a bit more silvery than anthracite. With a disapproving frown she asked, "Is this juvenile unicorn hair?"

"Hardly," Draco declared, snorting again. "It is just silk. But the latticed background contains Mooncalf hair."

"Sounds more like a creature Goyle would choose," Ginny opined.

"Severus," Draco halted the man. "Did you hear this? Do take your wife out to watch the Mooncalves dance."

"Do take her out at all," Ginny corrected with a pout on her face. "Although *will* have an outing tomorrow morning."

Severus turned around sharply at her insistent tone. "Stop it right here. How about if you two hone your cutting skills while preparing paella and salad for after our training? Cut the bell pepper into even, quarter-inch stripes and the carrots to lozenges of half an inch."

"What?" Draco pronounced, but then a smirk crossed his face. "You owe me, Severus. Do check the last page, the sources. Come, Ginny, let the professor get to his favourite quill and the red ink, while we direct our wands at the knives. I haven't done housework for weeks now."

"So he doesn't take you to the local disco?" Draco prodded when they were alone.

The young woman huffed. "Disco, pah! I'm not expecting Severus to make a fool of himself. But there must be some diversion in life! All books and no snitch makes Gin a dull witch!"

"You do get to play Quidditch nowadays."

"Not recently. We've barely been on a broom the last week. We've been discussing the tactics of these new Ministry patrols. What routes they frequent, what makes them suspicious despite a Disillusionment charm, which we've also learned." She rapped her wand on the top of Draco's head, and his immaculate robes assumed the once-white colour of the kitchen, including its marks and scratches that told of the neglect and abuse the furniture has gone through over surely fifty years.

Ginny admired her work from different angles. "Damn, I missed your boots."

"Bad enough if the old Snapes used the work surface as a cutting board, but my robes!" Draco whined. He moved to the far wall and winced as he looked down his front.

Ginny swallowed hard. "They must have chased each other using the kitchen knives as darts."

A chameleonish wand hand swished around as Draco conjured a mirror to verify his looks. "Salazar's sea serpent, never thought my face could hold so many scars even before the final battle."

"According to Bill, the goblins would prefer you that way. They still sacked him."

Draco swished some more, becoming twitchy when nothing happened. At the fourth attempt Draco had cancelled the charm, although the colour of his face didn't change. He frantically consulted the mirror to verify his looks, patting his hair into shape.

"For Merlin's sake, Draco," Ginny huffed. "Are you back to being the self-conscious brat or what?"

"Huh, no! Well, maybe at times. It's hard not to during the free days when I'm supposed to check the mirror every other minute. Nothing's amiss though, apparently," he noted with relief, and some colour returned. "Be glad you learned this properly and didn't damage my good looks! What's this about Bill?"

Ginny sighed. "If we want to keep Mister Strict out there in mood we'd better focus on even lozenges. Here's a knife. Honestly, batons is all you could ever want when it comes to chopping vegetables!"

"But last week's potion cleared only with accurately shaped lozenges. I distinctly recall..."

"I know what my blob looked like. Who needs a brew that *enhances* their craving for sugar anyway?"

"Are you doubting your teacher?"

"Oh, shut up! I can tell you a little about Bill, but I must concentrate on the angles while cutting!"

:.:.:

It was such a fine, sunny morning that Severus could indeed not have left Ginevra anywhere without drawing attention to it, and the opportunity was too good to miss.

And yet, close to Land's End, he tried once again. "Ginevra, stay here, please. You can still help. I will Port-key the injured Order members here."

"No, Severus, you promised! I must see what happens. I've been away from it all far too long. Besides, you're on your inspection round only. They would wonder why you left me here."

"I cannot bear it," he tried again, his face contorted with the thought alone. "Can you even keep out if you see your family; are you strong enough?"

"Severus! Stop this instant. I'm not an idiot." Her neck and cheeks threatened to take a dangerous crimson colour, but she swallowed and struggled hard to hold herself in check.

Severus was defeated, and he knew it.

"Here, then you take a Portkey. You keep it. ALWAYS. Drop your wand before you drop the Portkey. Leave as soon as there is danger and certainly when I tell you so." He held her close, his nose brushing her cheek. "Can't lose you ... love."

The new endearment stunned Ginny for a moment. A warm sensation spread from her guts, and her heart ached for a moment. At this moment, Severus was not just protecting one of the brats that had ended up in his care! Pacified, she said, "I will, Severus. I will hide. I can watch and note their behaviour. I can help the injured. Or I can incapacitate them completely. Yes, only from my cover, Disillusioned and all. Goodness, Severus, we have been training for fights for months, I know what to do."

She gently cupped his cheek. "You take care of yourself, for I need you back in one piece."

"All right then. We do not Apparate over the sea. This rule does not depend on the person," he quickly added. He held her close once again. "Do be careful, Ginevra!"

They found a small hut of sorts on the east of the tiny cliff off Land's End. While the couple crossed the rocky ground they checked the terrain. No path. Loose stones of all sizes invited to be Transfigured or moved. Despite the sunshine they were all moist from the spray of the sea. There was hardly any vegetation except for what the sea had cast onto the rocks. In the west, Ginny found a depression to hide in. She would have a good view while her body was hidden. The depression was wide enough that she could even duck from a stone flying towards her. She picked up a shell and held it high, waving innocently.

Severus nodded nervously, to confirm that she ducked deep enough, then went over to the hut. He was ordered to do a control round to check different groups of Death Eaters. Having his wife along for 'a walk' would indeed divert any suspicion. Yet, he would have preferred knowing her to be home safe. *Male protection instinct*, he scolded himself. *Haven't you always found this ridiculous? And besides, she isn't safe in Spinner's End alone either.*

Severus looked into the hut. They knew the four Death Eaters holding watch there, Draco, Avery, Marcus Flint and Paul Nott. Furthermore, Thomas Mulciber was patrolling outside. He at least had seen them both arriving together.

Suddenly the air rustled. Severus, pretending to look around, checked that Ginny had her head down.

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Severus hastily picked two very nervous members of the Order before anyone else flattened them. The gangly, young man followed the sportive duelling routine far too stiffly as if a referee were to award points for fairness. The other was a woman of fierce determination and impressive powers but mediocre aim so that Severus' agility training came in handy.

They certainly weren't fools, but one alone would present no challenge at all to a seasoned Death Eater. Even when Severus had just thrown a levitation or a blinding hex of his own he could still cancel their curses approaching him. Wordlessly. Those two were reasonable material, but they needed to train! Once again he cursed his own weak resistance when Dumbledore had cancelled the duelling club and later, when no one had encouraged Dumbledore's Army. Not to mention decent teachers for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Alternating spells towards these two and reinforcing a shield with his second wand, he drove them to the west of the island, all the while searching for Ginevra.

As he got the measure of the woman's aim depending on her erratic elbow twitch, Severus conjured deflectors for her hexes so that a Death Eater got a hit in an arm or leg in addition to his challenges from the front. Such deflection would hide all traces from his own wand, as he hoped Draco would remember too.

Suddenly, an outcry of pain pierced the air and confused the foolish boy! With a rapid flourish, Severus threw an extra-wide shield that would cut the three of them off from all straying spells for a few seconds. The guy, whose profile sported some features of the Boot family, needed the timeout most.

Severus risked a glance to the side where Ginevra was hiding. The immobile form of Longbottom was slowly gliding over a high stone, probably right towards Ginevra, who was thankfully not visible.

Severus could not spare any time to see who else had noticed this, as his opponents fired off towards him again. For a while, he fell into a sportive routine, nicely alternating between the give and take, as a good sparring partner would do, only that Severus himself was never on the "take" side. As Boot weakened again, Severus changed tactics and quickly struck down the woman.

"Jocey!" Boot intoned, unthinkingly.

Severus groaned inwardly, *Haven't they taught these youngsters even the basics? Haven't they drilled them into any discipline?*

At least Boot had the presence to produce and use his Portkey for them both, freeing Severus from one burden.

Swiftly he gauged the new situation. Mrs Weasley stood her grounds with an expression that could freeze one's blood. Separated from Mad Eye, she was now fighting two full-fledged Death Eaters on her own. In minute progress they drove her to the depression where her daughter hid. A curse hit a rock already in flight, cracking and clouding one Death Eater's face with debris so that the man stumbled blindly onwards, out of their circle. They had trained exactly this curse so often, that Severus identified the signature immediately. *Ginevra! Well done!* But it had been sent from further towards the hut than she was supposed to be. *Where does she think she is going?!*

Engaged in new a fight of his own, Severus could not risk a second look. Frustrated, he deflected the sharp curse coming from his opponent at Molly's second attacker before he covered himself in his dome shield to turn around again...to look into his wife's eyes.

The expression of hatred on Ginevra's face, so similar to her mother's, let his heart skip a beat. Crouching low, she had a stone float at her command. When she deliberately turned away her gaze, it crashed on the man's neck and shoulder. She was out of sight in the next second.

Severus was hard pressed again. More Death Eaters had arrived, and he needed to concentrate. On the one hand, he tried to keep young fighters of the Order out of the thick of it, on the other hand, there were Draco and Ginevra to care for. And over there was Potter, stealthily heading to the little heap of stones that appeared to have been collected haphazardly but in reality held the Horcrux. Or so Severus hoped. A well trained redhead of stocky build was with him, shielding him from sight: Charlie Weasley.

"Over here!" Severus snarled, waving at the throng of the Order and tearing two junior Death Eaters' attention from the two. Obediently, they focussed on a group to their right. Soon one of them screamed in agony, and three more Death Eaters concentrated on this hot spot. Severus shielded Weasley from an attack and had the curse hit the other junior Death Eater's knees. He collapsed silently.

A rumble indicated that the hut had collapsed. The air was dry and dusty for an instant, but then the breeze had carried it off. Severus dared another glance, but he was too far and fighters blocked his view. When Severus turned round again, there was no sight of either Weasley or Potter any more; the stones lay differently but just as arbitrarily for an innocent observer.

Severus Apparated to the pile of logs that had been the hut. No sign of Ginevra. Could she be buried? Severus plunged aside of a cutting curse and rolled towards the east. The Death Eater who followed him stumbled on his way and fell heavily. He never stood again. Severus did not need bystanders!

An infernal sound filled the island just as another squad of Death Eaters Portkeyed in. Then there was silence. Utter silence.

The masked men and women looked around, not finding any opponents standing upright. "What was that?"

"They sounded their retreat, I should say."

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Silently, Severus scanned through the scattered logs. He found a helpless Avery hiding at the edge of a wall. "Ginevra?" No answer. There was a body surrounded with blood. *Too tall for her*, Severus thought in relief.

"Flint," a voice next to him said. Severus nodded, uncaring. *Could there be hidden rooms?* Not if the building was of Muggle origin, but Severus was not sure of that.

"So many dead," someone said. "And more wounded."

Absent-mindedly Severus commanded, "Get everyone out!"

Probably it was Paul Nott who clarified this vague order. "Portkey them all to the mainland. Marten, Scott, secure a relay base. You three there, Apparate them from there to the sickward. Make it snappy! Return with the Portkeys. One key remains here at all times."

Nervously, Severus levitated fragments of the walls around until there was none that could hide a body. *Or a limb.*

"She would have had a Portkey?" Paul Nott asked cautiously.

Severus nodded. "I should have given her a command to leave." He stood, staring down but nowhere in particular. "Her bravery outweighs her experience."

"She is a Gryffindor, and a Prewett. Come, Severus, where did the Portkey lead to? Knowing you, not too close to this place, right?"

"Leave it to me. I will go." For the first time in a while he looked up, but he did not take in the battle scene in front of him.

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Draco searched for survivors in the frightening landscape of the battlefield. Three members of the Order lay piled up, dead. Another one still twitched, and Draco Stunned him quietly in the vague hope no one would notice. If the man looked dead, the retreating Death Eaters might leave him lying there. There was a stray arm and an ear. Behind a rock, half washed into the sea, Draco saw what looked like a boot with a leg still attached. Draco lost his breakfast on the spot.

Many more dead Death Eaters were scattered over the field. Clutching his right shoulder, Mulciber swore under his breath, "Bloody Order, just look what they did. And for what, eh?"

"I don't know."

"Not even you, junior partner of the biggest Death Eater?"

With a huff and dragging his gait, Draco moved on, trying to get as much space between himself and Mulciber as possible. Assisting the injured would work best, for Mulciber was not known for caring! Draco conjured simple band aids and splints then gathered them around the next Portkey.

A woman wandered helplessly around, shielding her eyes. Her upper face showed so angry a set of boils that Draco wasn't sure of the state of her eyes. He took her elbow, and she twitched. "It's Draco. This way, let me guide you. We have enough eye balm at our master's," he tried to soothe her.

When Draco looked up again, Severus was gone. Most likely he was at the shore, some miles up, since at one point he had advised Draco to arrange his Portkey that way. It was better not to follow him.

A sharp pain in his left forearm and the hiss of the others caught Draco's attention. Their Dark Marks were burning, their master summoning them, and it was highly advisable not to stall.

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"My Lord, we've lost ten fighters. Many wounded ones will make a full recovery. The Order left at least four dead."

Draco, of course, did not correct Mulciber. He kept close to the entrance where Severus must appear shortly or absolutely draw unwanted attention to himself.

Even considering their losses, Draco found the level of the Dark Lord's fury hard to understand. The others were at a loss as well. This set of rocks cannot possibly have been a hideout to speak of. Yet, with a stony face, their master had them all minutely report their actions. Draco, left thigh and foot numbed and ears still drumming from the horns, tried his best to appear eager and active but without much success. However, everybody else did very much the same.

Their master listened and punished.

Finally Severus arrived, clothes torn, hair dishevelled, staring but unseeing. He shook his head minutely towards Nott. Draco's knees almost gave way at the look of desperation in his mentor's face.

The Dark Lord greeted his right hand in the same way as he had the rest. *CRUCIO!*

After what he considered the appropriate timespan, he asked, "What was that for, S... Snape?"

"My tardiness in answering your call, My Lord," Severus said, bending low to kiss the hem of his master's frock, now that he would be allowed to crawl close.

"Indeed. I do recall summoning everyone twenty minutes ago. Explain yourself!"

"My Lord, I was searching the shores..."

"Why would that be necessary?" the sharp, high pitched voice interrupted him.

"I beg my Lord to forgive me, but I took my wife along for today's inspection round."

Again their master's snarl came sharply, *"Crucio!"* and after cancelling it, he asked as he had done so often already, threateningly soft, "What was it for this time, S... Severus?" *At least he does not use his family name again,* was the most positive thought Draco's mind provided.

"For taking her along unauthorised?"

"What befell you to do so, Severus Snape?"

"My Lord, to make her get some fresh air under my supervision. The mission to such an abandoned place appeared safe to me."

"Crucio!"

There was no foretelling when the questioning might end. Again and again Severus was submitted to the Cruciatus curse for a few seconds, and afterwards the question always was, "What was that for, Ss... Severus?" A gruelling strategy!

As Draco had assumed, Ginny had used her Portkey, which led her to a secluded bay a few miles off. With a raspy voice, Severus ended and hung his head, more defeated than ever.

He was in a worse mental state than Draco had ever seen him: quaking in his boots, utterly defeated *Does he realise how much he loves the girl?*

Said boots vanished, and the new *encouragement* of the Dark Lord hit Draco's mentor: a curse to slowly peel off the skin from your feet. Already after the first heel was exposed, Severus sank onto his knees, a weakness that caused mutters among the Death Eaters and seemed to surprise even their master. He cancelled the curse and hissed like a snake, "Where. iss. ssshe? SSSpeak."

Severus presented a black pebble that was sparkling as he moved his thumb over it. "She left me a message on the Portkey, announcing she would return home." Standing but not looking up, he croaked, "I have no idea how or when, and I did not find her there."

Draco dug his fingernails into his palms to suppress the shudder from the sensation of cold sweat running down his back. Ginny was missing! It would be the final blow for Severus and Draco alike. Never see her cheer any more, never hear her voice? It just could not be true.

"Can the Order have taken her to... safety?" their master enquired as if asking for the weather forecast.

Severus failed to conceal his desperation. "I was in the thick of the fight, I could not follow..."

"Crucio!"

The new assault homed in squarely, but Severus was prepared better this time. He stood, if only barely, and allowed for no more than a small gasp. The Dark Lord let his wand move up and down, pushed force here and there, unpredictably. Eventually, Severus sank down again, yet silently. "Will you let yourself be lured to their lair, Severus Snape? Or will you die like the hero you were back in spring?"

The horror spreading among the bystanders was palpable, and Draco could even smell it. The pheromones in cold sweat of the mortified throng penetrated even through the odour of the blood and dirt they were clouded in already. Their most celebrated hero was taunted this way, and none of them had any idea why that was.

Their master cancelled the spell and prompted, "I have asked you a question, Severus..."

Severus panted, gasping for air after every few words. "My Lord, they will not... catch me. There is nothing... and nobody... that can move me... from your side."

"Not even your young wife, devoted to you, as she seems to be?"

What strategy will work best now, Draco wondered feverishly. *Shall Severus confess his love, or would this be his end? The Dark Lord wants children...*

"With your permission, I will seek to find her, my Lord," Severus said. "I will admit, I got rather used to having her close. Despite all precautions I took, she might even have caught such signals."

The Dark Lord cackled fondly at that last remark, and a few of the bystanders felt encouraged or obliged...which of the two Draco could not tell...to join into his laughter.

Gradually, more people joined and others allowed themselves to breathe more freely. Their master's temper had at long last calmed down. He let the injured ones go and moved to another, clean room with the rest. Predictably, Severus was still with them and not allowed to leave.

Draco joined the men in a bathroom where they freshened up and healed one another as best as they could.

As they returned, more Death Eaters from the highest rank had been summoned and tea was served. In what sounded like idle chitchat the Dark Lord turned to the person in charge of the guards. "How could this happen, Thomas?"

"My Lord, I am at a loss," Mulciber muttered. "This island you commanded us to guard... it looked so innocent and..."

"You set your own judgement over mine, Thomas. Whatever task I set is the most important one for those in charge."

"My Lord, I see my error. It is purely my fault."

Sharp now, their master countered, "I hear a doubt in your voice. SSSPEAK, Thomass Mulciber!"

If he dared he was a braver man than many. Or just dumber. Thomas Mulciber did speak again. "My Lord, with all respect, maybe if you could explain as to why a place as remote as this... This attack did not look like a diversion. What did the Order want there?"

Draco was not the only one keen to hear the answer. To the left and right of him, the masked men and women raised their heads a little. They all tried to balance between appearing nosy and disinterested. Neither would do when facing their master.

"So you want to know? What is it to you?" the monster snarled, sounding as if he would not answer. However, to everyone's surprise, Severus made a single step towards the snakelike man. "Severus?" Disgust and surprise lay in this single word.

"My master, with your permission, Thomas has a point. If we understand why..."

"... you have an all too easy way to betray me!" Fumes escaped the Dark Lord's nostrils as he paced in front of them, robes billowing. "Do you think I do not know how many of you seek a way to secure your neck if we fail?"

Given their fatigue and pain, their protest sounded remarkably strong. Their master raised a hand in recognition. Severus retreated into the circle, but Mulciber stepped forward, encouraged. With a wave he was given permission to speak. "My Lord, if there is another place that looks equally innocent to us but bears significance to you, how exactly should we protect it better while not drawing particular attention to it? What are we to pay attention to? My master, I do not even know if the Order has succeeded in whatever it was they wanted to achieve there."

It was a brave speech. All heads were now directed towards their master in the vague hope for something substantial, that however, did not come. "I am not a fool to deliver you the weaponsss againssst me. I am prepared to lose the weakssst amongst you on our way to power. We have sssspares, remember that! Now go. Get out of my sight."

With a bow they retreated, when the Dark Lord called, "Paul!"

Nott stood rooted, then turned slowly, bowing awkwardly, visibly in pain.

"I take it that you have a personal interest in the redhead, née Weasley?"

He cast down his eyes in confirmation and was ordered to take Draco and a novice to support Severus in his search for his wife.

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When the searching team left Spinner's End, Severus fell on his sofa, a self-filling goblet of water his only companion. Sleep would bring his mind no comfort, but Nott had insisted that his body required rest.

"Severus," he had said as if speaking to a stubborn child. "Be reasonable. We will need our wits sharp and our bodies fully functional. You'd be hindering us more than helping."

And, as Draco had stated correctly, if...no, *when* Ginevra returned home, she would need Severus' immediate support. "No one can replace you here, at home, Severus."

And so he was doomed to idle waiting.

Waiting was part of a spy's main occupations, as was dealing with fear. But this was different. Fear for a loved one was paralysing rather than alerting him, and he felt many signs of distress he had despised others for.

Severus barely managed to ward the house behind them. Too exhausted to tailor wards to not allow a stranger in, but grant her access, he had set up an alarm. Now he was to wait.

Wait idly, while his mind played its nasty tricks on him, going through horror scenarios that could unfold any time, any place on the British Isles or repeating scenes of the last months where Ginevra had not been as safe and care-free as she deserved.

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My betas, Coshie and magicALLY, deserve high praise for rearranging my sentences and making this chapter readable.

The Draag Stone

Chapter 27 of 35

Ginny and Ron leave the battlefield.

The Draag Stone

A bird was chirping him back to consciousness. His arm thrummed alarmingly, not leaving any other part of his body much room for complaint. The air smelled of the sea, and he wanted to fill his lungs, but his chest would not allow him to take a deep breath. Neither would his eyes stay open in the bright light. And so he resigned himself to shallow breathing and listening to the distant waves.

An undetermined time later, something swished over his left temple, rousing him to awareness again. Something kept nagging at his consciousness, insisting that it wasn't right for him to be relaxing here, that he should be elsewhere, and a lot more active. With the next swish, he turned his head that way, incidentally away from the sun. His lost sister was sitting next to him. This, he knew immediately did not tally with anything that had happened recently. She was holding his head in her lap, stroking him. "Ginny?" he croaked, unsure if he was dreaming or what it might mean if he was not.

Ginny looked into his face, and her features softened as she let out a long breath. "Ron, oh Merlin, Ron, it's so good to see you. How are you?"

Ron rolled on his side to bring one elbow under his body, but Ginny gently held him back. "Take your time; there's no one else here. Are you somewhat comfortable?"

He looked around, gathering his thoughts. He was lying on a tiny patch of grassland surrounded by rocks, feet bathing in the sun. The frayed holes and tears in his robes forced the events on the rocky isle back into Ron's memory. Harry had insisted on accompanying the party, and if he failed all was lost. A jet of adrenaline pulsed through Ron and demanded immediate action. "I must go..."

Not yet sitting properly, Ron swayed from lack of blood to the head and was forced to lie down again.

"No, Ron. You can't fight just now. Just rest," his sister said.

The Order was fighting and had been hard pressed, and lingering wasn't right! But Ron could not jar his body into motion. As he relented, a groan escaped him, and he hated himself for showing weakness.

Ginny plucked at his sleeve and asked, "You need this arm taken care of. Can the Order go to St Mungo's?"

Ron gave a minute shake of his head and was glad this didn't cause him vertigo. "The Ministry couldn't hold it, but Hogwarts is open to us."

"Too bad it is at the other end of the country. All of the Order members will go there, right?"

"Yes." Ron knew that even people from outside the Order had started choosing Hogwarts over St Mungo's, and the Order had in fact recruited secondary members right out of Pomfrey's claws, but he didn't find the strength to elaborate. "The hospital wing is usually full," he added instead.

After several, gradually deepening breaths, Ron took in the situation at last. "But... but, Ginny, what are you doing here?"

Her new smile washed refreshingly over his soul even if her eyes were swollen with tears as she replied. "So you finally noticed? Well, I am helping you. Now, let me think."

More slowly this time, Ron hoisted himself on his good elbow and appraised her. Her straight hair lifted around her in the breeze, her alert eyes observed the surroundings but turned to check on him regularly. She looked older than he remembered and more serious. Not that it should surprise him. Ron shook himself and pulled his legs under himself to get into an upright position opposite her.

She furrowed her brow in concentration, but whatever it was she came up with didn't seem to really convince her. "We should leave, but I can't Apparate yet. Can you Apparate us both? Are you strong enough?"

This was his chance! Eagerly he checked his limbs. All except for his right arm felt acceptable, and even this limb did feel a little better now. A lot better, if he just wanted it. "Yes, of course," he replied and stood up to prove it. The nerves in his arm protested as he worked his fingers individually, but he took care to not show the pain.

"Ron, don't rush into things. Side-Along Apparition isn't the same. Have you even done this before?"

What was she thinking? She pretty well knew he was licensed. "We're being drilled, if you remember. Side-Along and distance Apparition. I can do more than one hundred miles now. Give me your hand."

However, she held up said hand instead, palm towards her brother. "One warning still. If you break as much as my toenail, Severus will have your throat. Still willing to Apparate? Good. Now Apparate us over there." She jerked her head to an outcrop of rock twenty yards away.

They appeared safely near the rocks, and Ron stood his ground. He knew that he had to be strong for two. Ron also knew he had to tread carefully around Ginny to not scare her off. Hermione had performed research on hostages and how they idealised their keeper, something called after a capital on the continent. Ginny might not see things as they were.

"Excellent," she proclaimed. Then she examined Ron's limbs and head, just like his mother did whenever he returned home these days. He didn't fight it. "Are you all right, Ron? Drained?"

Truth be told, Ron had nearly fainted, but he would never say so. He was in charge here, and he had to bring her up to Scotland! He took his time to strengthen his voice, but the pain and the blood throbbing in his palm caused him draw in his breath. "I'm... fine." He could have cursed himself for his slip.

"I see. Apparition is to be limited," Ginny remarked matter-of-factly.

Looking up into the bright, blue sky, her eyes followed a flock of seagulls. "If we could simply fly like them... Oh, but we can! Yes, that's it! Ron, tell me, is The Burrow still standing? Can we fetch brooms from there?" She was all excited now.

I couldn't have planned this better, Ron thought. For the time being, I'll just play along and not rouse her suspicion Aloud, he stated, "I don't see why not. I can Apparate us that far, I'm positive."

"Wonderful. Let's hurry, as long as they're still fighting. We cannot be found together." She took the Portkey, fingered around with her wand, murmuring, and finally sent it back over to their first landing place. "You hold me properly again... off to The Burrow."

:.*:.*:

They almost lost their balance when Ron landed them at the edge of their old makeshift Quidditch field.

"Good place," Ginny said. "We can take a short rest here, I hope. How's your arm?"

A tell-tale, angry violet line started at his wrist and extended one third the way to the pitch of his elbow. A sepsis! Maybe Apparition wasn't such a good idea with a wounded arm?

"You need rest. I will go to the house; wait here," she commanded and left quickly.

Conserving his strength, Ron lay down and watched his sister stride forth determinately. When she approached the berry bushes, a thought crossed his mind *She doesn't know the new wards! She'll get caught in them, and Dad will come and find us.* This whole operation was far simpler than he had imagined.

However, waving her wand in a most skilled fashion, his little sister passed through the garden door with ease *Oh, bugger!* Within seconds the inner wards were also down. *That was bloody brilliant,* Ron had to admit. *And she has torn down Snape's wards, too. Or, she said so.* Ron still didn't believe in this story. Too groggy to develop a plan, he continued just watching her.

She was aiming at their shed, and its door flung open, two brooms zooming to her.

Instead of quickly returning to him, she seemed to ponder about something, weighing her choices. Finally pointing her wand to the second floor, she stood still for some time, as if waiting. A greenish object flopped down to her. She then aimed at what Ron thought was their parents' room, and lots of small items tumbled down, landing softly at her feet.

Finally, she summoned objects from the kitchen that she had to catch deftly.

Another pause before she decisively raised the wand to her own window. Ron double-checked sharply in disbelief, but this was indeed her blue-silver, cuddly unicorn! A picture flared up in his mind of a Ginny not more than twice its size, the horn-tip in her sweaty, little fist and the thumb in her mouth. The Ginny of today cuddled it shortly before it followed the rest. *Ah, the green thing is the old rucksack Charlie often used for weekend trips with that Muggle friend of his.*

When all the Summoned items were packed, she shrunk the bag.

Panting slightly, she arrived and cast an ignore-me spell and a Muffliato. "I'm not sure how good the tap water will be, but it is all there was. Hm, I left a few of the old wards

down," Ginny mused. "Should I..."

"No, stay! All valuables are at H... in Headquarters," Ron assured her while downing the water and opening the chocolate she had brought. Warmth spread through his aching body. "Good thinking!" he acknowledged her.

"Yes, well, I do recall my brother's preferences. Oh, Ron." And suddenly a wave of sentimentality swept over Ginny and she clutched his shoulder. "I'm so glad to see you. It's been so long." Now she was positively crying.

He embraced her one-handedly and patted her back. Tears tickled down his cheeks now as well.

Ginny! Here she is, in my care alone, and I'm not strong enough to handle it! Ron felt the responsibility crashing over him. I'm not at my best with this arm, and magically I'll never be her match anyway. I have to exploit her own ideas, pretend to cooperate, lure her.

"It's been months, Ginny. I cannot believe you made it. Tell me, now. Tell me everything!" He smoothed her hair away from her face and rubbed at the smudge of chocolate he had left near her ear. Holding her at arm's length, he had a thorough look at her. Her hair was shorter than he remembered and not nearly as shiny as it should be. Her face and arms sported scratches and bruises. Ron shuddered, imagining what Madam Pomfrey would find under her clothes, which were mended and nondescript and certainly no comparison to the pristine dress code Snape himself kept. Was it a wonder she was crying?

Ron should have remonstrated with her but could not summon the strength. He should leave her to do the talking. "How were they treating you? What can I do?"

"I'm fine. Really. You need not do anything. I've just been missing everyone so much."

Ron snorted. "You tell me you lived in a house with this git, in the company of Death Eaters, and your only problem was you don't see us?" He felt her stiffening at his side. This had come out all wrong! "Now... I mean... we all missed you, and of course, you missed us. But I cannot believe that it's all. What did they make you do? What has HE... made you do?"

"Severus is good to me. Always. And he sees to it that others are as well. Didn't Fleur pass on our message?"

Heat crawled up Ron's neck and ears. *That mischievous, false witch! Ginny used to hate her and call her Phlegm all the time! Where has this gone, why would she suddenly confide in her? How can she expect me to listen to her? That woman failed to return Ginny when she had had the chance.* This had been her one, great opportunity in this war, in which she otherwise had no part—not that Ron minded!

Ron was about to say this, but looking at his sister's distraught face, he swallowed down the impulse—Mad-Eye be thanked for all his drills. Instead, he stomped off to cool down and lay out his strategy. *Ginny might in fact believe in all this!*

Returning, Ron just noted, "Yes, well, that. We have no proof Snape didn't Confound her."

"Can't you see that I'm fine? I can do magic as normal, and I can talk normally. Do you want me to do funny exercises?"

Sighing, Ron went for the most obvious signs that contradicted Ginny's own impression. "You've scratches all over, you're bony and look exhausted, your robe is worn and mended..."

Swiftly, she stood and glared up at him menacingly. "If you recall, we have been covered in the debris of a collapsing house. Did you expect me to conjure a mirror and run a series of freshening-up spells? Or was I right in rather saving your hide, Ron Weasley? Severus takes high risks to protect me."

"What did he do to you? What am I to expect underneath these rags?"

"You stop this right now, or I'll be on my way alone. Search for a new, less emotional topic; there's plenty to discuss. You can brush the debris out of my hair, if it helps you cope," she growled.

Well, if he couldn't reach her directly, he'd try another tack.

"So what did you do all day?"

By the sound of it, she had attended regular classes at that shady place they called Salazar's Academy, and if her memory could be trusted, then in a quite unspectacular fashion. Lectures, homework, pranks, good teachers and lousy ones. It sounded far too normal to be true. Their subjects had been a bit different, that seemed all.

Ron recalled that neither the Ministry nor the Order had located the school yet but there were rumours all around.

"So, for more than two months," Ginny concluded, "I have now been a student again. Our O.W.L.s were ruddy tough. A nightmare, to be precise."

"Yeah," Ron snorted, recalling the discussion between Sprout, McGonagall and Lupin about the O.W.L.s that had been filed at the Ministry not long ago. "I've heard about those. I bet the teachers filled the exam papers for you, too. This wasn't quite normal school material, was it?"

"What? Who dares to claim that they did? I worked hard for that, spent nights and weekends revising. You can ask Hermione what hard work is, since I doubt you know. These exams were certainly harder than Hogwarts makes them. And I tell you, this is a straightforward school. Strict as it gets. There were pranks, sure, but no stupid little house fights."

"Snape being the headmaster for his beloved Slytherins?"

"He isn't! He teaches two subjects and... has other tasks. And would you please stop talking like that about your brother-in-law!" she snarled.

That thought made Ron's flesh creep even without any particular image in mind. "Don't worry, Ginny, this marriage will be annulled, and then you're free." Ron laughed, hoping to extract a smile from her.

Her reaction was frighteningly sincere. "Oh, no, it won't just be annulled. We've gone into this union with open eyes. Severus is... very... considerate, accommodating..." Her face hadn't shown any emotion as she had searched for a word, but her features straightened with the last sentences.

Without missing a beat, she changed topic. "We must leave this place, it's too obvious. Are you able to Apparate us further?"

Ron felt his ears redden, but he knew he had to drop the discussion before it became a fight. He assessed his body. It sure felt better, didn't it? "Where do you want us to go?"

"Well, I was hoping... Do you remember the Draag Stone, where Bill took us after that dreadful fight with Fred and George that left us covered in boils? Can you Apparate us there? For the rest we'll then take the brooms."

Ron certainly remembered how his mother had gone all red and short of breath at the sight. Bill had stormed in and put them all into a Full Body-Bind before sorting them out. Without much ado their brother had snatched a few random shoes, and they'd found themselves in more than enough fresh air. Ron vividly recalled the tiring hike up the hill in badly adjusted footwear, which Bill proclaimed would remove excessive energy out of their systems. When they were cold, their usually good-natured brother had only growled they had to speed up to get warm.

He could picture the large rock very well, too, including the surrounding in which Bill had after all made them search unicorns and chase dragons to keep them going. But in addition to the scenery, he would need the rough direction to Apparate them, and Ron didn't have a clue where it was situated.

"You better pause somewhere north of Birmingham." Ginny said, pointing. "From there its just north-east, opposite the sun."

As Ron nodded, relieved that he would find his target now, she added lightly, "Just don't land us anywhere too close to the Creeveys."

Ron froze. Boisterously cheery Colin Creevey had been her mate, even her partner in Herbology and Charms. They had regularly been seen brooding over the same books. The Ginny he remembered would never talk about the dead in such a casual manner! Clearly, something is amiss here. If only he knew how to handle her, how to react.

Don't put your foot into it before you understand it, a voice called out in his head. Time and again Ron had heard how he was always speaking before thinking. If in his current, weakened state he wasn't as explosive, then all the better. So Ron swallowed hard and embraced his little sister protectively. "That... will be fine, Ginny. Do we have to take all this stuff along?"

"Yes, well, I thought so. Listen, you cannot take me and two brooms anyway, right? What if I take one broom along the first time? Only if you're truly up to it, you re-Apparate here and return with the bag and the other broom. If not we've got one broom at least. And if you're stranded here, well, you do have another broom," she added, frowning.

The poisonous line on Ron's arm was a bit longer than when they had landed. "I'd like to stop the blood stream now before it gets worse," Ginny said. "It will hurt dreadfully, though."

Horrified, Ron blurted out, "You want to bind the upper arm and shut the blood circulation? Without a pain killer? No bloody way!"

"Look, Ron, we must Apparate quite a distance! Then we cannot reach help before it's dark. I do have a pain killer that's not going to make you too drowsy." She produced a small phial out of the folds of her robe.

Ron downed it, praying that Remus was right and Snape would never misbrew his potions. Besides, Ginny might have given it to him as well.

Ginny pulled some linen fabric out of the bag, tore off a long strip, and while Ron clenched his teeth, she bound and magicked it tight. Tighter. Tightest. Ron nearly collapsed but composed himself with an iron will. "I'm all right."

"You're strong!"

He grabbed her free hand and gathered his energy to whisk them away.

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Ginny caught a deep breath as she looked at the Draag Stone, a rock approximately 30 feet high that Muggles today called the Drake Stone.

Ron had landed them safely, only taken a breather and a drink and then rushed off with a thumbs up to gather the satchel and the second broom.

Back at The Burrow, though, Ron had been oddly lethargic. He had relented shockingly smoothly whenever he had crossed a line and Ginny had become angry. This was not at all the demeanour she remembered of her hotheaded brother. No, this wasn't exactly what had happened. Ron had stomped off with anger-red ears but suppressed his temper until he had been able to talk calmly again. *Mum wants us to tread around Aunt Muriel in this fashion to avoid her tantrums! What is going on here? Am I some kind of lunatic who goes ballistic at the slightest provocation?*

Ginny recalled a similar discussion on the evening before her first trip to Hogwarts. *Hasn't Mum told Dad to suppress his emotions when dealing with a Malfoy? I'm my own family's new nemesis.*

She kicked at the shrubs with such violence that a Muggle boy fled back to hold his mother's leg for security. The world just wasn't fair! Ron treading carefully around her, so that he would not reveal too much, just in case... *and I didn't spill the beans either, just in case he gets caught by our—their... by Death Eaters. Real ones, that is.*

Her wand heated perilously in her pocketed hand, and the boy's mother and elder sister gave her an extra hard stare.

To calm down, Ginny strode off and forced herself to recall how Bill had taken them to this place long ago. He too had been fuming back then. When they had reached the stone, his fury had ebbed and he had told them how druids and sorceresses had applied an ancient magic on the peculiar rock. It had happened after Ollivander's shop was founded, but long before Hogwarts was founded, he had explained to Ginny, as these events were about the only references she knew. Wizard children with certain diseases were still brought here on auspicious nights and handed over the stone to heal them. Ginny had not understood it then, but from her memory it could have been lung or liver dysfunctions.

The original idea of the old warlocks giving magic to Squibs had, however, never been achieved. Ginny wondered if the parents of Squibs, especially Lucius Malfoy, would even have attempted the conversion had it been possible.

Swiftly she looked around, but there wasn't a magical being in sight.

Instead of listening to Bill, Ron had immediately crawled off into the brushes to search for Imps or Jobberknolls. Or yetis or dragons; Ron had certainly not been picky. Funny, how all these beasts had all seemed equally exciting to both of them at this age.

Despite the horrible start, that had been a most wonderful afternoon for the three of them and brought Bill even closer to her heart. Bill, her eldest brother, always considerate for their mother and ready to take charge, at the same time smart and funny and never, ever conventional.

Her smile froze on her face when she arrived at her broom to notice how much the shadows had turned. A lot of time had passed since Ron had left!

Had he planned on leaving her here? Would he alert the Order? Was there anything in his demeanour that hinted at his plans?

She sat down hugging her knees, well concealed by notice-me-not charms. More time passed, and Ron had still not returned.

With a jolt Ginny suddenly remembered that she had not told Ron yet about Ollivander's hint on the black Hippogriff. It would be the first thing to tell him, when—if he returned.

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A/N

Do join me in thanking my new beta, Sunrisejuliette, and MagicAlly, who betaed and Britpicked this chapter. They have saved me from embarrassment over publishing severe inconsistencies and absurd phrasing.

Home

Chapter 28 of 35

Ginny and Ron fly home.

Home

The orange orb of the sun hung low, bathing the surroundings of the Draag Stone in warm afternoon light. Ginny concentrated hard on the peaceful scene, biding her time, suppressing the thought of food or of her brother who had not returned, and especially of Severus.

Dusk would provide her a welcome head start in visual Obfuscation, so that she could reasonably hope to avoid being caught by the wrong guys.

Come to think of it there's hardly any magical person out there other than the wrong sort, she mused grimly. Then she shrugged the thought off determinedly as it would not do to dwell on it. Better get this patch of soil dry and keep prepared for a strong Obfuscation spell. Constant vigilance! Gah, definitely the wrong sort...Moody will have me in a full Body-Bind before I can draw my wand.

For the umpteenth time, Ginny checked on Bill's old point-me device. Stubbornly beelining towards the goal, it had failed him in the mazes of Egyptian graves, but Ginny was intending to fly with it. She set it to Carlisle shopping centre, from where she could easily make the last ten miles home. Half an hour still, and she would start.

It was the plop of an awkward Apparition that pulled Ginny out of her thoughts. The tall, rail-thin bloke arriving had the presence of mind to hurl aside the yard-long object he was carrying before he toppled awkwardly over a piece of luggage and fell to the ground, buried in a heap of clothes.

Then silence.

Inch by inch, Ginny lifted the object and magicked it towards herself. The many marks easily identified it as the other broom from The Burrow.

Minutes later Ron was crouching next to her, recovering. With a huff she ditched her plan to set off alone.

:*:*:

He nearly lost the broomstick wedged under his elbow when he Apparated away in haste. Bloody Death Eaters, chasing him from place to place! But this was the second time in a row he had not heard anyone Apparate, and he dared a peek into the green rucksack. His mother's now shabby, yesterday's dress robes lay on top. Turned inside out their bright lime colour faded to the more agreeable tone of a pistachio. They disguised Ron well enough, he decided, steadfastly ignoring the ridiculous, frilly seam at knee-height.

Another two Apparitions later, he landed awkwardly where he had come from, the Draag stone.

:*:*:

While assessing Ron's angry wound, Ginny wondered aloud if Harry had a strategy for the final confrontation yet.

Ron merely grunted. "Harry needs a new wand or he cannot face Volde..." Ginny flinched instinctively and was truly relieved that Ron interrupted himself as well.

"You had better give up this particular road," Ginny replied, trying for casual with little success. She couldn't endanger Ollivander by elaborating about their sources, but she *had* to get the message across.

"Are you telling me he should stop trying for other wands?"

"You would be searching endlessly for a ready-made wand that happens to suit Harry."

For a moment, Ron looked her straight into the eyes, but he was not pushing in at all. He was far too calm for her liking, and she preferred to change the subject. "How's everybody doing? You haven't told me much yet."

Ginny decided to come back to the sensitive matter of the wand later. Delivering it in small doses could keep it safe from inexperienced Legilimency at least.

"Harry isn't doing so well, Ginny. According to Mad-Eye, has made progress in Occlumency, but I wonder if it is more encouragement than honest assessment," Ron said. It was more than she had pressed out of him before, and it wasn't all either.

"We miss you Ginny. Daily, or actually wherever we look. Charlie's mouth is a thin line like ol' McGonagall's, and Mum is desperate. She buries herself in work."

"I've seen her fighting like a tiger today. I'd have never thought she's that good. Brilliant, really!" Ginny remembered. "Is it some kind of revenge that spurs her?"

"She has to keep herself from thinking of you, she claims. Dad is very worried she might overdo it and collapse," Ron reported.

Quietly, Ginny said, "Please, Ron, tell Mum that I'm fine. I'm really, really not badly off and not in any more danger than anyone else these days."

Upon his doubtful look, Ginny stood and turned, her arms wide. "Do I have to cartwheel to prove it? Undress?"

"N... no! You do look unharmed." Ron conceded.

They went silent for a while, each lost for words, which was strange, considering.

"What is the matter with Harry?" Ginny finally asked.

"I don't know. He's brooding. He is not deeply, desperately in love with you, or your memory, I think. You had better discuss it with Hermione; she is a better judge than I am. But he isn't doing well. He keeps telling us of the way Snape held him down when he escaped with Malfoy. Harry feels he is no match even for Snape and thus how could he fight He-Who- you know."

"I've never talked to Severus about this."

"I bet," Ron blurted out. "Does he let you talk at all?"

"**Ron!**" Ginny got angry again. "Of course we talk, but I cannot pick a fight with him, right?" She could not tell Ron anything that endangered Severus' status. She just wished her brother understood. With a "Ready to go?" she stood and took her broom.

Ron, however, wasn't moving and Ginny sat back down. She couldn't leave him there. To give him a few more minutes, she related tiny, every day incidents that needed no clear references, a flock of hummingbirds upsetting a Charms lessons and how she still didn't enjoy Transfiguration. "Do tell Mum that, Ron. Even if it appears ordinary...this is how my life goes. Oh, and I've improved in cooking! We're actually sharing kitchen work and have developed our own Asian style. I still hate doing the laundry, but Severus has some spells that help with tricky potion stains. It's really true what Fred and George said at Christmas: now that I have to do it myself, I start appreciating the work Mum did for us. She'd be pleased to hear that Severus has no house-elf. We live... ah, but you'll see."

Ron scoffed, not convinced, but didn't say anything.

With no obvious reference to the fact that wands cored with a phoenix feather would not easily tolerate a second wand, Ginny continued. "Do get Harry to find a black Hippogriff. He could ask the beast for a feather and then contact Gregorovitch or his colleague Finland."

As she was talking, Ron rolled over, using the rucksack as a pillow and fell silent. So did Ginny. The only noise to be heard was Ginny's stomach rumbling.

It had long been too dark to see their white-soled trainers; time was flying by. Ginny quietly suggested they mount their brooms. "The thick, low clouds coming up over there will help to conceal us all without using magic that could be traced."

The only reaction she got from her brother was that he turned to lie on his back. Soon he began snoring.

Swearing under her breath, Ginny cast a warming charm on him. More delay, and the sepsis reached further up again! He could not fly independently, so much was sure.

The last jogger with his funny little head torch had long left, when Ginny shook Ron's leg to rouse him. "Get on your broom! We cannot afford more delay."

Ginny mounted the better broom and buckled the rucksack. "If needed, this load will have to be disposed of quickly. I'll glue your right hand loosely to the broom. You'll have to keep your balance with your legs, as in a match. Keep your wand at the ready in your left hand."

Ron was awake in an instant, and sounded alarmed. "What? You want me to fly without support? Ginny, this is madness!"

"Madness starts when we need to dodge Ministry patrols. Knees tight and off now, this way."

Ginny decided to take a low travelling height and observed her brother closely.

"Careful, sharp right now," she cried, having already turned her broom. Ron was slow in following. "Hey, hold your wand, you might need it," she scolded, gripping him hard by the scruff of his neck and setting him upright again. He was shaking...this was no good. They landed on the next path.

"This won't do. I will have to join our brooms," she stated and went to work. "OK, done. You know that, don't you?" He shook his head. "Tsk tsk, Slytherins are right," she mumbled more to herself than her brother. "Hooch didn't teach us anything useful. Just Quidditch. This is a spell for flying trips with a child or a weak flyer, like an injured one. You need to know flying in its basics, but I have the ultimate control. You'll see. Off now, Severus has to be worried to death."

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Ron felt awful. He could barely hold himself upright. How was he to bring his sister to Scotland? His arms useless, vision blurry, wind howling in his ears he relied fully on his flying instincts. With the manoeuvres she made, it was a good thing he hadn't eaten for hours.

Casting spells left, right and even backwards in ways he didn't understand, his sister speeded along. His own broom kept pace magically and even smoothed over her wildest movements, but he felt seasick nonetheless.

On and on they flew. Ron was lulled in as long as they went straight, but that luxury hardly ever lasted long.

"Sharp left now, help along," registered in his brain as Ginny had already turned, casting spells backwards and left. They made the air sizzle fifty yards away. "Remember your wand!" she admonished him, but holding a wand in his left hand was just pointless. Shaking heavily now, it was all Ron could do to hold himself upright on his broom.

Again Ginny sent the strange spell to the ground.

The flight seemed endless. Ron was numb with cold. The only warm place was the hurting upper arm where the blood thudded at the strong binding.

They gained height to pass over a forest and a mountain. She turned sharply left without a warning but gripped the scruff of his neck to steady him. .

Finally she slowed down, drew closer and asked innocently, "Do you know where we are?"

"N... n... no idea," Ron stuttered. How could he? They had been wildly criss-crossing in the clouds, and honestly, what did he know about the Muggle counties of Northern England?

"Good, so my diversion has worked," she grinned and without a warning she had them both descend in what could become the Weasley Feint...no, Ron corrected himself, flinching at the thought...Snape Feint.

:.:.:.:

They circled over tiny houses seaming a mesh of narrow, cobbled streets until Ginny descended to land in the attic of a house with dilapidated roof.

As Ginny peeped out of the hole in the roof, Ron gathered his wits. Nothing had gone as he wanted so far, but he would not give up yet. He stood gingerly and made a few tentative steps. His legs were holding! Carefully, he stretched and flexed his joints to work out the kinks from the flight.

It was pitch dark outside, except for the cones of light from sparsely distributed street lanterns. A strange stench of Muggle origin filled his nostrils.

"The coast is clear," his sister proclaimed and had them both glide down to the patch of dirt near the cracked porch stone. She ushered Ron a few miserable houses further, some boarded, some lived-in

At the end of the street, they turned towards one crooked house with an intact roof and lit windows. A ripple went through Ron as he triggered a ward. The front door was flung open immediately. A deep voice boomed, "Ginevra, what is it? Are you all right?"

Ginny dropped rucksack and broom, left Ron standing there and flung herself into Snape's wide open arms. "I'm fine, no worries. How're you, love?"

"Goodness, never do that to me again!"

A/N 1: Warm hugs and huge thanks go to MagicAlly for working her magic on this chapter as my only beta and my Britpicker.

A/N 2:

Sorry for the inexcusably long wait. My family is troubled, and I found this chapter very difficult. I am not proud of it even now, but I really want to get it over with, so bear with me. I'll try my very best to update more regularly now.

Spinner's End

Chapter 29 of 35

Ron at Spinner's End.

This universe and the people populating it are the creation of JKR. I'm only taking them out to play.

Spinner's End

They stood in front of the least ramshackle house in the neighbourhood, with poor light filtering through windows on the ground floor without proper curtains. The silhouette against the sky indicated an upper floor that was not lit at all. Other buildings lay completely in the dark and looked abandoned. There was a smell in the air that Ron had trouble describing. Nothing at Ottery St Catchpole had ever smelled quite like this.

His former professor grabbed Ginny, his hands running over her arms and legs, her back and front, murmuring, "Is it really you? Are you all right?"

Despite the wand in her hand, Ginny let it happen for far too long before she gently disentangled herself. "You're choking me, Severus. Otherwise, I assure you that I'm fine."

The traitor took her hands into his shaking ones again. "You have no idea how worried I was." He put his arm around her shoulder, and she let herself be led inside.

"Sit down now," he instructed. "Relax. Do you want tea before the soup?"

Turning around, Ginny called, "Ron, come in now and close the door."

Ron played along as he knew well enough that he could not start a fight with Snape, but he felt his face flush in anger.

"Ron, what is it? Come now. Severus will attend your wound."

"If I must," he said. His eyes narrowed, and Ron braced himself for the usual sneer. A 'hm' was all he received, though.

Snape snatched Ginny back from wherever she had intended to go and pressed a cup into her hands. He ordered her to sit down on the sofa that, albeit just a two-seater, dominated the small room. "First you drink something warm! Freshening up can wait."

The dramatic flight was over, and Ron was indoors and warm. Nothing distracted him from feeling his body again. Standing there with no purpose, he rode out ripples of discomfort and tried to form a plan for their escape. The sight in front of him wasn't helping.

The oddly casually clad man kneeling in front of the sofa was stroking Ginny's hair out of her face as if used to doing so. *How dare he!* Ron moved a few steps to the side and took out his wand, but even his left hand was shaking too much for proper aim. He let it drop in frustration.

Ginny's hand moved, but instead of pushing Snape off, she only stilled his movement. She got the man's full attention as she said, "Severus, please. I'm all right, just exhausted. It is fine. Have a look at Ron now, will you. He has a **sepsis!**"

The medical term finally turned Snape's gaze to Ron—not that he welcomed the attention! As the man's black eyes focussed on him, seemingly devoid of all feelings, sweat ran in rivulets down Ron's temples. This was Snape, there wasn't a doubt!

Examining the arm, Snape approved of the bind. He Summoned a beaker. "Drink this. Put your arm here. And do sit down for heaven's sake."

The thought alone was absurd! "Don't touch me. Don't touch her, for that matter."

Before Ron had inhaled enough to say more, Ginny cut him short. "Stop this right now, Ron. You need medical treatment, and we are finally able to provide it. Severus keeps our first aid kit well equipped. Now, please drink the potion; bottom up!"

A vein in the professor's temple had twitched, but he provided an explanation, completely ignoring Ron's outburst. "I will reopen the wound in your palm and apply a salve to draw the poisoned blood back and out. Then we can open the compression. In other words, Mr Weasley, this arm has to lay still, and thus you will either sit down or..."

"Of course, he'll sit down. Do I get us a phial of Sepsim Sortia, then?" Ginny asked, and after Snape nodded she left the room. By the reverberating sounds her steps made, it had to be a bathroom or a lab. Ron preferred not to dwell on the thought what else one might find there but healing salves. He shuddered.

Returning after several minutes, her arms and face clean, his sister peered at the untouched beaker and commanded sharply, "Ron, drink!"

Sighing, Ron considered the yellow, viscose substance. He had to swallow hard to get the jelly to go down, and the fact that it fizzed disturbingly wasn't helping. His heart raced for a moment, and his knees gave in.

A sensation in his wound brought Ron back. He found himself seated, Ginny's hands lying heavily on both his shoulders. She spoke soothing words while Snape applied a salve. The makeshift bandage lay in a pile on the floor.

Three times, Snape wiped a pea-sized blood-coloured dollop of salve away and applied a new, clear one. "Healers widen the wound to draw the poison out more quickly, but this would require hygienic, if not sterile conditions," he explained, probably upon Ginny's question, as he wasn't known for wasting words.

Ginny was excitedly trying to help out and wanted to press a cup of tea into Ron's left hand, which he rejected vehemently. She certainly didn't look like she was planning an escape. While treating Ron's wound, the dark man glanced frequently over at her, frowning.

The rippling unease had gone, but Ron fought a hopeless battle against his own tired brain. He had to prepare for their escape and find their way out, but could not

concentrate on a strategy. All he managed was to take in their surroundings more fully.

They were sitting at a small table with chairs, but the sofa and armchair indicated that the cramped room also served for relaxing—provided that Snape knew the concept. Books covered all the walls, except for a small chest near the entrance with a mirror on top. There was no telling what the books hid, so the owner of the house had an enormous advantage in a fight. The door behind Ron led to the bathroom or lab, and there was another door next to it. Snape had brought the tea from a room on the opposite side, probably the kitchen. Ron saw no stairs to the upper floor.

Ginny ended her prattle asking, "Severus, can Ron rest here overnight?"

"No," Snape declared sharply. When Ginny started to protest, he elaborated, "Our master arranged for *arescue team*, and they are still out searching for you."

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny exclaimed, noting the sarcasm, and started waving her wand, first at the entrance, and then all around herself.

"Never mind," Ron huffed, very ready to leave. "We won't abuse your hospitality."

"Ron, don't be unfair. Severus is helping you."

"It would be the first time he realizes this, and I don't expect him to be grateful." Snape remarked dismissively. "Ginevra, please return the salve."

"You're one to talk about being grateful," Ron hissed as soon as she was out of earshot. Then he turned away to wait for Ginny.

:.:.*.*.:

After only these few minutes, the boy was already grating on his nerves, but Severus needed his co-operation. He sent Ginevra to the kitchen for more tea and told Ron in a matter-of-fact tone, "Listen! She will break down soon. I've kept her busy on purpose, but as soon as she relaxes, she will remember this morning. Keep your animosity under control for your sister's sake!" He looked at Ron, who averted his eyes.

With a huff Severus continued loudly, "Freshen up and then sit down, both of you. I will bring dinner shortly."

Finally seated, Ginevra obediently brought the spoon to her mouth, but it wasn't nearly full enough.

"I was not sure about the onions, should they be golden or crisp, fried in butter or oil?" Severus asked innocently. Predictably, Ginevra took an extra helping of onions, nodded and smiled at him. Her smile washed over Severus' strained nerves, and he marvelled how the warm feeling of consent, of belonging and care, could ease even the pain the Dark Lord had inflicted.

Ronald was even more revolted after this display, and Severus did not care for him either. It was a sight in itself to not see Ron Weasley shovelling in all the food within reach.

Half way through their meal, the alarm chimed, and Ginny hissed that *they* had unknown company.

"Ron, come here. Now!" She pulled her brother out of the chair and moved him to the bedroom. Inside she opened their hideout under the bed and all but pushed Ron in before he had a chance to ask whom she had sensed. "Down here, quickly."

Severus took a look around and Scourgified a footprint of his brother-in-law. To justify the second setting on the table, he sat down and ate a spoonful of the hot, aromatic soup. With a light flick of his wand, he opened the entrance door to their next unwelcome guests.

:.:.*.*.:

Draco Malfoy dragged Ron back into the light and through to the sitting room before he could put up any resistance. He must have fallen asleep in the comfortable hiding place. He inwardly swore to himself.

He remembered that three men had been inspecting the house, the oldest one speaking in a manner that had sounded oddly familiar to Ron. He didn't know the person, but possibly he had met a relative? The man had addressed Ginny with the respect due to the woman of the house or the wife of an honoured colleague—and he had called her Mrs Snape!

Malfoy interrupted his thoughts, declaring, "I'd like you to fill me in now!" He looked expectantly to the armchair, where to Ron's disgust, Ginny was relaxing in the traitor's lap. Snape held her tight, and his hand disentangled a segment of her hair.

Ron started but immediately felt the tip of Malfoy's wand at his throat. The ferret glared at him, then asked sweetly, "Did you want the two of us to sit on the armchair together?"

"Draco, no! Ron's not going to be a fool," Ginny said, her cheek not leaving the traitor's shoulder.

Ron shuddered. Ginny had reacted with such malice on even hearing Malfoy. Her using his given name could have only one explanation *she's been Confunded!*

"Besides, Mr Malfoy," Snape added dryly, "your hair is in perfect order compared to this mess here."

Ginny giggled, curling up some more.

Malfoy's mouth opened, but shut again without a retaliation. His adam's apple bobbed twice before he spoke. "Let me return to the topic: How and when did you leave Land's End, where did you go and how did you two finally get here?"

"Finally the questions I long to answer," Ginny stated, looking at her husband. "The crap that cheeky upstart in the rescue team insinuated was not worth any reply."

Her hands moved to his shoulder and played lazily with his hair, an action that demanded nerves from Ron. The man looked far too content!

Ginny related briefly how they had left the little island and then travelled from Land's End to the Burrow. As she explained their Apparition, Snape growled, "Did I not warn you not to Apparate with someone inexperienced?"

That was too much. "Inexperienced? How can you possibly know..." But the wand tip stopped Ron short.

Ginny confirmed that Ron had done well, and he huffed against the offending piece of wood. "As if I'd harm my sister."

The traitor's eyebrow rose. "I didn't imply you'd do so on purpose." It sounded almost amiable.

He is far too civil, the slimy git. Isn't that the strategy of a turncoat such as he, to turn your head around two times, making you believe he is helping you? He is not to be trusted. We must get out of here, thought Ron as Ginny continued their story.

Snape, of course, knew of the Draag Stone and approved of relaying their journey there. "How long did it take you to fly here from that place?"

"Oh, we took about one and a half hours, maybe even two. I zigzagged a lot to throw off any pursuers. Ron... err, he wasn't too fit after these Apparitions."

Severus glared at the boy as if to say 'I told you so'. Aloud, he asked, "Exactly how many Ministry patrols did you encounter?"

"One," said Ron at the same moment that Ginny said, "Five."

Ron looked sharply at his sister. "Certainly not!"

"Ron, you noticed only one, which was probably the one that noticed us, too. Another might have also." She cringed at the thought.

"Wait a moment here, Mrs Snape, super flyer." Malfoy interjected in a light tone. "Are you telling me you'd caught the attention of a Ministry patrol? You're slipping, young lady. Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

"Possibly, sir," Ginny played along, "I was using a Cleansweep Seven with an old, badly fitting rucksack, and I had Ron, who was injured, attached to me in child-flight mode. He was riding a Cleansweep Four. Not that they'd have made allowances for that."

As she listed her calamities, Malfoy's eyes widened, and he dropped his wand a couple of inches.

However, Snape looked up sharply. "You went out, despite the patrols, in that formation?"

"What else was I to do? There wasn't anyone to help me. Ron was weak, and I don't think he has trained for that sort of flight. And no, Draco Malfoy, The Burrow doesn't hold a set of Firebolts and no Bluebottle family broom either."

"Bloody hell, you're an ace flyer, as I've always said." The boy's awe was all too apparent, and the highly polished piece of hawthorn wood dropped to Ron's midsection.

Ginny rose to make a curtsy. "Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure, young lady," Draco stood and kissed her hand, his wand firmly in his left hand.

Snape had winced involuntarily when Ginny pushed back to stand. Turning, she took a closer look at the man's body and state. The traitor was shaking! "Severus!" Her hands cupped his cheek to turn his head. "Are you well? Can I bring you something?"

Snape shook his head tiredly but urged her to go on. Worried, she asked, "I'm sorry, love, I did not pay any attention to you. What happened to you?"

"The Dark Lord was not pleased," Malfoy answered for him, and Ron smirked inwardly.

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny screamed, "he punished you! Did he use the Cruciatus? Did you drink enough?"

Snape turned away from her touch and said with his old sneer, "I had ample time before you arrived." Ginny flinched severely at the reprimand.

"Are you laying the blame for your punishment on Ginny?" Ron exclaimed and pushed Malfoy's wand away like an annoying insect.

Snape, however, didn't rise to the bait at all. After a sharp look, he simply addressed Ginny again. "Your excursion was inexcusably dangerous and far too risky. And yet I would have loved to see it." His long arms pulled Ginny to sit on his lap again. Repulsed as Ron was, he noticed something else now, too: the way they moved their heads didn't look right.

"Boy, can you be proud of your sister!" Malfoy marvelled in what did not seem a sneer at all. When Ron failed to answer, he prompted, the offending wand piercing Ron's ribs, "Can't you?"

"What?" Ron spat.

"Be proud of your sister!" Draco insisted. "If you aren't, I declare she ceases to be your sister. I'll take her any day."

"Don't you dare touch my sister again, Malfoy!"

"Oh, I don't plan on stepping out of line. Merlin, Severus would have my privates for dinner. That is, if she left them recognizable."

"Stop talking like that then!" Ron snarled. "She is my sister."

"Stop it, both of you! I'm right here, and I've an abundance of brothers, just in case either of you forgot. Yes, well," she continued calmly, "we landed, assessed the situation, and I brought Ron over here."

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The group fell silent, letting their minds wander whilst examining their individual injuries.

Suddenly the young woman stiffened, then jumped up, eyes wide in agony. She backed away from everyone. "Don't touch me. Don't come near me."

"Are you finally realising, where and with whom you are?" Ron asked. He stood up and approached her. "Come now. It is all right, I'm not leaving you."

Draco was too puzzled to stop him. However, Ginny only moved further away until her back met the wall. "Stay away!"

Now Severus stood, but he did not approach her. "Stay where you are, Mr Weasley," he ordered in a sharp voice. "I told you it would happen." With barely a blink, he silently closed the doors to all other rooms. Pacifying his books required a slight flick of his wand, which startled the agitated witch. She glared at him, but this was preferable to the damage the books might cause.

He had about ten minutes to get her away from the books. With his most tender voice, he continued, "Ginevra, do not worry. Calm down. Everything is fine."

"NO, you don't understand. I cannot... I... Oh, Merlin!" In an attempt to get even further away from them, Ginevra pressed her back against the shelf at the wall. Her hands, all fingers spread, groped along the books, searching for a way out. Panic widened her eyes as she realised the futility of it.

"I understand how you feel," Severus tried to soothe her. "You may stay where you are. I am not coming closer, all right? And the others aren't either," he warned them.

Ron approached his sister, ignoring all warnings. "Ginny, it is fine." He stepped forward, reaching out his hand. "Come now. We will leave," he coaxed.

"Go. Go away, Ron. I'm not safe, I'm a monster!" she shrieked.

Ron turned to Severus in rage. "What have you..."

Draco flicked his wand before the accusation was out, and Ron's voice failed him. "Shut up and listen before you do anything even more stupid."

Trusting Draco to deal with the heated redhead, Severus spoke to his wife again. "You are not a monster, Ginevra, but I understand how you feel. Why not sit down where you are? We are not coming closer, and we are not going to touch you if you don't want us to. Please, Ginevra, sit down."

He lowered himself to sit on the floor.

"You have no idea, what I am, what I have done," she answered, trembling like an aspen leaf as she was running out of energy and adrenaline.

Calm and soothing, his voice reached her ear. "Sit down, Ginevra. Sit down where you are now. This is fine." She had let herself glide down along the post of the bookshelf, but she stayed alert as she listened to her husband. "I know what you have done, and I do not condemn you. Can you explain it to your brother and Draco?" Severus asked.

"I'm a monster, a murderer," she said with resignation. "I've no place in human society."

Severus dared a glance back and saw Draco's eyes widen in shock while Ron took the news somewhat more calmly. "Ginevra," Severus began again, "you have every right to stay with us. We are at war. It is one of those things... although it is never easy. It must not be easy. It will help you if you tell us who it was or what has happened."

For a while he feared she would not comply, but eventually she stilled. Her monotonous, listless voice reported, "He fought Mum, and... he tripped. As he was still casting spells... I levitated a stone and... let it drop on his head. I've... I've killed our teacher, Missile." Covering her face in shame, she became quiet.

Severus was still wondering how to continue when she spoke again. "Then Flint. He was in that shack, tormenting Ron. I... I did the same." Resignation made her stop.

"Flint?" Severus did not succeed in suppressing his astonishment. "I knew only about Missile. I saw Flint there, but it looked as if..."

"I had taken Ron's wand for a few spells that leave traces," she said and finally broke down in sobs.

Severus heard a commotion from the sofa and Draco's snarl. "Stay where you are!"

Keeping his movements slow, Severus inched forward towards Ginny. "May I come to you now? Will you let me help you, love?" he asked.

"You're not disgusted?" she wondered, looking up at him.

"I could never be. I love you," he said very slowly and with sincerity. "Do you want to come here now?"

Reluctantly she took his outstretched hand and let herself be pulled to his embrace. After a minute of silently stroking her back, he got up and guided her back to the armchair. On the sofa, Ron was being released from Draco's spells. Both boys only watched, unable to decide how to proceed.

Severus knelt in front of Ginny, moving her cup of tea closer. "I'm... surprised, maybe. I saw you. It looked very personal. What made you act so determined on your trainer?"

"He's a lecherous wanker. After flying lessons, in the changing room..."

"He didn't!" Severus and Draco exclaimed.

Ron jumped up, his fatigue forgotten. "This is how you protect her? Pretend to love her, Snape?"

Severus stood in fury. "How dare you. You haveno idea what I am doing to protect her."

"I'm not interested in the details. I know that you helped me today, but I won't let you make a habit of it. Ginny, come on. We're leaving."

"Excuse me?" Ginny exclaimed, but Severus' voice boomed through the small room. "Which 'we' are you referring to?"

"You don't have to stay here any longer, Ginny. Let's go home," the boy repeated in as gentle a voice as he managed, his arms reaching out and down as though towards a small child.

"Ron? Severus is..." she started again.

"You're not going to take her anywhere, Weasley," Severus said, speaking quietly again, but all the more threatening.

"She's been imprisoned here long enough. Now that she has the chance to return where she belongs you are not going to stop her!"

"My wife, Weasley, belongs here, with me, in her home."

Sporting a Weasley-red face, the boy shouted, "Your wife? She's your slave! Her home? This whole room doesn't hold anything of hers, does it?"

Abruptly, Severus stopped arguing. He turned to Ginny who had curled up in the armchair and was silently weeping. "I am sorry we shouted over you. We are too agitated to handle this without shouting. We should let your brother go now."

Ron continued, lowering his voice just a bit, "I'm not done with you yet. And I'm going nowhere without my sister!"

Ginevra stood and faced her brother with a beaten expression. Her stance and her red eyes spoke of fatigue and disappointment. Very quietly, she said, "Ron, please leave us alone now. Severus treated your wound, he fed you and hid you, and you haven't as much as thanked him. Go. Just go."

Ron knelt down at her side. "You don't know what you're saying, Ginny." He spoke to her as if she were a mentally ill person.

"Let's just go home and get you well." Ron stood for his last words. "Then you'll see reason."

With a far stronger voice than minutes ago, the young witch said, "You don't tell me what to do. I'm not going anywhere because ~~am~~ at home." She gripped Severus' hand and looked up at him. He gripped her hand firmly and swallowed hard to not lose his countenance.

"What? Ginny, this isn't about a school crush any more," Weasley made a new attempt. "Whatever you might have seen in his study, whatever you might have experienced these months, please be reasonable now."

Severus could not suppress a sharp intake of breath. "My study, Ginevra?" he asked. "My bedroom at Hogwarts?" he added in total bewilderment.

"Oh, yes," the boy told him in a superior tone, ranting and mocking. "She cracked your wards; what do you say now? Didn't imagine it wouldn't even hold a schoolchild's attempt? Well, but then you aren't too perceptive or you would have noticed in all these months that she hates being called by her full name. Instead you added her brains that she clings to you like a fool."

Luckily for him, Severus was still dumbstruck, and it was Draco who acted first, gagging him and firing thin, snakelike cords around his torso and arms. "I'll lead him out to an Apparition point somewhere off," he declared. "If he is strong enough for this display, he will manage to get home, too. And if not, maybe he'll learn something. Is there anything he should take?"

"No," Ginevra replied sadly. "Bye, Ron."

They were at the door when Severus had composed himself enough to say, "Draco, you know what to do. You are also supposed to return here. Your bed upstairs is ready."

I can send Pöllö to Narcissa.”

“Of course,” Draco replied. “Off we go,” he told Ron sharply.

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Draco led Ron out. An additional Sight Lock Spell forced Ron’s eyes straight ahead, no matter how he craned his neck. “Can’t have you... taking in the scenery,” he panted. He didn’t remove the gag, but he levitated Ron just a tiny bit to ensure he didn’t trip.

Being at the mercy of the blond arrogant boy, Ron had to go with the flow.

They rushed through narrow, filthy streets and dingy passages and along a smelly creek with ankle-deep mud. Only in the forest did Draco turn to face his charge. His voice was shaking with anger. “Do you have *any* idea how much you have hurt her, how much she is missing her family?” He considered the redhead again. “No, you probably haven’t really got it. You were not thinking at all in there. She is suffering from the separation. I can’t bear it. There is only so much Severus and I can do.”

Draco quickly reached a decision. “Let’s Apparate somewhere to talk. It won’t be close by, so don’t start thinking you can trace your way back here.” He gripped Ron’s undamaged hand, and they arrived in a dingy corner of an otherwise brightly lit Muggle shopping centre. “Now listen.”

.*.*.*.:

Back at Spinner’s end, Severus tended to his wife’s acute needs. She was mentally and physically exhausted. He helped her in the bathroom and then to the bedroom, tucking her in with an overwhelming desire to care and hold her. A Dreamless Sleep potion was what was needed, and he gave her a good measure. “Now sleep, my love. We have lots to talk about in the morning.”

He left a note for Draco and retired as well. Spooning with her still and soundly sleeping form, he let today’s revelations run through his mind.

She had killed two men today—slain, technically, but for her it was the same. She was appalled at herself. The hate she had felt must have been overwhelming, and to know that she had the ability to kill would horrify her.

“This is how one should feel after such an act, however necessary it appeared.” Such had been Albus’ words.

“Are you not frightened of the monster I have become? Not even disgusted?” Severus had asked him on occasions.

“Not as long as you keep asking me like you do, feeling disgusted like this, Severus. Don’t feel disgusted with yourself, for you might lose your mind. But don’t stop feeling disgusted about what you must do. When you lose your disgust, you lose your ability to turn away from the evil, towards love.”

“I have lost that ability long ago, if I have ever had it, Albus.”

The headmaster had contradicted him every time.

Today, Severus might just believe he wasn’t such a hopeless case. Thanks to her, thanks to his wonderful wife.

She had then tended to her brother who in return had not understood anything. Both experiences have marked themselves into her soul.

However, Severus had learned something else this night. Months back she had obviously entered his private quarters at Hogwarts, the small study and bedroom behind his office. She must have passed through the complex series of Empathy Charms he had applied on them before she had ever arrived at his place, ever come to know him as anything other than a hated teacher. It put their relationship into a new perspective.

Severus dozed lightly and so heard Draco return. He cautiously disentangled himself from his wife and crawled out of bed. “Draco?”

“Still awake, Severus?”

“Did you know?”

“Did I know about Ginny entering your study? Yes, I did. She told me about it when you left me with the leg-lock.” Draco indicated the chair to which he had been confined all those months back. He yawned widely. “I never told Ginny about the kind of wards you had set.”

“Hm... Thank you, Draco.” After a pause Severus asked, “How about Mr Weasley?”

“I’ve put him into his place quite thoroughly. Let me just say that he asked me to send his apologies to Ginny. And to you.” Another yawn interrupted him. “Sleep well, Severus.”

“You too, Draco.”

A/N

HUGE thanks and a basket of chocolate frogs go to my britpicker MagicAlly, who went through this chapter word by word and thoroughly eliminated the kinks and oddities I had inserted. You don’t want to imagine what it looked like before! She’s the best.

The broom manufacturer Bluebottle advertised their family broom at the Quidditch World Cup.

Lucius

Chapter 30 of 35

Ginny wakes up in an unknown room.

Yes, indeed, I’m back! I’ve finally found a very nice, new beta who has worked her fine magic on the bumps that were in this chapter: Soprano in Shadow. As before, MagicAlly has also improved formulations and made sure that the story sounds genuinely British.

I'm so happy and would certainly send both of them a decorative box of Honeydukes finest chocolates if only I knew how!

Lucius

Five people were gathered around the lifeless form of Ron Weasley. He had shown up in the wee hours with a sickening crack near the Hogwarts gates, incomplete, and thankfully unconscious.

A seasoned Healer was meticulously slowing down Ron's heart, which was working all too well, losing him too much blood. She did her best to also shield the gruesome sight from view. Another member of the Department of Magical Transportation arrived and reported to the assembled, "I've located the boy's lost part. The ear is still connected to the missing half of his throat."

The Healer didn't even look up from her work on the open-ended vessels as she acknowledged him with a short question. "You didn't move it?"

"Of course not. I've only closed the trachea and the oesophagus and then concealed the whole fragment. The larynx is intact, and so is the left collarbone." He bent down and proffered his elbow. "I can bring you there."

"And his arm?"

With a 'Bugger!' the junior Healer left the scene again, and the elder one shook her head. She shifted her stance, working her back, thereby giving free view on Ron's open skull. Splintered tendons and tissues ended in mid air, and there was far too much space where the collarbone should sit.

Blanching, Hermione jolted backwards and was violently sick before she even reached the first tree. Harry's face turned green from sickness, but he swallowed it down twice before he joined Hermione.

Molly and George, while less outwardly impressed by the view, fretted around nervously, more distracting than helping.

With a friendly tone, yet keeping a professional distance, Tonks confirmed to them all that the squad was doing the right thing. "Just let them do their job."

The medics had to Apparate Ron back and forth a few times to reassemble him. Finally, Ron's body was complete, and George signed half a dozen forms for the Ministry before the three Weasleys, Harry and Hermione went up to the hospital wing.

::*:*:

She woke up slowly. She felt so well rested and enjoyed stretching and yawning thoroughly before she wanted to open her eyes. The last she recalled was Severus handing her a Dreamless Sleep potion, which explained her current state. Why had she needed it? Oh yes, Draco and Ron had been fighting! Ron? Yes, their crazy flight from the Draag Stone home. She could still feel the exhaustion lying heavy in her bones.

Now Ginny also recalled eating Severus' stew. It had been delicious, albeit too chill-hot for her brother. She smiled at the thought, and her hands roamed the sheets and bedclothes to find Severus. The smooth material felt exquisite to her touch, and the room had a very nice flowery smell this morning. She turned to the left, stretching like a cat and bright light passed through her eyelids...

Just a moment! This is all wrong! Our bedroom has no morning sun.

Waking up rapidly now, she tore open her eyes. The room appeared foreign to her. Silken bedclothes and lace on the pillow covers didn't belong to Spinner's End any more than fancy, flowery wall paintings of fairies and unicorns. The sun stood high, and its light filtered through exquisite cream curtains she had never seen.

Where is my wand?

"Missus awake now?" a high-pitched voice asked. Fully awake, Ginny jerked her head towards the end of the room, where a house elf stood, waiting obediently, head bent, one tiny foot wriggling.

House-elf, pure-blood, superiority, Ginny's mind provided, and she lifted her chin just a bit. "What is this place? Where is my husband? Where is my wand?"

"Missus is not to worry," the elf answered.

"Oh, but thanks," she replied tartly. "Who are you, and who is your master?" she demanded to know, coming forward strongly. Her situation was hardly the elf's fault, but they were duty bound to represent the view of their masters whom Ginny did not like much for leaving her clueless with just an elf for company.

"I is not sure I is allowed to tell. Master not give instructions," the elf answered, bowing noncommittally.

Ginny decided from the sound of the elf's voice that it must be a female. She inspected the room, the bed clothes and the pillowcase the elf wore. She did not see any family crest or monogram or any hint of the owner. "Am I imprisoned? Who brought me here?"

Like a mantra the little creature repeated, "I is not sure I is allowed to tell. Master in hurry. Not give instructions." She pointed to the bedside table. "Masters left spelled parchment for Missus."

"Spelled parchment? Oh, a message."

Ginny picked up her wand and read the brief note. Half of it was Severus' handwriting, although it lacked the perfunctory stiffness he used when commenting on their essays. The first address started with 'Gin', which was crossed out.

My love,

It is 11 a.m., and we are called to our master. This is most unexpected, and I have no inkling as to how long or for what he requires us.

I cannot wake you nor do I want to leave you unattended. We must make haste to bring you somewhere safe before we go. Do not worry.

S.S.

Another missive was added in a scrawl close to Draco's handwriting.

Ginny,

This is the best we can do. I've arranged for Draffy or Pukey..Ginny cringed...to attend to your needs. Order whatever food and drink you like as soon as you wake up. You are allowed your wand. Don't leave this house.

The signature was missing, and the last sentence was distorted as if written in great hurry.*Or in pain,* her troubled mind supplied. *If the missive is genuine at all, yet another voice in Ginny's mind suggested.*

Despite all precautions, someone could have secretly observed them last night. They might have taken Draco and Severus captive and forced them to write this. It sounded

like a cruel plan to separate her from Severus and keep them both in anxiety and agony. And, once their scheduled time passed, in pain and... death.

The elf interrupted her thoughts. "Missus is to have lunch, master ordered. I is arranging it. The bathroom is prepared for Missus." She indicated a door with her spindly arm.

"Forget it!" Ginny told her dismissively. "As long as I have no proof this parchment is genuine," she fiddled with the parchment in front of the elf's eye, "I'm not touching anything." She took it up again and read it through once more. This time the letters disappeared after she had read them. She dropped the empty parchment. Now she had only her memory left. Again, there was no telling if this was good or bad.

Soon after, she was forced to the bathroom anyway, irritated by the fact that the elf followed her inside. "I know how to use a toilet, thank you!" Ginny burst out.

"I is not to leave Missus," the elf apologized.

Growling inwardly, Ginny reasoned with herself that the elf might be of more use if it wasn't distressed.

The bathroom was kept clinically clean and well stocked, providing a fresh toothbrush as well as decadently fluffy, thick towels, slippers and a nightgown. The water had no smell or colour indicating it had not been tampered with. There were several taps to the bath, reminding Ginny of the prefects' bathroom at Hogwarts. A decadent, steaming bubble bath was in stark contrast to the quick, lukewarm showers at home. The scent of lavender would soothe her nerves but keep her alert. Whatever her true situation, it would not be any worse for cleaning off the grime of the previous day.

The elf appeared relieved to see her complying. "I scrub Missus' back, I is skilled at massage, Missus will like," she offered.

Soaking and stretching and then allowing the elf to spoil and massage her skin with oils of Lady's Bedstraw gave Ginny time to think. She wasn't used to elves, but had some knowledge of their weaknesses.

Dressed in the gown provided, she scanned the food laid out and told the elf, "If you want me to eat breakfast—or lunch," she amended after a glance outside, "you'll have to prove to me it isn't poisoned."

"Missus is not being poisoned," the elf simply declared.

"Says who? I cannot trust you," she answered in an equally neutral tone. "Bring me two unopened bottles of butterbeer and two glasses!"

If the elf was astonished she did not show it. She left again for a few seconds only. "Butterbeer is coming shortly."

A knock at the door, and another elf brought the desired drink in, bowed deeply and left. "You are to drink before I do," Ginny told her servant.

The little creature's eyes widened in shock. "Pu.. I is not to drink. Never. Elves do not drink Butterbeer. I is to punish myself for disobeying master and mistress."

"If you're ordered to serve me, you will obey me now," Ginny told her amiably, inwardly smiling that she knew the elf's name now. She washed both glasses carefully and poured generously from both bottles into both glasses. "Your master can apply Legilimency upon you to see that I forced you. Cheers."

Ginny insisted Pukey tasted all food, and she selected plain, dry or fat food as it would be difficult to spike with a potion. Once encouraged, the meagre creature showed a hearty appetite. Taking up the delicious, soft French brie, Ginny recognised the pattern on the plate from a meal Draco had brought from home before their wedding.

Soon enough the drink loosened the little servant's tongue. They were in a summer resort that the family didn't normally frequent in the cold season. However, Pukey avoided confirming that barbecues and summer parties have always been the only use of the place by taking a deep gulp of butterbeer.

She spoke with fear of her 'master' and her 'mistress'. Then there was the 'young master' who recently confused her, to say the least.

Her stomach filled, Ginny asked, "Is there a library?"

"Missus is probably allowed into—hic—the blue parlour. Lots of volumes of spelled parchment. Follow me."

There were several shelves of books, most of questionably or unquestionably dark contents. Some books were bound to their shelf with chains. If her host or kidnapper wanted to lure her, this would not be the way! A whole shelf held only books in a foreign language, and judging from all the accents, it was possibly French. Again, this fitted in to what she knew of the Malfoys: Draco had mentioned French lessons, and he had helped the pupils who spoke romance languages.

Ginny settled down with a notebook on *Crafty, Clandestine Cantrips*. Pukey stayed close, fidgeting. "You can sit down, you know." The offer brought another bout of agony into the elf's face, but since she swayed a little from the drink, Ginny insisted. "You are of no use to me if you pass out."

Now there was nothing to do but to wait. Ginny had taken the empty parchment with her and considered it again and again. Where was Severus, and in what state was he? If they had fallen into a trap, what would happen to her, and what to Draco and Severus? If it wasn't a trap but a genuine call, what did the Dark Lord plan to do in the middle of the day?

Coming to no conclusion, she stood and began to pace the room, taking her time at the mullioned doors to the porch.

After a while, Pukey remembered her task. "Would Missus stay away from the window? I is not sure Missus is allowed. Master not give instructions."

"Oh, were some... guests not allowed to look outside?"

"I is not talking of master's business. I is a good house-elf."

"I'm sure you are. There isn't much to see through these thick curtains anyway." Ginny replied lightly. She had already identified a tiled area and some grass surrounded by a thick, high hedge, efficiently cutting off the scenery beyond. There was a large, brick-built rotisserie with a monstrous copper flue. The rotary spit leaning against it would make a formidable weapon for a Muggle.

Ginny sat back down and picked up the scrapbook again.

After three quarters of the way in, the writing changed. Ginny went back one page to see the title *My own little hexes*. Its owner had already expanded the booklet. *Neat handwriting*, she noticed. All the capital letters and the small g's and f's were flourished as in her grandmother's letters. The ink flow was steadier than even Hermione managed, which meant the author had used a never-out quill. It had to have been a well-to-do person then, as well as one with malicious intent. All the spells were nasty, disgusting or downright cruelly painful.

A few were similar to the non-traceable ones Severus had taught her, however some would take effect with some delay, a variant Ginny had no experience with. She memorised three of them, trained the wand movements carefully and felt the required twitch although there wasn't a victim at hand. Not yet.

Imagining a fight, her thoughts wandered back to the day before, the rocks and how she had killed the two men. Both had enjoyed their power over others, especially over witches, Muggles and, in Missile's case, their under aged charges. He'd never have approached a teacher's wife, like Ginny, oh no. He had kept himself to the smaller girls.

Once alarmed, Ginny and Millicent had lingered close to the changing rooms, but he had found chores that took them to the kitchens or the infirmary. Their deaths were not unwelcome, but that she had been the one to kill them! Five years ago, the thought of killing Hagrid's roosters had agonized her; now she was a double-murderer. How long

would the sound of their crushing skulls follow her in to her dreams? She was glad that she had no image to accompany the sound.

Then she had spent hours with Ron, the first link to her family in weeks. At the Burrow and at the Draag Stone, he had been genuinely interested in her wellbeing. At Spinner's End, her new home, however, she had not known him. Of course Ron had never liked his Potions professor or Defence teacher Severus Snape, but hadn't she told them all what she had seen? Had they not yet talked to Dumbledore or entered Severus' study? Not even Remus? Could they still not believe her? Then indeed, this was not her family as she had known it.

Ginny practically felt relieved that she had not had the chance of a short conversation with her mother, Charlie or Harry. However, that thought made her feel distanced and very alone.

Despite Ron's injury they had conducted an amiable conversation and exchanged feelings as well as valuable information. They were all worried about her, and especially her mum was sensitive. Ron was still seeing Hermione, although Ginny didn't hear details. Harry had no confidence in himself, and he was nervous about Severus in particular; Severus, who fought on the same side. Oh, the irony of it!

Severus...

A sudden thought crossed her mind: what if Severus had placed her here to get rid of her, if there wasn't anyone else involved at all? Had he been mad at her yesterday? Replaying the evening back home and Ron's uncooperative bouts had Ginny pacing again.

She was in a bad mood, frightened from not knowing and brooding over the past events when an urgent voice called her from the corridor. "Mrs. Snape? Ginny? Where are you?"

Pukey was equally shocked as Ginny. "This is not master and not master's mentor. I is not instructed..."

"Theo? I'm here in the blue room." Despite Pukey's protest Ginny opened the door to let a dirty and anxious Theodore Nott in.

"Quick, we must leave. Take everything. Remove all traces," he urged her. "You, elf, Pukey, isn't it? The whole house has to appear as if no one has been here. We must hurry!"

Ginny and Theo rearranged rooms and grabbed Ginny's belongings while Pukey went to banish the rest of breakfast and the used towels.

Suddenly the entrance door opened, and Lucius Malfoy's voice boomed through the house. "Elf! I request aid. Here immediately!" All four went white as chalk. Theo caught Pukey, but Draffy slipped through the door.

"Ginny, activate it!" While pushing a Portkey into Ginny's hand, Theo cast an "Obliviate!" at the elf. The last they saw was a puzzled house elf; the last they heard was Draffy's desperate yelling.

::*:*:*:

"We made it!"

Another garden house, this one a lot smaller and not as neat. "We're in our place now," Theo explained. "Professor Snape is coming to our house. He'll not be in the best shape."

"What is this all about? I wake up in a place I've never been to, I have the barest missive from Severus and Draco, and now you abduct me. Or save me... I don't even know which. Well, considering it was Lucius Malfoy, I assume you saved me," she conceded.

A grin brightened Theo's face for a second before he sobered. "My father, Draco and Professor Snape were called to free the last prisoners in Azkaban. Snape and Draco took a long time to arrive, causing the Dark Lord's anger and Dad's suspicion.

"The freed prisoners are allowed home immediately, but the members of the liberation squad have to report to their master. Snape, sorry, Professor Snape, was a bag of nerves imagining Malfoy senior free to roam his place and unaware of your status. Dad arranged that I got Draco's Portkey together with mine, and... here we are." Theo's voice or demeanour revealed nothing of what he thought of their master.

Ginny kept an equally neutral face asking, "The Dark Lord's anger? Are you saying he punished Severus before sending him off?"

"The professor appeared as though he had been," Theo answered, his head bent. "Tardiness is one way of disobedience."

Ginny wanted nothing but to go home, but Theo objected. "They will come here first."

It wasn't that, which drew Ginny home, though. She wanted to check on the healing potions. Last time Paul Nott had taken some from Severus' stocks and had not known them. Theo still refused to let her go or accompany her there. "They will come here, trust me. And, I shudder to think what the professor would do to me if we splinched."

It was Ginny's turn to concede. "All right then. Do you have a potions lab here?" Theo nodded in surprise. "Let's see then if we can brew some remedies for them."

They went to the main building and descended into the lab. It was very tidy; however, the equipment was stacked too neatly to be in regular use. Ginny concentrated hard and came up with three lists of ingredients. "These are three potions. Let's check if we can make at least one of them, and if possible more than one batch."

Ginny frowned over the state of the ingredients in the cabinet. This lab could not have been used for at least a decade. Some herbs had lost their colour and much of their fragrance, some jars contained not-identifiable, sluggish goo, and many hessian sacks were covered in cobwebs.

Sheepishly, Theo apologised for the situation with a note that the whole Nott family wasn't exactly famous for potions.

"I see." Ginny considered the two skin ointments worth trying. She would have to compensate for a few items and perused the few books there but with little success.

She jotted down the procedure for one ointment, replacing and substituting ingredients here and there.

"Care to brew this one? It's hardly O.W.L. level, I think."

Theo had never yet brewed anything that hadn't gone down the classroom drains in the end, and the resulting mark had been all that mattered. He doubted his abilities on step six. They ended up cutting and grinding all of Ginny's ingredients first so that she could help Theo while her own cauldron was to simmer for half an hour. Happy for a concrete task, they began.

They missed the chime announcing the men's return. Soon the house filled with shouts from the men. Theo almost botched his potion while shouting back up.

"WATCH it, stir steadily! This is FIVE... SIX."

The door burst open, and a haggard but relieved Severus Snape stood on the threshold. "... EIGHT... NINE..." He collapsed on a stool, head in his hands.

"Don't worry, Severus. We'll finish this and bring it upstairs. Go have a drink and rest," she ordered. When he came to hold her tight instead, Ginny felt she had to steady him. He left reluctantly when Paul Nott fetched him.

Half an hour later, Theo and Ginny tended to Draco and Severus. Paul Nott had prepared some drinks and a snack.

"It's not the best texture," Ginny excused the slightly crumbly ointment. "Some of the stocked herbs were old. Severus, I had to replace wild ginger roots with cultivated ones that were dry as dust and quite grey. I added a dash of juice of swallow-wort to cope with the viscosity and the too brown thyme. Was that right, Severus?"

"I'd take anything at the moment, as long as you offer it," Severus said tiredly. Seeing her shocked expression he corrected himself. "Don't worry, swallow-wort was a good idea. It explains the heat on the skin. Comfortable in winter." Trying to bait her he added, "I was a bit afraid you might have added Adder's Root."

"WHAT? How befuddled do I look, adding arum when you might have an open injury. It's an insult, and you do not have freckles!" she mocked him back, glad to see his mood rising. From the corner of her eye she saw Paul Nott shrugging to his son and wife who had finally arrived. Not a single potion fan in the Nott's household, it seemed.

All the time Draco hadn't said a word. Not even the last jibe had reached him.

When they could not prevail upon the Notts' hospitality any longer, Draco looked positively pale, even greenish. "I'd better head home...whatever awaits me there. I don't need a commemorative plaque on your house, Severus; just remember me as a friend."

Contrary to what one would expect from the resolute woman, Brenda Nott shrieked. "There must be something we can do!"

"Should someone go with him?" Ginny asked in concern. "I'd do it, but I'm no match for Malfoy senior."

"You are the last person I would send!" Severus exclaimed, grabbing her hand and pulling her on to his lap. She smiled but stood quickly when his face became contorted in pain.

"It's all right," Draco placated them. "If I come with moral support now, I'll be worse off the first time I face him alone." Thinking a bit more he started hesitantly, "I... maybe..." he waited for an encouraging nod from Mrs Nott. "I think I don't mind an invitation to dinner tomorrow...if it's not a burden."

Paul Nott stood resolutely. "You are right, although we will make that tea considering you have to head off to school. Wait, Draco. I'll owl your parents right now. Athena!" He moved to the desk and fetched quill, ink and parchment. A majestic eagle owl arrived and perched on the backrest behind Nott. "Good girl... Here, take this to Lucius. Express delivery, DON'T linger, DON'T go for a hunt!"

The bird soared away. "She is reliable and very fast as long as there is no rabbit on her way. Draco, wait ten minutes before you follow." Draco nodded and went outside, Theo in his wake.

Considering his guests again, Nott continued, "I'd like to invite you two as well. It will be best to get things straight immediately. If you agree, that is." He turned to Severus.

With a bow Severus accepted.

Ginny gulped. Meet Lucius Malfoy? She was pleased to note that Mr Nott raised his eyebrow. He explicitly asked for her comments, a consideration no other Death Eater ever showed to her. "I take it you have a history with Lucius?" She nodded and swallowed. "How do you feel about it?"

Nervous now, Severus took Ginny aside. "I... I possibly should have asked you first."

"Indeed," she snarled. Reminding herself of his last hours she met him halfway, adding, "but you're excused. You are still healing."

A growl escaped Severus before he found proper words. "So: how do you feel about it?"

"We heard his voice in the summer house. It went right through me. Give me a reason why I want to repeat that so soon."

"Lucius will inevitably hear about... us. Do you want it delivered through the Mulcibers, or possibly at the Malfoys?"

"No, thanks," she replied pointedly. Aloud, she announced, "We gladly accept your invitation. Thank you, Mr Nott."

"I'll be most pleased." He bowed. "One more thing we should get straight then. I'm Paul, and this is Brenda. As Mrs Snape you are entitled to be on first-name terms with us." Grinning boyishly, he added, "Lucius will be most pleased, I'm sure. See you tomorrow around half four."

A/N:

- 1) Please do not make me, the innocent author, responsible for the name a foul-tempered eight-year-old Malfoy boy once selected for their newly acquired house-elf!
- 2) Friar's Cowl or Adder's Root, *Arum maculatum*, is poisonous when digested by causing tissue swelling. I assume it had best not come into contact with blood, either. However, its starch has been used in Italy to remove freckles from the face and hands. This is what Ginny refers to.

The Kiss

Chapter 31 of 35

One curse is being lifted, another raised.

My warmest gratitudes to Soprano-in-the-Shadow and MagicAlly for betaing and Britpicking who worked their own, fantastic magic on this chapter!

The Kiss

Wide awake in their marital bed, Ginny compiled a list of ingredients she would suggest for the Notts to stock up on. What a sorry sight that lab had been! The Burrow offered barely a third of the space, and their three thin-bottomed cauldrons were battered, courtesy of her dear brothers Fred and George, but the Weasleys regularly needed all of the essential healing potions, and so their ingredients were always fairly fresh.

Her thoughts stayed on the twins. Their fanciful business had just begun to flourish when the war thwarted it all. They had set up a new, grander lab at their premises, too. Bill and Fleur might also have their own lab by now. Ron had mentioned the Order's difficulties in purchasing ingredients, though.

When Severus moaned, she considered the exhausted form next to her. He had woken up three times in as many hours, greedily emptied the beaker of water on the bedside table and then searched for her with his arm. Finally, he had wriggled around her and so found the position that allowed him to relax. He was holding her so tightly that turning around was difficult.

However, he would not sleep much longer and would wake up very hungry.

Gently, Ginny disentangled herself from his grip, and when his hand searched for her yet again, she quickly pulled her unicorn plushy out of the rucksack and stuffed it into his arm.

When she failed to reach her teeth with her toothbrush, she removed the Japanese lip protection spell. Only a few weeks more and they'd be free from that curse!

Ginny cut ingredients for a salad and prepared the dressing separately to keep the lettuce crisp. Her soup would not need more than heating whenever he woke up. Substituting minced meat with the staple soy strips, she finally concocted a dish that could pass for lasagne, although it didn't have much taste before she cast a hearty amount of curry powder and soy sauce into the béchamel...not fancy, but filling.

An incoherent mumble from the bedroom announced Severus' impending awakening, and then he growled, "What the heck?"

Finally, he made it to the door frame in his grey t-shirt and green boxers. Ginny could not suppress a wide smirk at the sight and greeted him, "Hi Severus, sleep well?"

He was looking at her out of his barely open eyes, his hair as wild as Hagrid's, and the violet unicorn with sparkling gold horn and hooves cradled in his arm.

"What is so amusing?" he asked, eyebrow rising.

"So you met Hyacinth," she said, indicating the fluffy unicorn. "I was wondering if I could have a picture made from this memory. If Fred and George sell it, we can live on the proceeds for years." She went over and stroked his cheek.

Severus' face fell. "Ginevr..." Severus stopped himself abruptly. "Do not... You shall never have to stoop to such means to earn a living! I swear I will do whatever it takes to prevent that," he said with determination.

Her heart constricted with every word. Such a desperate sounding train of thought had to be broken! "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, Severus. I forbid you to talk or even think this way. Come now, let's have a square meal. Maybe freshen up while I finish the soup?"

The normal medical remedies, and primarily the potion against the physical exhaustion after a Cruciatu curse, sat on the table together with the crockery when Severus sat down.

They ate in silence. Too much was whirling through Severus' mind. For Ginny's schooled senses his expression changed from pained, to happy, back to contemplative and over to sorrow in rapid succession. Although for most people they would be hidden forever behind the famous scowl of their Potion Master, by now, Ginny was able to read these feelings through the tiniest flicker in his eyes.

Yet, exhaustion dominated, and so she placed him on the sofa and pushed a cup of warm tea into his hands. "Drink!" was the rather harsh command he received, and he readily obliged her.

"Good. Now start somewhere with what you want to say, Severus. Anywhere will do."

"Ginevr... why have you never told me you don't like your full name?"

"That has been bothering you, Severus?" she wondered, trying hard not to scoff. "Ron's a prat. Just forget it."

"He accused me of not being sensitive to you, not knowing my wife, the woman I ... love." The pain this thought had caused him showed in his eyes.

"Oh, Severus," she sighed. "It is true that I didn't like it when I was little, and consequently, my family and my friends say Ginny. But I've enjoyed hearing it from you ever since you used it." She paused briefly for effect. "I would have told you otherwise."

"Would you? When would that have been? Tell me now! What do you want me to call you?" He inhaled deeply. "Ginny? Gin?"

"No! It wouldn't be you, and I wouldn't be *this me*." She wondered how to explain, shrugged and tried. "I believe 'Ginny' is associated with my life as the youngest of the Weasley clan, the sweet little girl. I'm a different person now. I want you to use a name we are both comfortable with. And you do know me quite well." She snuggled in his lap and prompted him. "Next subject! Something more serious is bothering you!"

"More often than not I seriously doubt I know you, considering what I learned in the last three days. I'm still puzzled," he declared. "How are you feeling? How have you passed your time at... the place we dropped you."

"The Malfoys' summer residence, also used to detain people they cannot dump into *anoubliette*." Ginny raised her chin sideways in mock-aristocratic ways and sounded very French.

"I... wasn't pleased. Your missive could have been faked, or you could have been forced to write it. You didn't even use my name ... ah, but this is clarified, isn't it?"

Severus' pinky twitched nervously as he nodded in the affirmative.

Ginny swiftly summarized how she had tricked Pukey into revealing a bit of information and what thoughts she had gone through during the day.

"You doubted me." It wasn't an accusation.

"Well, yes. I had no clues to go by. You just confirmed how you didn't know me yesterday, and neither did I." Quietly, she added, "I have killed two men."

"No, Ginevra, no! We are in a war, and you caused their death. This is not cold-blooded murder, it's slaying, if even that," he corrected her. "I have no right...no right at all...to judge you. I have slain a woman this morning, and you know well enough that it cannot have been the first time. Draco has been spared so far, for all I know, but he prepares himself for the inevitable."

"I wasn't even fighting, Severus. I did not act in self-defence, I attacked them from full cover."

"Do not feel sorry for staying put! Potter will have to kill the Dark Lord. He will have to plan it and execute it, but no one in their right mind would accuse him of murder for it. No one would accuse you of murder either." Severus reached out and pulled her close until her tension faded and her breathing sounded relaxed.

For the first time after Ron Weasley left, they were both comfortable and had more than just a moment without something life-threatening. It was all Severus had waited for.

"Hogwarts, Ginevra!"

Even seeing Ginny recoil as he so suddenly became loud, he could not dampen his voice when he elaborated, "Ginevra/*how* did you get through the wards of my study?"

She jumped up and turned away from him, and he let her, but then held his wife's shoulders hard, harder than she could be comfortable with.

"Ginevra, *how*?"

"What? Why is this of any importance now? We should worry about Malfoy and the war." She huffed, and he glared at her. "I went in. I saw your memos and understood your motivation."

"Tell me how you entered. I have my reasons," he pressed on.

Ginny gathered her thoughts. Yes, she had withheld this fact from him...who would not have tried it when caught in the Death Eaters' lair? *Now, where and how to begin?*

Glancing at the ceiling, she said, "Alastor Moody worked with us on all kinds of wards, in case we needed it to retrieve... items. We used an illustrated book on Muggle security gadgets, locks, iron fences, complex mechanisms to compare them with. It certainly helped Hermione and Harry, and maybe us Weasleys, too."

Severus was listening in the highest concentration and didn't interrupt her.

"He warded rooms at Hogwarts and outdoor locations for our training. Remus set other wards; Tonks, Shackbolt and the teachers then added their own creations. We covered timed wards, wards that make you sleepy or light-headed, circulating wards, and, of course, combinations." She stopped, unable to understand what he was looking for. Yet his gaze was unbroken.

Severus pressed on, his voice even more serious. "*My* wards. Ginevra! How did you open *my private quarters* at Hogwarts? Not to think of what you did in there, which leads us too far for today."

"I didn't do anything untoward, I promise! I did not touch the Pensieve!"

Agitated now, he repeated, "How did you tear down these wards, Ginevra, I need to know! Tell me exactly who went in, what you did, what everybody else did."

Obediently, she replied, although her voice showed how irritated she was. "Truly there isn't much to tell. After you had left, as soon as it had calmed down, the Order tried to enter your quarters. Right the next day, Ministry Aurors came over. I really don't know what they did, but none of them got in."

"Weeks later, after we had returned from Godric's Hollow, Dumbledore's portrait had awoken, and he insisted every single one should try again. So we all got a go. Fred and George had the corridor filled with bubbles, little green dragons and what have you. Harry and Ron brought all their efforts to bear, wildly swearing and sweating. Neville wasn't too enthusiastic. Hermione made a hell of a list, consulted dozens of books, but she failed, too. I don't quite understand it, it was so simple. I was last, *obviously!*"

Despite his agitation, Severus stroked her arm gently. She would never come last for him, or be set aside.

"At least by now I'm not permanently forbidden to try. One day, we were to meet in the Slytherin common room after lunch. Moody is a Slytherin, see. I passed by your door. I imagined being in your stead, and I sort of felt what to do. I don't know what happened, but there were just two ordinary wards and a little bit of waiting, and I was in."

"You *sort of... felt* what to do... and you were in."

"Severus Snape is impersonating a parrot?"

The joke bypassed her husband who was recollecting all he knew about the empathy charms he had applied on his quarters. "Yes, it was the only way," he finally stated and looked at her in wonder, adding, "but you, Ginevra..."

"I'm still missing the punch line, aren't I? What's so peculiar?"

"As you well imagine, I could not have anyone enter my sanctum out of curiosity. Thus, I keyed the wards to my own state of mind. More than enough people have told me, its twisted beyond anyone else's and so caustic and malicious that no one even wants to understand them."

Ginny flinched. Yes, she had thought the same for years.

"I see you agree," Severus growled without true anger. "Rest assured, it suited me just fine," he added with a smirk.

"Yet, you've broken through before we met here. You not only felt what to do, but you *maintained a connection to me* long enough to go through the other wards."

In a voice more solemn than she had ever heard, he formulated the unfathomable. "That happened over there: at my study at Hogwarts, which is familiar terrain for you. However, also here you linked to me unbelievably quickly, and you never failed, even when I failed you so abysmally. You do have the empathy I've never thought possible," he finished in wonder.

Ginny let the news sink in, uttering, "I had no idea!" She was pulled out of her trance when he continued, gently circling his fingers over her arm.

"To summarise: the main ward is based on empathy. You have shown empathy for me when you broke it. However," he continued, raising his voice, "your breaking through the rest of the wards proves that you're not absurdly overwhelmed with these emotions but remain composed enough to act upon a situation that you did not expect. These are the sort of tests conducted to... find a partner for a long term assignment."

Severus inhaled, and a sense of nervousness washed over Ginny.

He cupped her chin with both, slightly shivering hands, locked his eyes with hers and chanted gently, "Legilimens!" He presented her with pictures of himself in various ages, in joy and sorrow, in health and also injured.

For a reply Ginny made an increasingly older Ginevra stroke the image-Severus, embrace or kiss him, laugh with him, worry with him.

Severus broke the connection. "Are you sure, my love?"

"Absolutely sure."

"I don't deserve you."

"Complain somewhere else."

"Thank you for not objecting, but no, I never will complain."

Pushing her gently towards the bedroom door, he unfastened her robe. Her hands roamed under his shirt, unbuttoned his cuffs and collar but eventually simply pulled it over his head. They lost all clothes on their way towards the bed. Repeatedly, Severus searched for confirmation in her eyes.

Lying next to her, he stroked softly over her cheeks with his thumbs before he slowly and considerably lowered his lips on her rising ones for the most tender and loving kiss they had shared. It was a kiss that seemed to reach their very souls. How they had both missed this feeling of lips on lips, tongues gently caressing each other!

When they broke apart Severus asked, "Is there anything deeper, stronger yet than the fidelity fastbinding, my love?"

Panting, Ginny didn't come forth with an answer, nor would Severus have been in any state to listen, for they were already riding on a wonderfully intense wave of passion.

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While Severus prepared a light meal, Ginny was supposed to read a book of his, *Interpersonal Charms*, on detecting and deploying binding charms. It had come from the forbidden bookshelf, and he advised Ginny not to stray but stick to the topic.

However, Ginny didn't feel like researching at all. She lurked around close to her husband and lover, just to strategically block his paths between the sink, the range and the fridge so she could snatch a kiss from him...only because now she could do so.

Severus made a good show of being exasperated, but in truth he enjoyed every single encounter and didn't mind adding trails of kisses along his witch's jawline.

Eventually, though, he pressed the book firmly into her hands. "Ginevra, please read the passages I marked. I want you to know what's behind my wards."

The young woman complied reluctantly and not without placing a fat smack on his nose...of all body parts!

Well groomed, empathy only fortifies itself. It creates a certain emotional link. The partners can feel each other's strongest agitation and are led to find each other.

"Severus?"

Instead of replying, he spun around to place a kiss on her this time, hitting her temples.

"Oi! The book doesn't mention spouses at all."

"The book is considerably younger than Hogwarts. Its authors..." Severus paused, raising a brow.

"...were pure-bloods. Right, I see. They would use the Sorting Hat and have no scruples at all in re-housing the weaker partner."

"Yes. The noble pure-blood lines focus in a confused manner on *hereditary disposition* for their offspring. A warm, ordered family life is for the lesser beings."

Their sandwich and salad was accompanied by a glass of wine for the occasion. Snatching Severus' left hand and bestowing it with a kiss, Ginny asked, "Did you feel the ring?"

He looked up and then at his ring. "The moment was not the most suitable to feel one's *finger*," he commented drily.

"I think it warmed and contracted. Anyway: I'm not at all sorry to announce that you cannot betray me anymore. Do not try it for the sake of the poor woman!"

She smirked, receiving a glare. "Vixen!"

Another "Severus?" stopped the addressee dead as he was about to cover her décolletage with kisses.

He glared up at her flushed face. "Not the best moment for an inquisition!"

"Please, Severus, I need to know this. At the mission, you said that you... uh, who?"

"Oh, our calamity? It was but an accident," he said. "A wall collapsed, and *dear* Bellatrix was not quick enough. I think she tripped over a larger piece of debris that happened to jump. Then, another big block happened to burst on her head."

"Bellatrix Lestrange is dead?" She stared at him in disbelief. "You've snatched away Neville's primary goal. Remus would have wanted her as well."

"Justified as their reasons are, I have my own."

Ginny sat up and looked expectantly into his eyes. With a sigh, Severus elaborated. "She taught me. Don't ask about her methods. Last year, she forced the Unbreakable Vow on me that made me kill Albus. And, of course, she doubted my right to have you as a wife," he added with tenderness. Harshly he continued, "Longbottom still has her husband and her brother-in-law to take revenge on, and Lupin should look out for Greyback."

"She could nearly kill with her eyes; her deranged glare froze me on the spot, and even Death Eaters were uncomfortable whenever she entered the room. It's hard to imagine that she was a human being."

"I have been through these situations too often already. It's never easy, but hardly ever was I less resentful than this time. However, Ginevra, do not ever forget that I have to appear desperate at the loss. You had better express similar feelings."

After a pause, Severus added, "We will have to face Lucius Malfoy from now on."

"Draco was horrified."

"He should be. Lucius expects absolute loyalty from him, as well as stellar performance in the Dark Arts. He does not tolerate a dunce or a weakling. I distinctly remember his favourite spells. We will take a few salves and restoratives potions with us tomorrow. "

"I'm glad the Notts invited them over. Doesn't this keep Malfoy from hurting Draco?"

"Yes, the Malfoys are used to treading carefully and not upsetting people randomly in a new situation. He cannot know Paul's current position. However, he might have been fed wrong information. The Dementors must have had some effect on his mind, too."

After a pause, Severus added, "The owl came far too late for the elves at the manor, and certainly also for Narcissa."

He turned to face her. "Ginevra, has Missile done anything to you?"

"Oh, he did nothing to me. He would not dare, the cowardly bastard! He always lurked around the changing room and... he was out of his senses from their smell. He sniffled around when the girls changed after training, not even waiting until they'd all left. The frightened girls were taking turns in watching out, and it took them even longer to get dressed. Millie and I stayed after whenever we could. That's why we were late a few times."

Severus, who hardly ever showed emotions, felt his neck swell in rage. "You should have told me, or anyone. Did he assault them?"

"We are not sure. Some of them became very shy in the bathroom. Sometimes they cried in their sleep or woke up with a shout."

"The nightmares..." Severus realised he had not paid Ginny's report enough attention. How often did he ignore her when it was important?

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Paul Nott opened his front door to welcome his second set of guests. He raised an eyebrow, when only Draco and his father entered. "Narcissa is indisposed," Lucius explained smoothly, in lieu of a greeting.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You look... settled. Hm, Draco, why don't you go up to Theo for a while? We will call you down for tea."

Draco entered slowly and nodded so hesitantly, that Paul suggested, "you can take the Floo from the hall, why don't you? Surprise him, like in old times?" With a small smile, Draco obliged while Paul Nott's worried eyes followed him.

He turned to the elder Malfoy, working hard to keep a friendly face. "Let's go into the library for a drink between men, shall we?"

Entering, Lucius noticed he was not the only guest of the day. "Severus! What a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope."

Cradling their firewhiskys, they discussed what had happened while Lucius Malfoy had been in Azkaban. Paul and Severus had no problems arranging the truth favourably for Draco. The boy had been forced to start from zero, failed a few times; yes, but under the circumstances, he was lucky to have been given the opportunity to prove himself at all.

"He is not considered a misfit," Paul concluded.

"Am I to understand that Severus saved Draco and Narcissa's lives?"

Paul answered, "I would certainly say so. Our master was enraged after the disaster in the Ministry. He gave Draco a task far beyond his capabilities. Severus helped your son not to fail utterly. Then he trained him for weeks."

Suspicious, Lucius asked, "What made you do this? Don't pretend you had altruistic motives, you sly, half-blood snake!"

Severus leaned back and smirked. "Draco proved immensely useful. He's young and physically fit, which is an asset in an old, Muggle-built house. I also got rid of babysitting Pettigrew. Believe me, I valued the change very highly. Back at Hogwarts, though... Let's just say that Bella motivated me very highly indeed, dear Lucius."

"Bella insisted you stole Draco's glory." Building up volume, he continued. "Killing the old fool was his task, and you made him fail."

"Yes, well, Bella. She was not there on the tower, was she? Ask Fenrir or the others who were." Severus paused to get Lucius' attention. His deep voice got a dangerous edge as he continued, "I distinctly remember your own first... err... big task. Care to tell Paul how you fared? And who was he, compared to Albus Dumbledore?"

Lucius looked visibly glad when Severus left out the details.

"Had Severus not taken the initiative and later supported them, your son and wife would not be alive today," Paul confirmed. "We undoubtedly had received a specific directive for you the other day too."

Lucius glared. "Do you expect my gratitude?" The veins on his temples throbbed and belied his outer composure. "Subordination like a third year?"

"Next you might want me reciprocating whatever it was that motivated you to protect Draco? Whatever it was Bella had come up with?"

"You know very well that I don't have a son in the service of our master. As for Bella, maybe you should consult Narcissa on what the two had initiated. Draco knows it as well."

Lucius stood and went to the fireplace, tossed in Floopowder and shouted, "Draco, a word with you alone."

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When Brenda led Ginny into her son's room, the boy was stunned at her appearance. No hand-me-down clothes or jeans for once, and her hair was falling elegantly. As she stood on the threshold, her posture emphasised her position as his highly respected teacher's wife rather than a co-student.

"Theodore, please entertain Ginevra while I finish preparing tea."

Easily said! How was he to approach her? "Mrs Snape?"

"Theo, please, drop the formalities," she pleaded. "While we're up here, I want to be just a girl a year younger than you, all right? A girl that's taken, of course."

He nodded, swallowed and felt very little relief. What to talk about?

Ginny walked along the length of the shelf and regarded his possessions. His room was devoid of frills or girlish knick knacks, but she turned out to be quite familiar with the boyish décor, smiling here, lingering there. When she reverently trailed the curves of a duckfooted figurine of Viktor Krum, he slapped himself mentally for his slow thinking. She would inevitably be reminded of at least one of her brothers.

"I've watched the finals, but we went home before..."

"We had planned to stay the night. Would you stash this away before Draco comes?"

Theo did, and they had a faltering discussion on Quidditch and the general arrangements at the Academy, while carefully treading around any political statement. The tenacious awkwardness that lay heavily on Theo whenever he was confronted with a girl, cleared by a degree.

When the Floo flared in the corridor, Ginny jerked heavily and froze, transfixed. Draco toppled out clumsily, and Theo helped him up and brushed the soot off thoroughly.

Draco gingerly lowered himself into the offered chair, looked around and finally saw Ginny. "Ginny! I had no idea you'd be here. Wow, you look... Ginny... Gin, what's the matter?" He moved as if to get up, but settled on extending a hand only.

Two tears had begun running down the girl's cheeks before she snapped out of her reverie and brushed them off resolutely. "Uh, not to worry. It's only... I haven't heard a Floo in action for months. Hi, Draco. We've just agreed to disagree on the British League. We can move to Quidditch equipment now, if you don't prefer wand techniques."

Draco proved to be a good catalyst for their chat and even banter, and so it took Ginny and Theo a while to realise that they still had a one-to-one discussion.

Remembering that Lucius might have mistreated his son, Ginny made the boy stand, and his first attempt was no match to the weight of his limbs. "Roll up your sleeves, Draco."

She spared him the embarrassment of a more thorough investigation and rummaged in her bag.

She applied a tangerine ointment against his father's favourite punishment, Nettleflames, on his forearms. Draco downed a tissue strengthener, then gargled a smoking blue potion to reduce the swellings in his throat and mouth.

He treated his calves and knees by himself before pocketing the ointments. "Give Severus my thanks, and Mum's too." Through the haze of blue surrounding his head, he added, "Niilo Kontakoski, the Finn playing for Tutshill, insists on a broomstick made from an entire birch stem. They must have small trees over there."

He fanned the blue cloud away and continued to work his jaw and legs in silence, bent and stretched his arms and legs. Gradually, the ointment did its job, fading at the same time.

The Floo flared again, and Malfoy senior was heard, requiring to speak with his son. Ginny moved into a corner of the room before the man's face appeared in the hearth.

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Surreptitiously, Severus cast a mirror-spell on the mantle to observe Lucius as he learned about the Unbreakable Vow. As Draco elaborated the predicaments Severus had faced with this vow, Lucius eyes sparkled up in glee before sobering over a summary of his son's months at Spinner's End and the seating order at their Lord's banquets.

Turning back to Severus, the blond presented himself as the grateful, and very humble husband and father. "I have been misinformed on the situation. You will forever have my gratitude for your altruistic actions, Severus, my old friend. I'm not yet certain of my standing, but don't hesitate to ask if you know of anything I can do for you." With a mock-serious tone that belied his words, he added, "Had the situation been reciprocal, I'd very certainly have done the same for you."

Severus was tempted to snort in disbelief, but Paul stepped between them and picked up the thread, asking innocently, "Do you mean to say that you would vow to protect a family of Severus'?"

The thought amused Lucius greatly, and he answered in a light voice, spreading his arms and chuckling amiably. "But of course, I would. With pleasure. Only... poor Severus here himself just reminded us of his solitude."

"In that case let's finish this before our wives and sons join us," Paul proposed, set the glasses together and hovered the small table under the window sill to create space.

"Wives? I did not bring Narcissa."

Although he would have liked to fully understand Paul Nott's motivation first, Severus cottoned on rapidly, spotting a chance that might never come again. "You did not bring your wife, Lucius, but I brought mine. Will you vow to protect her and the children she will give me, Lucius? The first one shall be born within a year's time."

"You are actually *married*?" Lucius asked in amazement. He froze briefly, then regrouped and exclaimed, "Now, wait, I'm not bonding for just any tart you have picked up!"

Immediately, both men faced each other, wands drawn. Paul jumped in between, placating them, "Calm down both of you! Now!"

"You tried to trick me," Lucius snarled. "Severus vowed to protect a pure-blood, a boy the Dark Lord had set great hopes in. In the wake, he protected my wife, a pure-blood woman of high standing in her own right."

"Severus has married with our master as best man. His wife is a pure-blood of a very old family, and our master has expressed great hopes in a large family of Snapes," Paul informed the blond calmly. "I see no difference. I will be honoured to be your Bonder."

"A pure-blood, you say? The Dark Lord himself approved? Well, then, congratulations are in order." Lucius conceded, but made no move to actually shake Severus' hand. Instead, his brows furrowed in concentration. "I'm most anxious to meet her."

"You will within minutes. Now both of you, on your knees, I like my tea hot." Nott commanded.

Lucius' face for once showed a conflict of emotions, indicating his rapid thinking. He could, of course, draw back.

Deep down, Slytherins don't give anything on gratitude; only self-preservation could motivate a Malfoy into any commitment. He would consider such a vow a first step towards re-entering the Inner Circle. Severus would not dissuade him from that.

"If I am to vow for his wife as well, I expect the Vow to end with a divorce."

Severus Occluded as much as he dared, painting indifference over his face. "I consider this adequate," he informed them, already lowering himself onto his knees *So sure that no one stays with me, and you've found an effective lever for damage control?*

Unexpected as this development was, Lucius' Vow would be an immeasurable advantage. He composed an innocent face while working feverishly on a formulation that appeared innocent enough but had no loopholes. *How do I make you, bastard, shut up about Ginevra meeting teenager-Tom?*

Grudgingly, his opponent knelt down and took Severus' proffered right hand. Nott's wand tip pointed to their right hands, when Severus spoke, "Will you, Lucius Malfoy, watch over my wife and my underage children, protect them from harm as they undergo their daily lives or the tasks the Dark Lord assigns to them, for as long as we remain married?"

"I will," said Lucius.

"Will you further actively strive for intelligence on, and thwart any plans to harm them as long as my wife is not divorced from me?"

"I will," said Lucius stony faced.

Severus took a deep breath. How to continue?

"And will you," Paul took over, "keep quiet and dissuade any speculation about the special links we three have with your protégés?"

Severus could not have formulated this better! The plural in 'links' included Lucius' abysmal action before Ginevra's first Hogwarts year, meaning that he could never divulge any suspicion that she might know the Dark Lord better than that monster was aware of.

Lucius looked up and frowned, visibly irritated. "I will," he said a third time.

Three tongues of flame now twisted with each other binding themselves around their hands to confirm the bond, the Unbreakable Vow.

As the snakelike red rope was about to fade, they heard Brenda's voice. "Theodore, please come down now, we'll have tea in the dining room."

They stood and brushed their clothes. Paul stowed the bottle away and cradled the tumblers in his left hand. "I'll bring them to the kitchen right away." He showed them through the door. "Please proceed to the dining room. Take your seats, maybe Lucius over here? Severus, do you like this place, and your charming wife next to you?"

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When Draco re-entered, he went for the ointment again, and they had a look at their Potions assignments from the last week: acute and obtuse angles in stirring and cutting. Theo groaned at all the details to remember that didn't reveal any pattern to him.

The three leisurely discussed sundry items, relishing in the fact that they were out of adult control. Ginny especially enjoyed talking freely to someone her age, to people who would not treat her as a teacher's wife, calculating how to use every word she said against her. They had gone over several school subjects and discussed a few

Quidditch tactics before they heard Theo's mother calling.

"You two remove any remnants of the paste on Draco. Double- and triple check him! I'll go and see how I can help Brenda," Ginny commanded and skipped down the stairs. She did not hear the boys discussing how odd it was to be friends with a Weasley, or a Snape.

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Paul returned from the kitchens carrying a bowl of crackers. Noticing Lucius' disgust, Severus was looking forward to the following entrances. And there they came, Brenda steering the teapot and a cheesecake, followed by his own wife, moving with elegance despite carrying a tray of miniature-rolls with ham, bacon, fish and cheese and amiably speaking to the other woman.

It was clear from first sight that theirs was not a mistress-servant relationship.

"How dare you subject my family to this Mudblood lover!" Lucius exclaimed, almost kicking his chair as he backed away from any possible contact.

"May I introduce you, Lucius Malfoy, Ginevra Snape," Nott said nonchalantly.

"You must be joking. What would he do with a little girl? Or is she your temporary plaything made legal?"

Severus only sneered back at Lucius, holding Ginny's hand down to stall any counter from her.

The door opened once again, this time to allow both boys in, Theo carrying the coffee and Draco providing milk and sugar as if he'd done so all his life.

"My son is not a servant," Lucius exclaimed. "Even if you seem ready to let your... eh...*wife* be used for menial tasks."

"It is no matter to me, what you think, Lucius," Severus answered. "Hm, this looks delicious, Brenda!" Ginny looked up just in time to see how Brenda's wand hand twitched slightly in surprise. She smiled inwardly.

Paul kept the initial seating order, i.e. Draco and Theodore faced each other on one end of the table for eight, with Ginny next to Theo and Severus next to her. Next to Draco, there was Brenda and the vacant seat for Narcissa. Lucius would have been positioned next to his wife, and no one minded much that this isolated him now that she was absent.

Paul took the seat next to Severus, then reconsidered and positioned himself between Brenda and Lucius Malfoy, thus avoiding Lucius moving in. Brenda's hand brushed his thigh in gratitude.

Conversation was stilted and circled about the fates of common acquaintances, thoroughly boring Ginny. She observed the Notts and was sure Brenda feigned her disinterest in the war as much as she pretended to enthuse over the social events of marriages and childbirth.

Eventually, Lucius Malfoy repeated his question. "You didn't answer me, Severus. Is she your temporary plaything, granted by the Dark Lord for your services?"

"I do not care what you think, but you will not voice it. Ginevra is my legal wife. You can check the papers in the Ministry."

"Well, well," Lucius prattled on, searching Paul's eyes. "So we have a little Prew..." He couldn't finish the word. His hand went to his throat, his eyes bulged and his torso glowed up in a pink hue.

In no time, Paul Nott brandished his wand, shouting, *"Interrumpe!"* Lucius slumped heavily in his chair as his features normalised.

Paul said, "I recommend you learn to remember your vow."

"Vow?" Draco echoed.

"Your father graciously agreed to protect Ginevra and our children in a similar way as I vowed to protect you, Mr Malfoy," Severus explained nonchalantly.

He continued, slowly turning to Ginny, stepping on her foot at the same time. "In contrast to my Vow, however, Lucius has requested a limitation to the time we are not divorced."

As if on command, she pouted. *Does she know how alluring she looks when she does that?* "But Severus," she said in an irritated tone, "surely you won't... I mean... I love you. You know that?"

"Of course, my dear," Severus answered softly, lightly stroking her cheek, thus treating her like the little dimwit she pretended to be. "Do not concern yourself." He had to hold his breath when the heel of her shoe descended most painfully on his instep. Looking over to Draco again, he gave his wife a little peck on the forehead.

Draco blanched, his fork clattered on his plate. "You..."

Quickly, Ginny took hold of the pot closest to her. "Tea, Draco? Or wait, this is the coffee. Want some?"

"N... N... No, thank you, I'll have tea, please," he managed to answer.

Draco had a hard time fighting back emotions and pretended he had swallowed the wrong way. Coughing, he excused himself and left the room. Ginny nudged Severus and, when Brenda was about to top up everyone's coffee, he followed the boy with the argument he needed a glass of water and no, thank you, he would find the kitchen.

Severus found Draco leaning against the wall in the end of the corridor. He approached the boy not so silently as to startle him. "Draco?"

When he got no reaction, he touched the boy's shoulder. Draco jerked around and embraced his mentor fiercely, very much to Severus' bewilderment. "I'm so happy for you two, Severus."

"Well, thank you, I guess," Severus replied awkwardly, not knowing where to put his hands.

"It was just a bit much to learn it this way. I'll be all right now that I have told you."

When Severus turned to go to the kitchen, Draco called after him "Uh, Severus?" The man halted. "Did Ginny ever talk about a certain offer I once made to her? No? If she does, please believe me I didn't want to eh... She's very dear to me, but only as a sister. The sister I have missed for so long." He made good use of Severus' handkerchief and was now ready to return. With a smirk he added, "You were very convincing with your 'little tart' there! Hey, no offence."

"None taken."

Severus returned shortly after the boy with a glass of water in his hand and behaved as if nothing was amiss. Yet he could not overlook the questioning look Paul Nott threw at them, taxing them, not knowing what to make of them.

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School was never a good topic to discuss when teachers, parents and pupils sat at the same table. Yet, Severus wanted to raise it this time. "Have you finished your

homework for the period, you three?" he asked innocently enough. Ginny responded with a disapproving glare while Theodore helped himself to an extra-large bite of blueberry pie that would prevent him from an immediate answer.

"Homework?" Lucius looked up sharply, his ham sandwich abandoned half-way to his mouth. "As in *school* assignments?"

Brenda was quickest to grasp the opportunity. "Oh, yes. *Are* you finished, Theo?"

"We've been doing some last adjustments on our Potions essay today. We should be fine," Ginny offered. "I mean, details that were good to add, and Theo searched through the material and... yeah well, we sort of formulated them together," she amended, remembering *how* her dear husband reacted on reading near-identical copies. At least Theo's would be correct this time.

As Severus had assumed, neither Draco nor Narcissa had been given the time to relate to Lucius that there was a new school and N.E.W.T.s awaiting Draco. "What is the point of this? Draco and his age group don't need coddling in a school! They ought to be out, fighting for our master and proving themselves."

"They still have ample opportunities for this, Lucius," Paul remarked. "Draco certainly got his share."

Ginny reminded herself to put on an innocent face. She was not supposed to know even half of what she did know.

"What can they still benefit from classroom training? Is Lockhart teaching Defence again?" Lucius sneered.

Not rising to the provocation, Severus went through the subjects Salazar's Academy offered. "Years one to five have a school education close to Hogwarts. Furthermore, they rehearse self-defence, gauging danger and proper hiding. They learn basic healing and a bit of paramilitary support, transporting goods and the like. The footmen of our master's army leave school for just what you suggest, physical combat training. They are further rapidly paired to provide our master with a new generation of Death Eaters." He paused to let this sink in. Draco made a face at the idea, and Theodore shook so violently that he dropped his sandwich.

Severus continued. "It is the officer ranks, the strategists and future commanders that are *granted* further education leading to the N.E.W.T.s. I dare say the requirements are considerably higher than at Hogwarts." Any other teacher might have added just how ambitious the students in sixth form were, but from Severus' mouth this would have sounded surreal, and he knew it.

Lucius was not convinced. The assembled couldn't even inform the released prisoner of the whereabouts of the school, fuelling his anger even more. Then Ginny remembered that it was Narcissa's turn to provide the food for the following morning and evening.

"You see, they arrange for the well-to-do families to organise our meals," Severus told the blanching man. "We have taken quite a liking in the capabilities of the Malfoy kitchen staff, and Narcissa so enjoys the praise. It makes her day, and she would never miss coming personally."

To nobody's surprise Lucius excused himself and Draco soon after this revelation.

Go do some damage control, Ginny thought, gritting her teeth. The meeting had turned out well, but she was relieved to have him out of sight.

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"Brenda, would you excuse us from housework just the once?" Severus asked, pointing to Paul.

"Since when do you volunteer, anyway?"

"Oh, I taught him manners, then?" Ginny quipped, a stack of plates in her hand. The glare she received from her husband was more than worth the bait.

In the kitchen both women sniggered. The Notts had no elf, and Brenda engaged Ginny in work and a chat, providing her with useful spells. They hardly noticed when Theo removed himself from the women's talk. To Ginny, the clean, well-organised three-persons household could hardly compare to The Burrow, but it felt good to talk to an elder woman for a change.

Brenda loved her kitchen garden, an undertaking Molly had given up long before Ginny was born.

With their goodbyes, Brenda agreed to help Ginny lay out an orchard after the next period while Severus assured them which herbs are cared for. "Some are suitable for the kitchen as well. You are free to expand the patch."

A/N:

In the book, Narcissa formulates the U.V., but in the film it's Bella, the Bonder. I take the liberty to allow a combination.

I'd like to ask you how much you want to know about Ron. (How well) Does he get back to Hogwarts? What does he tell? How is it received?

I wish you all a relaxing and merry holiday season.

Finland is covered with more than a metre of snow!

Graduating

Chapter 32 of 35

The graduation ceremony at Salazar's Academy

Cauldron cakes and two large gillywater go to my beta, Soprano in the Shadow, and my Britpicker, MagicAlly, for their patience and most valuable editing.

Graduating

The highlight of the school term, the celebration of the first ever O.W.L.s awarded at Salazar's Academy, was held in the evening after this four-days period. Incessant talks about dresses and hairstyles dominated the dormitories, the Great Hall and the corridors, infuriating the headmistress who never approved of any other topic than academic

pursuits. Mandy Sands and her three friends greatly enjoyed the idea of Ginny in a hand-me-down, out-of-fashion outfit. Pansy, who still stood in the bad graces of several teachers, happily added her derision to the rest in an effort to intensify the scorn of the pupils, confident that it would aggravate Draco.

Severus happened upon the four girls unexpectedly. "Neither haute couture nor drama are part of this Academy's syllabus, Miss Sands. You obviously have too much free time at your disposal, which you do not devote to studying." The last sentence was a direct quote from the headmistress and made sure they would not seek her out to overturn his punishment.

With tremendous pleasure he recruited the girls to cleaning duties till their hands were red and sore, then made them pickle troll nostrils in a smelly marinade that would not wash off, no matter how much they brushed their sensitive skin.

The prima donnas wailed all through Tuesday, putting a strain on everybody's ears and nerves in addition to their noses. No matter where Ginny sat down in their Not-So-Great Hall, the quartet ended up taking the seats closest to her.

Half an hour into study time, Ginny had broken two quills, her essay had hardly developed, and the parchment was a crumbled, blotted mess. After conjuring a protective dome around her possessions, she stomped into the office of the Academy's most feared teacher.

She was back in the Great Hall minutes later and banged a shallow jar on the table. "With his regards...or rather contempt. Now shut it, so that at least other people get some work done here!"

As the *wailing quartet* disappeared into a bathroom, Draco, Theo and even Millicent crossed over to Ginny. "Don't tell me, Severus handed a cure out just like that?" Draco started.

"What is it anyway?" asked Theo.

"It's Murtlap essence, of course." Ginny preferred not to reveal the very Gryffindor details that had made her value this particular ointment, neither Umbridge's blood quill nor her brothers' fever boils. She turned to Draco, adding, "And no, he did not. I had to blackmail him."

Draco raised an eyebrow questioningly. Millicent, Theo and the random bystanders gaped.

"How exactly does one do that?" a voice from the back asked.

"I don't even want to know," another replied. Retching noises behind his back made Draco turn around sharply, and the culprit fell silent. It was the first indication that Draco Malfoy's standing had improved.

"Nothing that would work for you. I announced I'd disappear with Theo for the whole O.W.L.s festivity."

"Watch your back, Theo," Draco quipped, and his friend blushed furiously. "Can he still have one dance or would Professor Snape hex him into oblivion?"

"He certainly can, and I'll be honoured. I'm not sure what skills to expect from my husband in this regard," *and I already know that more than enough parents will engross him with incessant questions*, Ginny added mentally.

"You danced with Longbottom," a voice in the back growled, but Ginny and her friends didn't react to it.

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The pupils of years three and younger received an early dinner and were sent home. As a pedagogical *encouragement*, the fourth years had, however, been permitted...that is, forced...to participate at the ceremony for the O.W.L.s graduates. The elder pupils were present as well.

The arrangement raised Severus' hackles. For good reason, Hogwarts had never handed out the O.W.L.s reports personally. However, back then they had also hardly ever terminated a school career. Very few examples came to his mind; Stan Shunpike for one, had received four charity O.W.L.s after six years of school and left then. The situation was quite different now.

Right after the last lesson, his wife and graduate ordered him into their chambers. Equipped with a wide-toothed comb, he was to work his way through her hair. She sat straight upright, at first facing the wall, but eventually he turned her around and leaned her head against his shoulders.

"Do you remember that?"

Severus certainly did, but produced only a gruff rumble as a reply. His hand was seized nevertheless and bestowed with a series of light kisses that passed over scars, a torn cuticle, wrinkled joints and calluses alike.

Eventually, her hair was detangled, and he stepped back to assess his work. She looked angelic! She deserved to be courted by her peers, each of them eager to share at least one dance with her. She ought to be protectively watched by her father or eldest brother against the one or two who might gather the courage to seek out her lips. Instead, she was bound to an old, ugly outcast and a felon, once justice would be reinstated.

However, she was not yet satisfied but expected him to somehow braid and arrange her hair. His fingers felt clumsy and fat. They were too short to hold her strands, but at the same time too long to wind hair around.

"Do you absolutely have to wear it pinned up?"

"Severus, please," she moaned, holding up a long, wire-thin and flimsy hair pin.

"Isn't there a spell?"

"Of course there are spells, if you can conduct several strands of a few thousand hairs at a time. I at least can't."

Severus called upon Circe, Nimue and Morgana as he twisted and bent the left strand for the umpteenth time, thereby carefully observing the right lock and again neglecting the centre. He needed more fingers; when at the same time, the ones he had were perpetually in each other's way.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Severus huffed. "If I drop it now, we start again." Louder he asked, "Who is it?"

"Millicent Bulstrode. I was wondering if your wife needed help, sir."

Gladly, he let go completely. "The witches heard my prayers. Please, Ginevra, remain careful around her, though." Waving the door open, Severus said aloud, "Do whatever she wants, I declare my defeat."

He distinctly heard his wife huff, "Men", and he found he didn't care. *Out of this room, just let me out! I don't have to know these things* he thought. *I might still adore the result, though.* He left the door ajar, not trusting Miss Bulstrode entirely.

Inside, red hair was wound, spelled and pinned. "Honestly said, I'm not too good at this. I was escaping the cows in our dormitory and their chatter. As if dresses and make-up were the key thing," Millie complained.

Severus tuned out the idle, harmless prattle and helped himself generously to water and tea. The next hours would either leave him parched or oblige him to amounts of alcohol he couldn't afford to consume.

"You might choose linen rather than such soft material," Ginny suggested at some point. "I've seen that Muggles have a wide selection of such garments." She stopped herself just in time.

With a huff Millicent answered, "I take whatever doesn't make me look like an Erumpent."

"You will always look determined and strong, but that is what you are, so there is nothing wrong with it. Clothes that support it look better than attempts to cover and hide it."

Finally, his wife appeared in the door. Severus' heart skipped a beat seeing her womanly shape so well accentuated. She was perfectly poised, too. She strode past him and turned with a confidence that seeped deeply into Severus' heart, thawing away some more icicles. Her straight hair was gathered in a small bun on the crown of her head. No, it wasn't impressive, neither bouffant nor decorated with shiny ribbons or sparkling beads, but his witch carried her head high and proudly, and that was what counted for Severus.

Her neckline, while not the most delicate, was well defined and straight. Her Muggle necklace with the feline pendant hung proudly in the groove of her cleavage, daring anyone to comment, and a few ringlets of hair, which had been allowed to escape from the bun playfully, bounced with her step, softening her overall appearance.

With satisfaction, Severus noted that she had done very little to hide her Weasley freckles, merely covered the one cluster that sat at a disadvantageous place of her décolletage, just above the deepest point, and off centre.

Both witches put on their shoes and were gone in an instant.

Severus couldn't have named a single detail of Miss Bulstrode's outfit or appearance, so occupied had he been with Ginevra's transformation.

How could she be so many people in one...fierce and skilled fighter, efficient housewife, diligent student, easy companion and fully satisfying lover? Their intense lovemaking that had invoked the Stimufidelius Charm sneaked to the forefront of his mind. She had wriggled under and around him and uttered the most unusual sounds. The reminiscence brought Severus' body and mind into a dangerous state. He wanted to rush out and hold her and preferably Apparate them straight home. Before he lost his capability to think he thought of their headmistress, which cooled him down enough to follow the women.

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Severus took in the preparations in the not-so-Great Hall, which appeared to have been enlarged. In a poor copy of Hogwarts, Professors Flank and Barnes had put up banners and arranged smaller tables along the sides. The Shriil Trio had set up in the buffet corner. *Splendid, just my type of music.* He'd soon be off wandering the house and checking on overly hormonal youngsters. *Oh, but then one youngster might feel encouraged to...*No, he knew she would not, and yet, he called to himself *Severus Snape, this time you will stay, and you will dance!*

Ginevra's light conversation with Miss Bulstrode and Draco stopped when her *very dearest friends* recognised her in her festive blue dress with its matching robe. Although by far not as costly as some of the samples from Twilfitt and Tattling's or French couture, she was dressed more than adequately. *Take that, Severus' mind shouted at the wailing quartet, each dressed to the nines, but now gawking open-mouthed like fish, shoulders slumping. The clumsy lot had subjected their feet to veritable monstrosities of heels that had to be held upright with a stabilising charm. Ginevra, on the other hand, had full control over her modest heels thanks to their regular exercise.*

The rest of the students also hung around in groups, and several of them frowned at each other or searched for solitary students they could harass. Some crowd control was definitely in order. Severus sighed and searched out the most level-headed fourth year in his Colour and also summoned the prefects. "I need you to watch over the students of our Colour. Observe them all and intervene before they dare to become *creative*. Nothing is to disturb the ceremony tonight, but this unusual set up is..." He cleared his throat to not reveal what he thought of it, which seemed to make an impression on his prefects. "...tempting, but anyone underestimating our Lord's ambition with the Academy is dearly ill advised. He will identify the culprits of any disruption and then woe betide them, and in proxy their Colour."

One by one, the parents made an appearance, some tastefully, festively dressed, others sporting a garish look. They began chatting with their children in different levels of anxiety or foreboding, and Severus tried his best to remain in the background.

Ginevra was on her way towards Theodore when she spotted him. With a frown she turned sharply.

He stiffened as she approached him, her jaw set like a Veela on a mission. "Severus Snape, you have two options, either you follow me surreptitiously or I'll drag you along as if we were married for four decades, rather than four months."

He preferred to follow on his own, but could not stop a retort. "You won't drag me anywhere in forty years either!" he tried, sounding meek to his own ears. She didn't even bother to snort.

In their rooms, he was combed, and his clothes were checked over. "I brought your best robes for tonight, and you need something green. Don't contradict me!" She bound his hair at the nape with a fern green bow that lay on his desk and charmed the handkerchief for his pocket in a matching tone. "You're the Head of the Green Colour, remember. Hmm, you look good. I'll have to watch you!" With a deft kiss on his cheek, she was gone.

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The Dark Lord's speech on ambition, proof on achieving goals, and getting the rewards deserved, left several students shivering with foreboding. Mothers searched for their husband's hands as he continued elaborating the consequences of faking one's achievements.

Suddenly, his bloodshot eyes roamed the crescent the fifth years formed in front of him. His voice became razor-sharp. "Frank Drillsstrand?"

The addressed boy was already as white as a sheet; now he trembled and beads of sweat garnered his forehead. His feet barely carried him the required steps out of their group.

"What would you see as cheating?"

Before he could say a word, the boy fainted.

"Wake him. He must feel how his deeds are rewarded."

Gregory Goyle, wherever he had suddenly come from, conjured two buckets of water which he poured over the still form. When Drillstrand revived, he made him stand, facing their master. "Anssswr, boy, loud and clear, for everyone to undersstand why you exchanged your missserable brew with sssomeone's perfect one."

Frank, of course, had nothing but a stammered excuse that his brew had turned sticky unexpectedly, and the opportunity had been so perfect... The Dark Lord's curse hit him hard. He wriggled under the pain, and his screams filled the hall. Ginny felt a hand grip hers, and she pressed it, not caring who might search her out for support.

Eventually, the shrieks stopped, but Frank was whimpering in pain.

"Ginevra Sssnape," their master called. "It was you he wanted to take advantage of. What punishment do you want to see?"

At that moment, Ginny was glad to have the hand to squeeze and barely noticed the wince as she closed it tight. Her mind was racing while the red, snake eyes looked at her expectantly. She bent her head automatically so that he would not get access to her thoughts. There was no way to consult Severus. She could not even see him, for the Dark Lord had positioned himself between them. A memory of sixteen year old Tom ranting about students undeserving a magical education came to her rescue. *Send them straight to a coal bed or quarry, I say!*

"My Lord, Frank attempted to make you believe in achievements that were not his. I could not trust him another time if he reports a success. He... might still be useful for menial tasks, though. I..."

She finished her last sentence with force in her voice and in her hand that still pressed the unknown one. "I would set him to hard, physical labour, my Lord, and, of course, confiscate his wand."

"Very well. *Accio*, cheater's wand! Now take the wand out," the Dark Lord shouted dismissively as he pocketed the instrument. "I'm not willing to see parasites like him in this house of academic achievement."

Goyle went forward, easily shouldered the bundle that was Frank Drillstrand and left. Two adults silently left the hall, clinging to each other. Severus stepped forward and banished the water before anyone else deprived him of the chance to briefly sight his witch. Merlin, these three minutes had cost him. He felt a decade older, and a pint of sweat seemed to drench his clothes. Ginevra had selected this punishment wisely. It crushed every pure-blood family's ego, but was, after all, reversible. He felt relief that the Drillstrands didn't have a following that would dare to come after Ginny for revenge.

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"Now let's hear the results of the first ever O.W.L.s examinations at Salazar's Academy," Headmistress Mulciber declared pompously and stepped forward to face the graduates. To nobody's surprise Larry Thompson was called first. He would have nothing but O's, Ginny suspected, except possibly in Duelling, which he always approached with his lips clamped together, desperately missing clear instructions in written format. Larry received his diploma, shook the headmistress' hand and proceeded off to the left where his Head of Colour, Severus, congratulated him in his customary, stiff manner. Ginny nearly giggled at this display of normalcy after the tension minutes ago. The Dark Lord came next, his face nondescript as always. Larry gripped the scaly hand without hesitation and bowed deeply. Then he was received by his parents who embraced him and congratulated him warmly.

A girl was called now, whose name Ginny could not recall, and Severus retreated to make room for Professor Flank. Ginny saw the girl breathing deeply on her way from Flank to the Dark Lord and then presenting her diploma to a man, who set his arm on her shoulder.

One more pupil was honoured before the headmistress flinched and wanted to place the report to the bottom of the pile. Scaly hands gripped her wrist. "M... my Lord?"

Ginny saw fury flicker up before the red eyes focused on her again. "Ginevra Sssnape," their master announced, and Ginny received her diploma out of his hands directly. Dutifully, she proceeded to Professor Flank, her Head of Colour, who congratulated her in her usual, impersonal way. Not feeling obliged to seek out the headmistress, Ginny went towards where the parents stood...all the other pupils' parents, that is.

Several pupils later, Severus was at her side for a very short grip on her shoulders but had to go quickly to congratulate his next charge. Eventually, the headmistress announced, "We've honoured the best third of our O.W.L.s graduates. They will most certainly stay at least until summer. For the following third, their end-of-term exams before Easter will be crucial.

First was Florence. Praising her extraordinary Transfiguration work, the Headmistress almost showed something akin to real feelings. She was passed on to Severus and the Dark Lord. Her parents, however, barely nodded, clearly disappointed with her.

Ginny hoped and hoped to hear Heather's name, but it would not come. She was only called among the last third...when the Dark Lord had already left. These pupils could stay until further notice, as the official formulation was. For the female part this meant until they were married off.

***:

Elves from the Malfoys' and Sands' households had outdone themselves with an elaborate meal, which they were even serving tonight.

Severus was duty bound to stay at the teachers' table for the meal. He could not possibly avoid dancing with the headmistress, and so asked her as soon as she had put down her dessert spoon, in the middle of a set. He endured her left hand clamped around his upper arm in what was akin to a foxtrot and her heels on the backs of his feet during the waltz that followed. When the Weird Sisters struck up a wild beat, he silently accompanied her to her seat, bowed and hoped she had hated the experience as much as he did.

When turning, a tray of glasses and canapés floated into Severus' reach, distracting him long enough to pass by the seated female teachers as he scanned the room for troublemakers.

His wife and Draco were displaying a wild dancing style to the beat that would have raised Lucius' hackles. Abraxas Malfoy's derisive comments on *theorybantic, licentious Muggles* played in Severus' mind without asking for an invitation. Teenaged Lucius had absorbed the attitude like a sponge, and Severus, boot-licking idiot that he was, had been deeply ashamed of his heritage.

Draco shows more spine, Severus thought. He wanted to feel proud of the boy, but when he looked at the heated faces of the young dancers, jealousy built in his intestines and rose like bile, bitter and consuming. Never had he permitted himself such light frivolity, and now his own wife was enjoying herself with another rather than him. He swallowed down the bad feelings; he would not allow them to consume him!

He had already reached the end of the dais and now took the opportunity to break protocol and proceed to a table with two pupils of Slytherin house and their mothers. Neither family had a husband left to accompany them and stabilise their position among the Death Eaters, therefore they welcomed the little boost that his company could provide.

The first of Severus' new table mates easily matched his stride to a classic rhythm and left him to his thoughts. Lazily circling, Severus observed Draco nudging Theodore until the latter finally gathered his courage and asked Ginevra. The shy boy knew his steps well enough to challenge Ginevra, sway elegantly and steer clear of Severus all at the same time.

The second woman at Severus' table barely focused on the dance. She was more of the talking sort. "Beltane will be such a big event; our master is having us plan it already."

When the music faded out, she said, "Thank you, Professor Snape, for coming to sit and dance with us."

"My pleasure, entirely."

"However, now your beautiful wife is coming over, and you'll want to spend the rest of the night with her, I'm sure." Severus bowed gladly and led the woman back to their places where Draco was just pulling out the sixth chair for a fairly winded Ginevra. She eagerly took the beaker that swayed into her direction. The boy had the audacity to wink at Severus as he snatched the other one and left.

Refreshed from the large beaker of chilled pumpkin juice, Ginny nudged Severus' shins under the table.

Her expectant eyes warmed his core, and he rose. He led her to a free spot on the floor, held out his arms, and the most beautiful woman in the room eagerly stepped in. "At last," she sighed.

Severus' heart somersaulted as he paced the long strides of the foxtrot, her body in his right arm, her smile for no one other than him.

Their step-length aligned with the first few bars, and he guided her around the hall counter-clockwise, slow, slow, quick, quick.

"You can be very proud of yourself, Ginevra," he said. "I certainly am."

"Maybe tomorrow," she replied, misty-eyed. "Tonight I don't want to think about anything else other than staying right here with you."

Another round, and from under the dais, Severus' gaze wandered across the assembled out of habit. The dance floor was less populated than he would have liked, and too many eyes were directed at him.

At that moment, Ginevra tensed in his arms and her brows rose. "The hag! Why the bloody ..."

With three beats Severus had surreptitiously turned them and saw the headmistress leave the band. Their leader shrugged helplessly at the players. "What happened, dear?"

"Her gestures were clear," Ginevra said through gritted teeth. "They are to end the set and the evening after this piece. Ah, and now she sits on her throne, so very proud of herself. Huh, are you throwing hexes behind my back?"

"Just a minor confundment. If this is to be the last piece, then we'll have to start it all over," Severus explained. And so it happened: after what should have been the last refrain, the singer began with the first stanza. "Ollivander's short wand IS very convenient; remind me to thank him."

Ginevra relaxed again and giggled a bit, saying, "I will. We should invite him again."

She leaned her head at his shoulder, and he slowed his pace for a few bars, enjoying her so close. As the music got stronger though, Severus straightened again. The pair took wider strides, swaying with the rhythm, enjoying the few more minutes they had stolen.

"Thank you, Severus."

"My pleasure, I assure you."

"Can you do it again?"

"We don't want to reveal our tricks, Ginevra. The headmistress has been following our every move for these last minutes."

Not only the Snapes were utterly disappointed when the Weird Sisters thanked them for the evening and began gathering their paraphernalia. The applause quickly turned into rhythmic claps and shouts for an encore.

Their spokeswoman renewed her Sonorous charm to respond. "I'm sorry, guys, we cannot continue tonight."

Severus had never before heard catcalls and angry whistles in the wizarding world, but the young audience was obviously not beyond such means this night.

It was the fiddler who finally declared that a band has to maintain their reputation above the wishes of a headmistress. "One more dance for our fantastic audience tonight!"

She nodded to the trumpeter, and they intoned a wild sort of polka. The students shrieked in delight, and the dance floor around Severus and Ginny filled with pairs, whose eagerness often surpassed their skills.

Severus directed a protective spell towards their shins and Ginny's skirt.

"Well then, milady," he said and placed both hands on his girl's hips before she offered to sit down. Oh no, he would not give in, and if his back ached for days to come. He swayed her left and right on the spot, commanding, "Let's begin with left and right chassés, and we'll do just fine. Place both your hands on my shoulders so we don't lose each other."

The arousing spectacle was anything but the demure elegance their headmistress had wanted, and everyone seemed to agree that it served her right. Soon enough, Ginny and Severus romped about with everyone else, including many pairs of parents, who had unceremoniously Banished the tables to get more space.

A set of Durmstrang students from the continent gathered in triplets and surprised everyone else with what they called a heel-and-tip polka. Those not feeling spry enough to partake in the dance itself, formed a ring around them, clapping with the beat and protecting them against the rambunctious throng.

"Now that you're thoroughly exhausted, we can bid you good bye with a clear conscience," the spokeswoman from the band shouted over the roaring applause.

The pair hurried to their quarters, grabbed their satchels and arrived at Spinner's End in no time.

His mouth otherwise occupied, Severus had to erect their wards non-verbally and fend off eager hands from his garments at the same time.

"Patience is a virtue," he said while taking down her still immaculately arranged hair.

"I ditch all patience when you're so damnably sexy!"

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A/N :

The polka is very popular in Continental Europe, from where the Durmstrang students come. They're showing a rickety, magic version of this choreography,

http://www.myvideo.de/watch/2951029/Polka_zu_Dreien_Hacke_Spitze

It conveniently allows dance-hungry girls to share the few boys that are willing. However, these poor Muggle children seem to have been sedated, don't they? I assure you, Salazar's Academy saw a far more lively version!

Ginny meets a distressed Maud, Ron finds his confidence, and Lucius follows his own agenda at the school.
Finally, Severus needs persuasion.

Irritation

Having been thoroughly cherished, Ginny felt energetic enough to get up early and cook a full breakfast. Severus, though, appeared utterly reluctant to rise, which was Ginny's habit rather than his. He sniffed and nodded approvingly when he finally made it to the bathroom, but as he sat down at the table stiffly, the smoky scent of the fried bacon was overlaid with the scent of the muscle soother, arnica, wyvern bile and camphor.

Recognising how his aching back originated from all too much and rather wild activities during the evening and night, Ginny swallowed against the heat rising up to her cheeks and knew better than to remark on it.

"You prepared a wonderful breakfast; my turn to clean the kitchen. As you don't have any homework and the weather is agreeable, get some fresh air! Please also visit Maud Taylor. You are the only one who really knows what has happened to her."

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On their stroll through the park, Maud relished the idea that she would soon have Easter holidays. "Two more weeks and then I'll be my own boss for two whole weeks!"

"Lucky you," Ginny sighed. "My break from classes is to be longer, but we'll face a whole list of social obligations that we're definitely not going to enjoy. *And I haven't a clue what I'll face after Easter break*, she added to herself.

"You should still squeeze in some exercise on the bike," Maud declared and insisted that Ginny was to use her mother's helmet.

"I suppose," was all Ginny could answer. She still had to convince Severus of the plan and knew he would cotton her in all kinds of spells, but she had to keep up appearances for Maud's sake.

After Marcus Flint's assault, Maud had seen a gynaecologist and was to see her again just before Easter. "Just in case there *is something medical*," she explained, sounding utterly unconvinced.

She had further been talking to a psychiatrist about the incident, but after two times she had broken off. "That woman accused me of dramatising when I told her just how scary he was and how the two other blokes had not been able to move. Can you believe it, those idiots pretend they don't remember a bit! I am left for a fool."

Ginny felt helpless. Obliviation wasn't perfect, but what else could they have done to the bystanders?

"I have been there, Maud. I've seen it. It was... yes, we should say it clearly, it was disgusting. I feel so sorry for you, Maud. But I see how strong you are. If it helps you, you can talk to me."

"Ginny, I haven't seen you in two weeks."

"Yes, I know, and I'm really sorry. I've missed talking to you. Will it help if you write it down? You could use a diary and see how you develop?"

"My impressions are not changing. I could type Control-C Control-V every day..."

This time Ginny's blank face gave her away.

"Oh, I forgot, you can't have computers, can you? They need electricity."

Newly enthused, Maud told her about the fun she had with this thing, and how it saved her going to the library. "Let's get to my place and have a look. We can also pick a bike tour."

While their tea was brewing and the PC starting up, Maud fetched a folded map. Thanks to Professor Windeye's course in Geography, Ginny didn't make a complete fool of herself as they picked a route for maybe three hours. "It's a nice tour, partly in the sun, but sometimes on shady forest paths. We'll also pass by some local sights, like the latest blacksmith or the abandoned dye works, a subsidiary of the monstrosity here. You'll like it."

"That'll be great. I know so little of how Severus grew up, other than that it was miserable."

"Now let's take our tea upstairs and look at my PC!"

Maud's enthusiastic explanations of software and her favourite games left Ginny more confused than enlightened. Colin and Dean only laughed about this computer-thing, and Severus had never even mentioned it. Then again, Professor Barnes knew about computers; would she have to understand them?

When a wildly flashing square disturbed Maud's explanations, insisting she act immediately to not lose a fortune, she said smartly, "No, we won't 'click here'! See, this window looks suspicious. I'll not download anything dodgy to my PC. Close! Someone could trick me and look into what I'm doing."

Smiling in recognition, Ginny nodded. "Spy-ware."

Now Maud stared nonplussed into Ginny's smug face until she explained, "One of my teachers told me about this. He warned me of something similar. Hey, that reminds me, can I see the Orthography spell?"

"The *what?* A spell? You must be joking."

Damn, what had Barnes called it? Ginny wondered and quickly distracted her friend. "Oh, forget it. Show me what you can do with this thing."

They went through Maud's recent school work, things called programs, and a 'web' that sounded huge but didn't relate to any spiders. Most of Maud's explanations passed Ginny by, however when she explained talking to people via emails, Ginny's face lit up.

"Wait a moment, Maud! Is it normal that a family has a PC? What about professionals, people like Heal... err, doctors, accountants?"

"They all do. Let's see, GOOGLE. It's a search engine. You can find all kinds of data with it! You know, places, facts on history or science, people. We'll write 'Oculist Liverpool'. Here we are." Maud scrolled through and hit the next page. "See. Lots of them."

Now Ginny was all excited. "Dentist, Oxfordshire!" she ordered.

"Here, do it yourself!"

Ginny searched her way through the letters on the so oddly structured thing called a "keyboard" without accidentally charming the needed tiny button to flash up for her. It was no wonder Muggles needed a check on orthography...whatever they called it.

After the last letter, Maud commanded, "All right; now enter."

Confused, Ginny looked around for a lid or something.

"Huh, what're you doing? It's *this* key here. Ah, quite a lot of dentists. However, you should check our area if... Hey, what are you doing? Be careful with the equipment."

Ginny's heart was thrumming wildly now. Excitedly, she scrolled down until... **Here!** According to Hermione's description the highlighted entry should be her parents. "How did we never... I could... I will ask Severus... goodness!"

"I see," Maud said slowly as Ginny wiped sweaty finger on her jeans. In a hushed tone, she asked, "Are they friends of yours you thought you couldn't reach? Well, now you can! I'll bookmark their page. Oh, sorry, it means you'll be able to find it easier."

"*I do know* what a bookmark does!" Ginny replied indignantly.

"All right, all right, sorry!" Maud lifted her hands in surrender.

A window popped up, saying, **Volleyball!**

"Oh, my, time truly flies," Ginny said and pushed herself away from the desk to get up.

"It doesn't matter; just click it away," Maud said in an odd voice.

"No, I should go. We have been in here for hours. Severus deserves my help, and I certainly don't want you to miss your exercise."

"I'm not feeling..."

"Maud Taylor," a high-pitched voice from downstairs interrupted her. "You take your lazy backside to your practice today, or I will cancel that membership. I'm not pouring my money down the drain if you're just going to shut yourself away!"

"Mother is being her charming self again."

"Wait," Ginny said, "you didn't go last week, then?" The expression on Maud's face told her she was right. "You must go out again, Maud. Meet your friends! They're all girls, and you've known them for a long time."

After a minute of silence, Maud pleaded, "Will you come with me this time? Please!"

"You'll skive off again if I don't, won't you?" Ginny tilted her head to look at Maud. "Right, that's settled then."

When Maud still didn't move, Ginny stepped closer and engulfed her friend in a wide hug. Gradually, the tension of distress was loosening, and Ginny broke with the words, "Come now, pack your gear, we're going."

The ever-anxious Severus was persuaded with Draco's help, and Ginny found herself inside a Muggle school, equipped with her running shoes. Most of the girls greeted them happily enough, only a few grumbled a bit about Maud cutting it so fine before the start of a league match.

Practice began with warm ups where Ginny was allowed to partner Maud to even the numbers in relay races. She had never done any hurdle jumps before, and it must have shown as the Coach called her back to the bench lest she'd risk an injury.

The game itself was... a total bore, and Ginny had to suppress a few yawns for Maud's sake.

When they left, some younger boys stormed in, each equipped with a bouncy, red ball. They easily filled the hall with their happy shouts. Their enthusiasm reminded Ginny of the first-years in flying lessons. "These basket-ballers are pretty good," Maud told her.

"Sometimes our coach makes us watch them *to understand team spirit*, as he says," a nearby girl provided. "They are so cute, I could cuddle them."

"On Thursdays there is nothing fun to watch, though," another noted, receiving either groans or laughter.

"Pregnancy yoga and Antenatal classes", Maud explained to Ginny, grimacing. "It's a course run by the local midwife."

Reacting to Ginny's sharp look, she conceded. "Well, yes, they are lucky, because Ms Miller's program is said to be quite good. But all the blown up bellies, dreamy eyes, you know." Her grin was not reciprocated, and she shrugged, not noticing that Ginny's heart skipped a beat. She carefully filed the information away for later use.

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Severus waited for Ginny at the exit, wearing his tracksuit and carrying a very Muggle, cotton tote bag sporting a neon slogan which read 'Saving the world one bag at a time'. "I'm sorry, Miss Taylor, but we have to leave immediately," he said and took Ginny's shoulder before she burst out laughing at the sight of him.

They rushed away from the girls and Apparated to a forest where one of the two conspiring werewolves was waiting. They checked around thoroughly that they were alone and then went over to a thick clump of trees and shrubs. Inside, the werewolf-girl was sitting miserably on a few branches, clutching her knees in her arms, rocking her body back and forth. The man bent down and gently took her shoulder. "Clara, dear, they are here. Stop crying." She looked up.

Severus bent down to inspect her, but she crept away from him. With an impatient huff, he turned away from the distraught girl and beckoned Ginny over. "Speak to her. We can help her, but she must listen to me and do as I say, immediately."

Ginny knelt down. "You're Clara, aren't you? I'm Ginny. This is Severus; he's the one who's been brewing the Wolfsbane."

Clara looked up questioningly, eyes wide in fear. She was smaller than most year-zero students at the Academy, but even in the dim light, her eyes revealed experience far beyond her years.

It took some more encouragements until she was ready for Severus' instructions. He spoke slowly and in a very serious tone, falling into his teaching mode, which, unfortunately, never sounded reassuring. "We can take you away from Greyback, but it would be forever. If they ever see you again, they will kill you. It is a decision you must make now."

When nothing was forthcoming, he repeated, "Is this what you want: to leave the pack and live with people unbeknownst to you?"

"Severus, where do you want to send her? Is it to who I think?" He nodded, and Ginny continued. "We'll send you to a group of nice people. Some are my age. I don't think any are your age, but two are also werewolves."

The other werewolf looked up sharply. "To... Lupin? Clara, you know him from last year, the silent, friendly guy who took Fredrick along."

"Oh, but of course," Ginny remembered now. "You will probably meet Fredrick. He used to go with Remus for his transformation. He's a lively one, isn't he? Made me laugh, that one! Three werewolves then."

"You know him?" Clara asked in bewilderment, and her shoulders relaxed.

"A little. Now, listen to Severus and don't be afraid. He has the plan."

Severus shot a hard look at the werewolf and with a nod and a little pop the man was gone.

The plan was for Clara to drink Polyjuice and walk to the gates of Hogwarts castle. "We'll bring you as close as we can. Your name..."

"... is Fleur. Am I right, Severus? Yes, Fleur. That's French. She is my brother Bill's wife. She's got a strong accent, so don't talk too much."

For the next few minutes, Clara took in details. She was to address the headmistress, Remus Lupin, or any person with red hair. Or Harry Potter. Her eyes widened, and she began to tremble. "You know him? Will he be there? I cannot talk to him!"

"Oh, but you can. He's... he's... just a boy, really! I was his girlfriend. Severus," she called over her shoulder, "can't we deliver a message with her? Just greetings from me, and that I'm fine?"

"You've just done that, haven't you? Don't sneer; it doesn't become you! I agree that whatever your... last contact might have reported to them could use more fortification. Now, there are more important things to discuss."

He assumed his formal pose again and continued with his instructions. "You'll have very little time, maybe only thirty minutes. Then you'll re-Transform because Fleur Weasley, being part-Veela, cannot be replicated for longer," he explained to both of them. "We cannot deliver you to the gate, which means you have to make haste, but you can get used to the body of a grown woman before you meet anyone. Be a bit loud and don't appear as if something was wrong."

"Once you're inside and with one of those people I mentioned, quickly show them these pies." He opened the bag for her inspection, and her shoulders relaxed as she nodded. "The lycanthropes should be familiar with them, and I think everybody knows them from sight. These are four, and one is for you."

"You might meet Fleur's husband, Bill. He looks... yeah, terrifying. Greyback bit him in the face, and it looks just awful, even if he smiles. If you meet him, he'll expect you to be comfortable with him, like the real Fleur is. He adores her. So please be prepared. Be VERY gentle before you tell him who you are."

The elder werewolf noisily announced himself, and Ginny finished. "You can do that."

Clara swallowed. "Right," she said, although she looked like believing the opposite.

"Clara, are you going with them? Then I must say goodbye here. I must not know anything of tonight. Severus will Oblivate me. Be good, my girl." They hugged silently, and the men went away.

Clara pulled at Ginny's sleeve and whispered urgently, "He was such a great help. He protected me, but he's losing his position in the pack. I'm worried for him!"

"I'll tell Severus about that. Look, please Clara, tell Harry to keep going, will you? He needs to befriend a black Hippogriff. I've sent this message before through... someone, but please repeat it; it is utterly important. Here, give him a kiss from me."

"I couldn't..."

Suddenly, Severus was between them, gripped them around their waists and Apparated them away. "Close shave." He breathed deeply and Apparated them again. After some more relays, Ginny was able to stabilise herself enough to recognise the silhouette of the Shrieking Shack against the evening sky. She rapidly reassured herself of her wand and asked, "Have *you* still got your wand?"

But Clara had been bitten at the age of eight and didn't even have one. The werewolf pack provided no systematic, magical education. "We pick up a bit from the elders."

Ginny looked for a twig. "We'll make this glow for your walk down to the gates. They'll see you coming, and you won't trip over the roots *Incendocaldo!*"

Severus gave her the Polyjuice drink and a piece of bark to bite. He held her tight during the pain of transformation, but as a werewolf, she merely scoffed when it was over. Ginny had her stand upright, then embraced her fiercely and nudged her. "Go down before I lose my nerve and run myself."

The Snapes remained in the dark, listening.

"Who's there?..." - "Me, F... Fleur" - "Fleur? Why? Aren't you..." Recognising it as a Weasley voice, Severus took Ginny's trembling hand.

"Is McGonagall zere? Quick!"

"Come in now."

Ginny exhaled deeply and already felt the jerk of Apparition.

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As promised, Brenda and Theo Nott visited the Snapes the next day. While the women inspected the garden, an apprehensive Theodore made his way into the lab. "I truly hope it helps," Brenda murmured, brows furrowed. Ginny felt the same. Theo had become a friend, and she could not imagine him as wand fodder in a battle. He was Brenda's only son.

Outside, Ginny identified most of the Potions herbs, and they found a space to expand for basilica, thyme and rosemary. "Genevra, you need to make it crystal-clear to Severus that all the poisonous stuff has to go," Brenda insisted. "Truly all of it, and you must begin this spring! Weed several times before he regrets it."

Ginny swallowed. How many times did they have before their dark master demanded babies, and could she handle the responsibility?

"Now, tomatoes go in their special plot," Brenda continued in a lighter mode. "It is the same one every year, sunny and with a wall behind them. You can add a sunbeam reflector spell and have them ripen in no time. Muggles know early and late varieties, red and yellow ones. Then there are charmed variants that bear fruit for the whole season. I have one to bring you when it is time."

They found spots for onions, carrots and lettuce. "Not that you could cover your kitchen needs, but it is nice to see them grow."

They defined where a gooseberry bush would go and a few rows of strawberries. Brenda checked the apple tree. "Is it a Muggle tree?"

"Severus talked about climbing it in his childhood. His father would never have tolerated a magical one." After Brenda had trimmed it with a steady wand hand, its branches looked far less entangled. "Now most of its apples should get their light and their space. A main lopping is an autumn task though. I'd clear space under those two huge branches. They can carry a swing. Oh, don't look at me like that, the little ones tend to grow!"

While she carefully spelled branch-goo on major cuts, Brenda provided, "Find out what sort of apples these are. If they are a late variety, or even for storage, you should have something else for spring and summer, or the other way round."

When the sun stood deep, the women's backs were aching, their heads were heated from exhaustion and mud covered their hands. But they had made a difference. A pile of branches and excavated whole plants near the shed was the proof of their labour. They went inside, and after freshening up, they called Severus and Theo up for tea.

Bleary eyed and shaking, Theo gulped down a glass of water in one go before he sat down at the table. "Goodness, Severus! Theo looks like a Gryffindor after detention with you," Ginny scolded.

Her husband just shrugged. "Potions is an exact art, but I gave him gloves."

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A downpour of rain and household chores kept the Snapes cooped in all Friday.

To cheer his wife up, Severus told her, "Our dear headmistress had originally planned to group the fifth years according to their Hogwarts houses for the O.W.L.s ceremony. She wanted to publicly compare the achievements, demonstrating Slytherin's superiority. Guess which house thwarted her plan?"

Confused, Ginny looked up from the laundry, which immediately collapsed into a wet puddle.

"You easily exceeded the average of Slytherin and ranked second after Ravenclaw." He went over and kissed her lightly. "Have I told you how proud I am? How well you were doing? Considering that flying was not in the O.W.L.s, I can imagine how you'll score for term's end."

A warm rush went through her body, reddening her cheeks, and Severus once again swore to himself to make her smile more often.

When she lightly countered, "You sprinkle praise over a Gryffindor? Boy, you're slipping," he sneered as was expected. Her wide grin was all reward he needed.

The next moment he became serious again. "The O.W.L.s are stored in the Ministry, and I am positive they will be publicly accepted by whoever wins this war."

He took a deep breath. "And yet, it isn't but a small security." If only he saw a way to spare her from their master's plan!

"Aw," Ginny moaned and kissed away the melancholy before it got hold of her husband.

In contrast to the O.W.L.s, the end of year exams would be entirely under the control of Salazar's Academy and include practical tasks, both Flying Techniques and Combat Flights. This setup would allow those who had the predisposition needed in battle strategy to remain at the Academy to hone their skills even if their *academic* achievements left something to be desired.

"You will not have problems with these subjects per se, but you'll not like the tenor in these classes anymore. We will have to reconsider your education," Severus concluded.

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Although it was late when they turned in and Severus normally woke with the sun, he set an alarm. An odd anxiety gripped Ginny. Since around the graduation ceremony, she had had the impression something was amiss, but she could not put her finger on it.

When the melody chimed, Severus was awake immediately before he needed to be rocked and shaken. He reached over to the still form next to him. He stroked her cheek and tenderly ran his fingers into her hair until she opened one sleepy eye.

"I have dreamed of this morning for weeks on end, and I will not have it differently now," he declared.

"Severus, what is it?"

"Tonight was... don't you know?"

"Goodness, yes, the fourth new moon after our wedding!" With a flush she remembered. Until recently, the date had been incredibly important.

"Indeed. Take a last deep breath now. I will not stop kissing you until breakfast."

Had she only imagined things after all?

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Lucius showed up for what he called a Duelling demonstration. First he and Slash gave a demonstration in the Great Hall. Both jumped back and forth, dodged, cursed, blocked and hexed.

Time passed, but Lucius was pressing on and on. The air had a smell of sulphur, two windows were broken, and a bench had caught fire. The pupils *Aguamenti!* had prevented further damage but left the furniture and several bystanders drenched. The heroes in the paintings on the walls fled the site, and the trainees growled that they wanted to prepare themselves rather than watch.

Suddenly the door boomed open, and Severus shouted, "*Finite Incantatem!* **What** is going on here?!" He had the third-years in his wake so that they would not explode a cauldron in the meantime. Slash cringed under his elder colleague's dangerous glare.

Malfoy played the innocent. "Ah, Severus, join the show? Send the little ones to the back and let's see what you've got, will you?"

"This is a school, Malfoy."

At that moment the headmistress arrived. "Lucius, I'm surprised. You wanted to see the students' performance you said. I was under the impression you wanted to *watch*." She took his cheek as a personal insult, even though she added, glaring at Severus, "And our oh-so-experienced colleague could not reinstate order by himself, I see."

Severus rolled his eyes ever so slightly, but Ginny saw, or felt, it anyhow.

With a huff Severus ordered his own class back. The poor things would have to endure his foul mood now. None of the just-graduated students envied them.

They were now arranged in pairs. Four pairs would fight, Slash and Malfoy pacing and giving advice, the other eight observing and learning. Ginny was in the first group and fought with all she had. Slash was delighted, but of course it wasn't good enough for Malfoy. He would not correct her either, but carped on about insignificant details and laughed at any mishap.

She knew very well it was the Vow that angered him whenever he saw her. Likewise, it was the thought of the diary ruining her first Hogwarts year, of Dobby and of Draco that angered her whenever she saw Lucius. She had a plan for him already, and today was the day! Draco had confirmed to her she had escaped unnoticed, and Draco himself seemed unaware of the booklet she had found in the summer house.

Her occasion for revenge came when the second pairing was fighting. There were three among them with abysmal aim. Ginny positioned herself behind one of them, and when Malfoy was behind his opponent, he was hit with one of the three hexes she had memorised.

Lucius turned around when the curse hit him, but it was as clever and mean as its inventor: it would show its actual power over the victim only an hour later, and then repetitively every two hours.

Her mother would be disgusted that Ginny made a man rub himself, but she calculated he would not have much energy left to harass his family or any Muggles if he was cursed to lay hands on himself so regularly. Depending on the caster's determination, the spell would hold approximately a fortnight, the booklet had told her.

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Ron was participating in normal life, but he had what he called his odd moments.

Fred summarized, "The Department of Magical Transportation has informed our Aurors at Hogwarts about the place they found your leg and other parts. Charlie retrieved our old Cleansweep Four from that place. We still cannot explain how you have ended up with it."

Ron took this in with a frown. Had he been at The Burrow to get their broom? Why? *A broom is for flying. Yes!* His face brightened up. "I *had* been flying, and really long, too. It might have been for hours." He shuddered as the memory resurfaced.

Sadly, Fred reminded him, "Ron, there are Ministry squads patrolling. You would have been caught."

"I know that we dodged one. Later Ginny said there had been five. We flew in erratic ways, more erratic than I've ever flown."

At the mention of Ginny's name Harry left the room with a huff.

Fred let the disputable topic be and countered, "Ron, your arm was injured."

"I wasn't really doing anything myself, you know. Ginny led me. She scolded me for nearly dropping my wand."

His brother smiled at him, hiding his deep concern. Whenever entrapped in inconsistencies, Ron concocted a new yarn, and the solution always circled about Ginny.

The next day Arthur Weasley checked the reports of the patrols. There had been a few unexplained cases in the hours in question. They were spread all over the country, though. It was nothing to hold onto, as long as they didn't know where or when exactly all this had taken place.

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In the common room Neville told his mates, "You know, it's weird. Ron talks about Ginny all the time, and I truly think someone has patched me up on this island. Someone looking like Ginny."

Hearing this, Harry finally lost it. Colour rose in his face, he stomped his foot, and his fists clenched until his knuckles showed white. The mirror and two glasses on bedside tables shattered. "Will you all stop it!"

And so they did not mention Ginny anymore, because Harry's mood was the worst to bear.

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"I'm leaving, I'm sorry," Ron's head bent in despair as he went towards the door. Hermione's eyes followed him sadly. Alastor's training in duelling should last for two hours, but Ron was passive as a punching ball after thirty minutes already.

Harry didn't take this well at all. His bad mood returned. "Why are we doing this?"

Ron turned and replied urgently, "Harry, you must go on, especially now that I'm useless." He opened the door. The golden evening sun shone in through the corridor windows. He left without another word, his hair catching the light and forming a strangely radiant halo. Remus went over to take Ron's place and duel Harry.

"Ginny! Wait, Ginny, I need to talk to you." It was Ron shouting along the corridor. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Hermione wrenched open the door. Joyce, a young Auror with auburn hair, stood a few yards down the corridor, staring at Ron.

"You thought she was Ginny?" Hermione asked. Ron nodded, his face torn in pain.

"Could you please come back and walk down the corridor again?" Hermione asked the Auror. "Remus, Harry and Alastor, stay here with me and look at the woman." focussing on Harry she added exasperatedly, "with an open mind if you can at all manage."

The Auror did as she was told. Her hair caught in the ray of sunlight that turned it sparkingly red. "She could resemble Ginny," Remus admitted. "For a moment at least."

"You're all mental!" Harry ranted. "Ginny is smaller and walks differently and..."

"Stop it, Harry!" Remus almost shouted. "We are here to understand Ron, to help him. And I think we need Nymphadora now."

Hermione smiled. *Yes, this is it.* She took Ron into an embrace. "You will be fine, I'm sure. Come, let's find Tonks."

"Stop it, Hermione. I'm a mess. I'm hopeless and useless."

"Don't despair, Ron! You need help, yes, and we don't know yet how we can help you. But you're not useless. And I love you, you know that?"

"Hermione, it's been a week!"

Harry snorted. Hermione preferred not to answer. The truth was it had been eleven days. Ron had not been told about the four days in the hospital wing, and he had not bothered to check a calendar either.

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Ron stood in the slightly darkened room. The person next to him was... Tonks. He knew that. Yet, she looked like Ginny now, and he wanted to pretend it was her. He also knew that his parents, Hermione and Remus were listening and watching, but he could not see them. He didn't want to, either. This was between him and Ginny.

Hermione had thought up this arrangement. She just did not give up on him, and he owed her his cooperation. It was something Muggle, half-transparent mirrors and such, and she said it would help him.

Tonks began talking, sounding like Ginny. "We're on the tiny rocky island at Land's End. You're fighting together with Charlie. Who are your opponents?"

Ron leaned back and closed his eyes. "A younger Death Eater. Flint, I think. He hurls a slicing hex..."

It felt like ages to go over the beginning that they already knew.

"We're now on the shore, and we need to leave. Why?" Tonks prompted, finally reaching the unknown parts.

"The others could come, and no matter which party, they must not see you helping me. St. Mungo's is not an option, and Hogwarts is too far. We need to get to..." Ron halted, and then said firmly, "your home."

"My home? Oh, but of course! How can we get there?" Tonks recalled just in time that Ron considered Snape's place Ginny's home at times.

"We'll Apparate and... fly," Ron explained. "I must take you side-along and you warn me not to hurt you or Snape would have my head. Then you command me to Apparate to The Burrow."

"... Where we take a broom ..."

"Wait! First I'm having a rest, as I'm exhausted. You go over to the house alone and tear down the wards. You pack lots of things into a satchel and take two brooms. You hand me chocolate and water. That is good! We talk a lot. You assure me you are doing fine. Snape is good to you."

"He is. Remember that!" Ginny-Tonks said firmly, as she assumed she should.

"No, no, you are supposed to scold me: I should say Severus."

"Right, it is Severus. He is my husband, your brother-in-law. And he treats me well." Tonks cast a helpless look at the semi-transparent mirror. "Do we go on? Are you stronger now?"

"Much stronger! I can Apparate us further. First I take you and one broom, and then I'll return to fetch the rest."

"All right, then. Where exactly are we going?"

"To... to the huge rock, where Bill took us as kids. Don't you remember?"

"Of course, I do, Ron. What was it with this rock again?"

"It should have done something magical. Can't remember." Ron shrugged dismissively. "It doesn't work, though."

"Oh, that place." She felt like rolling her eyes at the boy's ignorance, but her job was to coerce him, not to scold him. "Now we are there. What does it look like, and what do we do?"

"NO, I'm NOT there. I cannot see it. I... don't remember." Ron leaned forward and held his head with his hands, elbows on his knees. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't bad, Ron. We'll have to find that rock!"

Her face looked something like Tonks' again when she explained, "When you Splinch yourself in Apparition, your lost memories often return to the places they were created." By now Tonks' skin had lost her freckles. "We cannot safely visit The Burrow or Land's End yet, but we might visit this rock if it is a neutral place. Have a rest, Ron. You did well." She punched his upper arm encouragingly.

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Bill agreed on coaching Ron a bit more since he was the one who supposedly had taken Ron and Ginny to wherever it was. It took them three days to figure out it had been the Draag Stone. He couldn't help muttering, "Britain holds a few more stones which *don't* have magic properties."

Ron felt chastised, but Hermione took him by his shoulders. "You've done it. Oh, Ron, I'm so happy for you. What did you say, 'Draag Stone'? I'll be right back..."

Bill nudged his little brother towards Hermione and thus the library. "Go after her!" To his surprise Ron did as suggested.

The pair returned late for dinner, sharing quite a bit of information about the famous landmark. Even Harry was appeased.

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Shacklebolt, Fred and Bill accompanied Ron and Tonks to the Draag Stone. Tonks once again looked like Ginny, which made the whole trip very dangerous. Ron identified the place and fell into his memories. "I'm exhausted. I'm having water from the little creek. We lie down."

Within minutes, Ron's mood lightened as he remembered a lot of details about Ginny's daily life. Fred and Bill shared watch with Shacklebolt and listened in turns, not quite believing what they heard.

Tonks stretched her back as she had seen Ginny do, then proffered her arm. "This was a nice chat. You've regained your strength, and it is dusk; do we travel on?"

"No, we must sit and talk until it's darker. Then we'll be flying. You glue my right, injured hand to the broom and link my broom to yours."

As Tonks performed the spell, Fred asked in fascination, "Where has Ginny learned such things?"

Confused, Ron looked up. "Fred? Oh, yeah, she's only Tonks, pretending. Never mind. I'm all right," he added when he saw their stunned expressions. "I remember until here. We need to fly now, I guess."

They played the flying part of the reenactment for a short while to no avail, then returned to Hogwarts.

The next day, Arthur confirmed that a Ministry patrol was dodged about ten miles from the Draag Stone at the time in question, and several others had been within a radius of thirty miles.

Hermione was beaming, for Ron's confidence was back. "I'm not completely well yet, but I'm getting somewhere," he would tell her, and he also improved on how to behave towards his girlfriend.

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The week at the Academy rolled on uneventfully for Ginny. Severus was absent most nights, though, and returned in a graver mood every time. Gone was the playful banter, and he seemed miles away even when they had a few moments alone.

Between lunch and the first afternoon lecture of the last day, Ginny went over to their rooms. She had just enough time to get through with the contraceptive potion she received every month.

Surprisingly, the beakers were not on their bedside table, although Severus knew she preferred to lie down. He entered seconds after her, hands empty. For the average observer, his face showed no emotion. For Ginny there was pain/sorrow and hopelessness in his eyes and in the twitch in his fingers. His whole posture spoke of doubt and desperation.

He didn't talk. This wasn't anything new, certainly not at the Academy. But never before had he spelled all doors closed, reinforced the blurring spell to keep the headmistress from spying and mutely started to... Merlin, he was seducing her in the middle of the day!

He disrobed her gently, however all his efforts could not cover his uneasiness. He was tense and stiff himself and felt pain rather than joy so that Ginny could not relax either. His teasing felt painful instead of enjoyable, and she herself couldn't find a single one of the spots that usually made him groan. Severus averted his eyes whenever she tried to read them.

This must have been what he had been rolling over in his mind for two weeks already. If she refused him today, he would accept this...she felt it. But he would try again, and it would be with the same nervous uneasiness.

Why could he want her with child so soon? Ginny had believed they would have time until midsummer or maybe even until her birthday. She lived too isolated from the war to know in detail what made him change his schedule. She trusted him implicitly to have his reasons. How could she possibly help him get over his anxiety?

With a swift move, Ginny rolled him over and straddled him. Administering kisses and tender suckling to his neck and collar line, she diverted him enough to Summon her wand into her left hand, where he would not expect it. She proceeded up his chin, drawing circles with her tongue and reached his cheekbone. Suddenly gripping his chin with her right hand, she forced him to face her. "*Legilimens!*"

A poorly clad, young woman, unkempt and with an indifferent look, held a likewise apathetic, unwashed, snotty little child at her hand. They shuffled along a dingy road that looked as hopeless as their lives.

NO!

Decisively, Ginny cleaned up the toddler and gave him sparkling black eyes and dark, wavy hair that bounced with his every step. She lifted the woman to walk straight and smile happily, her clean, red hair shining in the afternoon sun. The road smartened up together with their clothes. Now the child pointed ahead and tore loose from Ginny's hand to run with that dangerous looking toddlers' style into outstretched arms. Strong male hands lifted the child up high. It shrieked in joy, deftly gripping a nose that Ginny wanted to protrude prominently, but it threatened to shrink against her efforts.

Finally, she secured Severus' conk into the picture and surrounded it with his dark, bottomless eyes to remove all doubt that it might not be Severus himself.

The toddler safe on his hip, Severus should stretch his free arm to embrace Ginny and peck her on the cheek, but she lost control over the scene again. Helplessly, she watched as Severus' hair greyed and her own image grew podgy, resembling her own mother more than herself.

NO!

With iron will, Ginny trimmed her image's waistline and straightened her face. The couple turned and...now Ginny decided she could just have a bit more...faced the corner of a nice house. An elder child with reddish pigtailed seared along on a toy-broom, hovering a foot off the ground. In the curve, the girl's brows were furrowed in concentration, but seeing her family, she careened right into them with a smirk on her face.

Without Ginny's doing, the imaginative Severus-father deftly caught the girl and her little broom before it hit the imaginative mother. All that was left for Ginny was to make her own image smile widely and enjoy receiving a small smile in return.

Satisfied, Ginny released the eye contact and kissed Severus fervently, desperately. "It's what I want, love! It's what we deserve! Let's fight for it together."

With the prospect of so much happiness, Severus relaxed.

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A/N:

Warmest thanks are due to my beta and Britpicker team, Soprano-in-Shadow and MagicAlley. They not only shield you against misplaced prepositions and my absurd word creations, but Soprano-in-Shadow owns Ginny's wonder about a spiderless web while MagicAlly has a copyright on the slogan on the tote bag.

End Of Year Exams

Chapter 34 of 35

Ginny finishes Year 5 in the gruesome Salazar's Academy.

End Of Year Exams

In this last period before the Easter break, Salazar's Academy held end of year exams...as if their O.W.L.s hadn't been enough! For Ginny's and Draco's years, they were clearly designed to put an end to the school career for more than half of the pupils.

In addition to the anti-cheating measures they all knew from Hogwarts, their master ordered a set of his followers to patrol in the classrooms, rising the tension from unbearable to sheer cruelty.

The door to Transfiguration opened, spilling out the sixth form, Draco and Theo as distraught as everyone else.

"Yeuch," Ginny exclaimed, fanning the air. "Never heard of an air freshener charm, have you?" With a little drama, she pressed against the opposite wall, anxious to avoid body contact with any of them.

"Oh, shut it, Ms Snape," growled Draco, clearly not in the mood for the banter. He stepped in front of her in a weak attempt to block her way. "We're sitting more exams than you lot who get the O.W.L.s results worked in."

Ginny didn't reply. Next to her, Heather sighed, albeit inaudible to Draco with whom she still didn't feel very comfortable. Ginny doubted her friend would have done better this time round, but she didn't need the reminder of her mucked-up O.W.L.s practicals.

"Is that so?" someone else asked.

"We write as many theory exams as everybody else," Ginny countered. "In the set of subjects that the Ministry doesn't approve of, that's Duelling, Dark Arts, Combat Flying and Flying Techniques, we have practicals, too. Oh, and our paper in Charms and Hexes called for a mere fraction of the year's material...the pieces the Ministry so shamefully ignored. Several feet of parchment on the effects of shrinking body vessels, linking the urinary passages with the wind-pipe, comparing interior and exterior

putrefactive hexes and what secretion to force out of an opponent without him passing out."

The sixth form students shuddered, but Ginny went on, "I wonder why no one wanted a practical from us."

"You make me look forward to tomorrow," Draco replied. "Right now, I'm starving, though, and I understand I have to make the detour via our dorm to powder my nose. Come along Theo, before she decides to bore us with more details."

After lunch, Ginny and her mates were in assorted groups of four for the practical exam in Flying Techniques, the cargo being a very shallow basin full of water.

"At least it's truly *dead* matter for a change," Ginny growled. Her memory of being abused as cargo was still raw.

They had to change roles for each lap and got credits for giving their commands clearly, supervising the other three and the cargo.

"They didn't say, but they will also evaluate how well we follow the other commanders," one of Ginny's team members added, muttering under his breath.

With a threatening frown directed at Ginny, another one confirmed. "Indeed."

Ginny rolled her eyes at the insinuation. She decided to play it open, as this wasn't what the Slytherins would expect. "I am compelled to hang around in this school after Easter, no matter what; however, I do prefer to not double as wall decoration. To continue schooling, I need these marks as much as you do."

"Leave it," their last team member, Bernhard Hunt, growled. "Did you even listen? Our last task will be to define our roles and positions ourselves and do another lap with unknown traps. We can't do that mistrusting each other. In for a Knut..."

For their second lap, Ginny was nominated as commander. Her memory from being the cargo made her check it regularly. They made good speed; however, as they passed through a barely enlarged Quidditch goalpost hoop, Bernhard's broom touched the obstacle. It twitched and zipped rhythmically, and water sloshed over the nastily shallow rim of the tub. With great presence of mind, the boy transfigured a measure of his holding string into elastic, breaking the correlation. Seeing most of their cargo had been saved, right after landing, the whole team high-fived him and each other enthusiastically, breaking some of the mistrust between them.

Bernhard was still in a dither from whatever curse the hoop held, so they agreed to make him the last commander.

For their extra lap, Ginny suggested the second best leader should take a rear position and concentrate on the group itself, while the commander, in the front, was to concentrate on the course and cargo. "And that will be you," Bernhard declared. The two others busied themselves with their robes, to avoid eye contact, but murmured their consent. Bernhard was second-in-command.

In these roles, they easily dodged two "Ministry squads" and passed over the "mountains". Arriving with more water than others and in the second-best time, too, Bernhard and Ginny were more than content with themselves.

In Combat Flying, always two airborne pairs were to force each other down while an examiner shot additional hexes at them from the ground.

"Oh, Ginny, I'm sorry," Heather said when they were partnered together. "You could have been among the very best, but now I'll totally ruin your scores. I'm pants at shields, and everyone knows it."

Ginny was dead sure the arrangement wasn't accidental, but meant to drag her marks down, and using a friend of hers was just the cherry on top. Severus' earlier exercises in temper control helped her to not show it, lest Heather would lose the bit of confidence she still possessed.

"You've got a great aim, Heather, when you are calm, and you know hexes like nerve ticklers or eye irritants that they will not expect. Low key maybe, but very long lasting. I'm confident I can handle the cover for the two of us, long enough, to have you land those. Trust me to observe and block both parties, our two adversaries in the air and the examiner from below. Keep close and concentrate on the stronger flyer. Hit them fair and square, and then let's see how they deal with that."

Before take-off, Ginny tied a strong, all-purpose curse deflector to the bristles of both brooms with her wand up her sleeve. "An old charm that I found in Severus' material. It isn't well known," she whispered. "We might surprise someone."

Barely in the air, she erected a strong shield around them both, and Heather was free to fire through it. Their opponents each fought on their own, alternating between protection and attack. Ginny's shield repelled the attacks well, and the rebound went to her wand alone so that Heather flew steadily. She was free to choose her targets and hexes. And yet.

With each attack, the shield twanged tinnily all around them. Ginny's ears rang.

The boy in front of them, a Durmstrang-transfer, easily shook off one of Heather's reliably loaded spells. She groaned in frustration. "I cannot get enough power through," she shouted against the high-pitched, metallic noise. "And I barely hear what I'm saying."

It was true. *Heather will be exhausted, and they'll know all her favourite spells without having endured from any of the effects*, Ginny realised. This was no good. They had to do something drastic, but Ginny wasn't willing to give her friend up. Heather, with her poor defence skills, would be down in no time without even tiring their opponents, and with her gone, Ginny would give up her own chances as well.

Her maltreated ears brought Mad Eye's favourite shields, *Hector's Husk*, back to Ginny's mind. He had had them learn it for this very purpose of firing from inside out. Ginny flicked her wand sharply to disconnect her old shield, letting it widen and weaken on its own. Its pitch fell immediately, and Ginny felt herself inhale deeply in relief. Conjuring *Hector's Husk* within the fading shield, Ginny had some time to get tuned to its particular oddities before it was being tested in earnest.

Her new, invisible choice, dampened the attacks gradually in an active zone a few inches thick. It wasn't in the syllabi of either Hogwarts or Salazar's Academy, adding the element of surprise they so badly needed.

With a wide grin, the boy right in front of them cast a focussed cutting hex. *Hector's Husk* made no sound at all as it invisibly absorbed and dispersed its power. A mere fraction passed the shield and knocked bluntly against Ginny's broomstick, sending them a little off course. Reflexively she strained to pump more power through her wand hand. It was so much easier to think in the cottony quiet that surrounded them now!

Their second opponent was nowhere to be seen, when suddenly something sizzled sharply in from far to their right. The attack faded out with no effect, and murmur arose from bystanders on the ground. The very same hex came their way again, stronger even, as if not quite believing what had happened, but then the girl shrieked as Heather's well-placed stinging hex hit her wand-hand and it glowed bluish. Her fingers opened, but her wand remained tethered to her rapidly retreating wrist. Too bad Heather missed it in her afterthrust.

More hexes flew hither and thither with no effect until the girl yelped yet again as her ear and half her torso grew an icy crust. The *wea* *Agua menti!* Heather was capable of adding enlarged the lop-sided ice crust and had her spiralling helplessly to the ground.

An encouraging, "all right," was all Ginny had time for before she stared at an opaque, green cloud that now concealed the Durmstrang boy. "Don't waste your energy on him now," she suggested. Heather nodded, thankful for a respite.

Soon after, Ginny's shield flickered pinkish into sight, revealing its extraordinary thickness but not reaching its edges.

"What the blazes..."

Ginny pumped more force into her protection, worried at how much toll it took. She could barely hold her wand hand straight! They'd have to end this fight quickly! One of the examiners pointed at them, interfering for the first time. His curse thrummed against the already fading pink at least a dozen times, shaking Ginny's wand, but it abated without damage.

In retaliation, Heather shouted, "*Aguamenti!*", which, albeit simple, distracted the examiner.

She continued throwing her hexes as Ginny blocked, but eventually Heather's broomstick received a major push, and she shrieked in distress. They had moved too far apart!

Swearing, Ginny dove down, caught her fall and deftly tethered her friend to herself in child-flight mode. "Heather, trust me on this," she hissed. "Just stay airborne and fire off all you have!"

Her experience with Ron paid off as she manoeuvred both of them around. The opponent permanently probed Ginny's shield, but tightly coupled as they were, their combined mass withstood incoming attacks easier than Ginny alone. *Inertia*, her brain provided in Professor Barnes' voice.

Ginny alternately rested her wand hand on the broomstick and the crook of her elbow. Strands of hair clung to her temples and cheeks, wet from rivulets of sweat. She could not risk any curses of her own in between pumping power into her shield and steering them.

Released from flying, Heather breathed deeply. Her posture straightened, and she fired hell for leather.

For a while, they found themselves in a stalemate. Their opponent agilely dodged or blocked whatever Heather threw at him. He didn't give Ginny any break either, constantly firing and probing, hoping to tire her.

Eventually Ginny had to re-group, and he promptly landed a lateral blow. The coupled witches reeled in mid-fire. Heather's sharp slicing hex made the examiner jump to the right...directly into Ginny's swarm of Bat-Bogeys that wasn't meant for him either. Ginny turned them level hastily, erecting just a simple deflector shield.

Expecting her old, thick absorber, their schoolmate sent a blinding flashlight hex to stall a new attack. Ginny's simple shield had it ricochet down on the already troubled examiner as well. The man must have inhaled in surprise, since he spluttered and ran to the nurse, howling.

The boy froze in shock at what he'd caused. It was enough for Heather to knock his broomstick skywards and shout, "Fire!" Ginny didn't hesitate to oblige and set the bristles and frock tails aflame. He gesticulated wildly for conjuring water and re-leveling his broom, and Ginny pressed the last bit of her magic energy into "*Incarcerous!*", imagining a thick, metal chain. It wound itself only poorly around the boy's broom hand and the front end of the broomstick, ends dangling two feet, but it was quite enough: the boy couldn't counteract the sudden additional weight and was pulled head first towards the ground.

Reaching the ground, Heather and Ginny toppled over their brooms and limbs and wished for nothing more than staying put for a week.

"Get up! Quick!" someone hissed.

Not up to that task, Ginny remained on her knees, and Heather sat on the ground, but they both lifted their wand arm as if ready to continue.

Shaking his head, their second examiner blew the whistle to call an end, and Ginny fell nose-first to the ground. She couldn't care less whether the crowd of spectators was sympathetic or not.

Urquhart's pointed Dragonhide boot was the first thing she saw when her eyes opened.

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Their classmate Lisa Madley broke down over a barely touched breakfast. With little ado, patrolling staff sent her to the hospital room. When the girl not only missed the exam but didn't return even at lunch time, Millicent cut her meal short to visit her. She didn't mind Ginny joining.

The nurse, this time a chubby blonde, pointed to a bed with a heap of shaking sheets and shrugged. Lisa's sobs could be heard, but only wild strands of her hair were visible.

"Our pep ups for exam exhaustion require a certain level of co-operation from the patient, which she is clearly missing," the witch from St Mungo's stated.

Between her sobs, Lisa moaned over *Linda*, her sister, who had been married together with the Snapes. Weeks back, Ginny had heard the woman and her husband had arranged themselves fairly well, considering.

Millicent blanched. "Oh, Merlin. Did she get an owl this morning?"

"They did come early today," Ginny recalled. "So it's possible."

Before Ginny could ask for a connection, Millie stood and resolutely drew the nurse into her little office, where she gesticulated wildly, stomping her foot, too.

Ginny drew the distraught girl's attention to herself and got her into a half sitting position. "Here, take a little tea."

Returning, the nurse had lost the colour in her face and her self-satisfied attitude. She made no further attempts to push Lisa into returning to her exams. "You stay here, girl. Don't worry, you're excused from all exams this term."

"I'll come back later, Lisa. Maybe sleep a bit?" Millie suggested kindly and patted her shoulder more gently than Ginny would have imagined.

As the door closed, Ginny turned to Millie, holding her elbow. "What's going on? Knowing the nurses as I do, your story must have been very convincing."

However, Millie shook her head and didn't elaborate to Ginny. She stalked off with purpose.

"I hate how I'm kept in the dark!" Ginny huffed.

She bumped into Millicent, who had stopped short. "You?" the elder girl rebuked her. "You're married to the prime source of information."

"It might come as a surprise to you, but Severus does shield me from whatever he deems to be *unsavoury*," Ginny continued to defend herself. "And Merlin knows he has a lot on his shoulders."

Millie stared into space, not revealing her thoughts.

"Don't you believe me?" Ginny probed. "It's true, although he hinted that I'll join his social events over Easter break. Banquettes and receptions where my marital status and blood status will outweigh my age. I'm all delighted"

Before they joined the throng leaving the hall, Ginny added, "You lot barely talk to me, even when I sleep in your dorm."

"Point taken."

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It was Transfiguration theory this afternoon. With delight, Ginny noticed how Lucius Malfoy hurried in still arranging his clothes when it was already time for them to turn over the papers. *Like my little hex, you snob?* she thought grimly. *Now, what's the betting you'll pick on me?*

However, he pranced up and down the other aisle, and Ginny quickly tuned out the sound of his harrumphing. She quickly jotted down replies to the few questions on the basics to get them out of the way.

Far too soon, she faced the eclectic and tricky questions that required thorough deliberation but would score highly.

7. Which class of Transfigurations would you apply on the depicted set of necklaces to get them through a raid? Elaborate also on two discarded options.

Why necklaces of all things? Ginny wondered. Model A sported a preposterously valuable, heavy...and ugly...stone-loaded pendant on a gossamer chain that needed a spell to not break under the load. One would instinctively think of shrinking the monstrosity, but wouldn't anyone truly searching immediately cast detectors on shrinking spells, or just cast a restoration spell? Ginny noted this down as discarded. Instead, she opted for skewing and flattening and moulding it to a lamp shade, hanging the chain playfully along the edges. Model B consisted entirely of identical pearls, thus clearly counting as a bulk good. A great set of charms formed in her mind, but, sadly, it didn't belong to Professor Flank's realm. She needed to find something unassuming that would often be found in a magical lab. Something that was lining up numerous identical components...elements...segments...a caterpillar or, even better, a centipede! She carefully elaborated how she'd concentrate on the clasp to become a head with believable forcipules. Florence's words rang in her mind how she'd have to make the thing alive.

The delicately meshed collar-wide model C became a perfect little cage for the centipede. Ginny almost regretted that this was merely a theoretical test.

8. How are proclastic and anticyclic Transfigurations related? Point out commonalities and differences. Illustrate with two exemplary spells. Discuss three Transfigurations that resemble one class but in fact belong to the other.

With a sigh, Ginny decided to skip this question, although it was clearly going to give high scores.

Passing by her for the first time, her old nemesis bestowed a cold smile upon her that was as unusual as it was false.

The man had now picked out a couple of pupils, one of which was Ginny. *How typical*, she thought. He breathed down her neck and shook his head minutely when reading, but she would not let it get to her. Her exam provided enough trouble!

"Mr Malfoy, if you'd please stay in the centre of the aisle," Professor Flank asked with no particular emphasis, and the man ignored her.

Ginny cast a cooling charm on herself and bent over her parchment again. Question by question she worked herself through.

"Half an hour to go," Professor Flank announced, and Ginny still had very little on the important question eight *Damned proclastic and bloody-anticyclic Transfigurations!* She sat back to sip at her water, wondering why she was feeling less under pressure than just minutes before... well yes, Lucius Malfoy had stopped prowling the aisles!

He was hovering near the exit, self-occupied, twitching and turning surreptitiously and **very** eager to leave. What a sight it was to have the arrogant bastard squirm under the curse she'd cast!

"Fifteen minutes!"

Merlin, she could not afford observing Malfoy, no matter how delightful it was!

Slowly turning back to her task, Ginny noticed Larry Thompson wriggle his pinky awkwardly. Oh, yes, that was the characteristic that gave anticyclic Transfigurations their name, and it manifested in... right, the homogeneous inner structure of the marble or china they produced. It was also reflected in the horrid décor Professor Flank tended to favour.

With relief, Ginny bent over her parchment yet again.

... whereas proclastic Transfigurations, especially those of second grade, result in elongated fibres. When the dish is sliced or breaks, the shards will reveal the class of spells used unambiguously. This is, however, not a suitable test as only anticyclically Transfigured objects respond well enough to mending spells...

The moment Professor Flank asked them to finish their sentence, Malfoy stormed out and wasn't seen anymore that day. What kind of revenge could be sweeter?

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The somewhat odd subject of Geography and Beasts of Britain came next. The test was held in the Great Hall, the questions being near-identical for the upper forms four to six, since the subject had been neglected in their previous schools.

After their general knowledge of the British Isles, one block of questions was about potential places for a makeshift stay. Well, even Muggles knew of lots of caves, although the wizarding community had concealed the major ones in southern Scotland for their own use.

Further down in her parchment, Ginny described how the air circulation over land was different from over water, and how even forest and towns had their own air conditions, the thermic. As consequences, she was to describe where she would find Thestrals, Hippogriffs, birds of prey or Dragons, and what spells would a broom rider need to compensate for the thermic.

Ginny happily put quill to parchment.

"Will you IMMEDIATELY stop casting spells on the photos!" Professor Windeye's scream interrupted her. Smoke wafted around the room, and two of the parchments in Ginny's view ignited.

Confused, Ginny scrolled down to find a set of still, black-and-white photos, supposedly depicting geographical landmarks and famous locations of the British wizarding culture. *Oh my, how can Muggles see anything in them?*

Lastly she had to describe how she would go from the Isle of Man to Diagon Alley with not more than 50 miles in one means of travelling to shake off followers. A Portkey was first, since one doesn't Apparate over water. Should she go to Scafell pike? Or Anglesey, which, she recalled with amusement, was an island on Muggles maps. If she did, she had to consider bypassing the reserve for the Welsh Green that lay under the Muggle waterways. No way flying over it: a Dragon could easily set her broom on fire.

Ginny went through her material and ended up with a course alternating the transportation between Muggle and magical. She used the Knight bus for an odd passage in between and ended in Oxford from where she took a tourist boat to London. The question was far from simple, but imagining the trip had been fun as well.

Hogwarts should really offer an adjusted version of this subject she thought not for the first time. *But the exam could be shorter than four hours!*

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Tonks yanked open the bedroom door, hands on her hips. "Remus Lupin, you kept tossing and turning until two in the night, and now you've been out of bed for another hour. You tell me what's up. Now."

Tonks prodded the man on the sofa once more, and he propped himself on an elbow, saying, "Severus."

"What about that horrid man can possibly be worth forfeiting a night's sleep?"

"Nympha, please, I cannot dismiss a classmate, and Severus less of all. He was a constant presence in my youth," Remus said, then paused to sit up. He stared unseeingly at the far wall. "I thought I knew him, but from Ron's reports, Ginny Weasley peeled out a layer in his soul, I didn't imagine existed." Remus thought more about it. "You know, if she is happy with this...truly happy, I mean...then I might be glad for him. This is a startling concept."

"Bet it is," Tonks answered, plopping down next to him. "A happy Snape...what would Sirius say? I'd not have thought it possible. He treated me like pond scum, and I'm not even a Gryffindor."

"How many cauldrons did you toss over?"

"Oh, stop it already. Can we trust he's treating her... well, appropriately?"

"I do believe we can. See, Severus has never been one for pretending. If he could not have the real thing, he was wont to decide he doesn't need it. I thought he has given up all thoughts of family life."

"Family?"

"Romance then, or actually any sort of partnership. Whatever it is they have, Severus would not be adding her mind, giving her love potions or exercise other manipulations as the stories of Death Eaters go."

"He's always abused his pupils, setting them on menial tasks in hours of detentions when a wand could have done a neater work in minutes."

"That's not entirely true. Most of the disembowelling has to be done without magic. He merely omitted explaining this."

"How... convenient."

"Of course. Look, Nympha, if he puts Ginny to work, then it's not to be lazy himself or to exploit her beyond need or reason. I was thinking more of the respect, or even love they seem to have developed."

"Before I believe Ron's story about their genuine feelings for each other, I'd put it all on his addled mind!"

"Ron isn't *that* befuddled." Remus thought a little more and added, "Neither was Fleur. She even looked past his attitude towards herself, calling her pale and shallow."

"Severus Snape, the loving husband. It gives me the creeps." After a while, she snuggled closer, asking, "Why, pray tell, isn't Remus Lupin a loving... husband?"

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Their Duelling examination the next morning was held at the same place, two pairs at a time. Ginny was in the last group, when the air was already carrying more than its share of sulphur, and three students had been sent to the nurse. Ginny and Mandy Sands bowed and paced the required ten steps. The tension between them had never eased, and now they stared daggers at each other. The taller of their examiners appeared more than happy about it. Slash, who had more respect for the Snapes than these examiners, was observing the other pair.

Technically, Mandy was no match against Ginny, but her repertoire of spells went well beyond the curriculum, and she certainly wasn't afraid of using them. If they came more focussed and didn't miss their target so often, she'd be a real threat.

Ginny identified her pattern easily and sent the leg locker where she expected Mandy to be a second later. It homed in, and Mandy couldn't balance out. In mid-flight she still shrieked a strangulating curse that could be fatal. Ginny parried it easily and immobilised her with a Full Body-Bind. Her duel with Mandy ended before Ginny had even found her rhythm.

The gangly young examiner now sent his own hexes towards Ginny, strong, sharp and in rapid succession. They weren't too strong for her to block, and he might still have held back, but Ginny didn't like her own performance.

Ginny saw a pattern in what he did and anticipated his next move, just when he did the unexpected, and she fell. He loomed over her, sneering malevolently. His one eyeball sported a green hue and a wide open pupil. The blinding spell she had deflected must have hit his eye, and the man took it personally. She had, after all, bested him two days before with the same deflection, only from up in the air.

She found herself surrounded with a circular iron fence he had conjured. The upper end of the fence started contracting and closed itself over Ginny like a dome. Its diameter shrank. *A fence; how to attack a fence?* Her feet were pushed in, and her knees bent. She rolled to lie on the side, feeling how her knees were gradually pushed up to eventually meet her head that was already pressed in as well. The examiner took his time. He taunted her and her Gryffindor courage, which, so obviously, didn't help anything.

Ginny's mind worked full speed now. *What spell works against a fence?* Iron. Can't be burnt, can hardly be sawn. Acid, yes, but corrosion takes time. Any conjured object would, however, dissolve or be movable if the caster was distracted. How to achieve that? She looked around, for which she was taunted again. The examiner's own chair! She transposed it to stand directly behind her opponent while he called her arrogant and overconfident. Her hope that her peers would not give her away turned true. Most didn't even see what she was doing staring transfixed onto the steadily shrinking fence. With all strength she could muster, she mouthed *Accio!* towards the chair. When its seat hit the examiner's knees, they bent, his wand hand lifted up, and his concentration was broken for just a moment. With a Mushroom buffer, Ginny hovered the fence two feet into the air, rolled out and rolled on to quickly hide among her peers. She didn't have the energy to do as they had learned, fight until the opponent is incapable to move or harm anybody. She was glad she herself had escaped that state.

The examiner dismissed her, saying, "Until we meet again, Miss... Mrs Snape!"

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Term ended for good when the pupils left school on Wednesday morning. The teachers were supposed to stay a little longer but the Notts had invited Ginny to spend the day. Severus was welcome for lunch, when (or if) he escaped from the claws of the headmistress.

Brenda wanted to know exam details, and Theo groaned. They were both exhausted and felt they had read books enough to last a lifetime. Yes, Theo felt confident with most subjects, and even Potions had gone rather well. Ginny had seen his sleeping draught being too runny from stirring too much and with a wrongly tilted rod, but she wouldn't say this now. It would still make you sleep, but you'd feel twitchy and uneasy for hours, she assumed. The way she felt right now, she would take it anyhow.

Paul Nott arrived, and they had lunch outside in the warm, spring sun.

Severus owed that he would not make it after all. "Oh my, he's truly pissed." The Notts looked up, and Ginny covered her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry for the

expression, but I can't say differently, what with *this* scrawl." Theo shook his head. His Potions essays looked no different once he received them back.

The Notts announced an Easter Sunday's brunch at their place. The invitation list would not be too large, and one could take the garden and the house to avoid a crowd. Ginny accepted gladly, suggesting she could come earlier and help. "Well, but this is nice, indeed," Brenda exclaimed. "I'm always so pressed with these parties since most others have an elf or six to help them out." Ginny nodded. She was well familiar with this situation from the social events among the Ministry staff.

Paul provided Ginny with a blue bow that she could wear open in her hair or keep hidden under her clothes. It was a Portkey to their house. "On Sunday, come whenever you're ready. Listen, Ginevra, this is a permanent Portkey to our hall. An activation is needed, but if the time arises I'm sure you'll manage that wandlessly as well. Keep it safe, and it can bring you to safety.

"I want you to have a secure place to go where you're likely to meet people. Even if nobody is here, be our guest and use any facilities you need. Every single one, you hear?" Brenda nodded in agreement.

Then she excuse herself, for she was on duty in the evening.

Out of politeness, Theo and Ginny played a little Exploding Snap and made an effort to talk, while avoiding any conversation about the school. However, they were too groggy to concentrate on anything. "Severus wrote he won't be here before four. We should go outside, enjoy the fabulous weather," Ginny suggested, stifling a yawn. "Where did you play as a child? You had friends?"

They strolled through the Notts' garden and forayed into the surrounding fields. The warm, sunny weather made them sit in the shade of Brenda's best apple tree and talk. Yes, Theo had had a few friends before Hogwarts, but his father had been very protective. Like Draco, also Theo had been given instructions which families to avoid. He knew that there must have been those who had instructions to avoid him. "Mandy Sands for one, and Pansy Parkinson might have as well. It's to maintain the hierarchy, you see." In contrast to Draco, Theo had been rather free to befriend Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, provided they had at least one magical parent.

Considering this freedom, Ginny wondered why he had remained so solitary, but it felt wrong to ask. She repeated what she had told Draco before, how very different social life in Gryffindor tower was.

Just as they were dosing off, Severus arrived to pick Ginny up.

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Back home Ginny dropped herself on the bed. "I'm not going to leave this place for days, or maybe for weeks."

For a long while, Severus simply regarded her exhausted face and tired body from the door. Not once this week had she asked or somehow verified that he had made and sent the pies for their lycanthropic friends. This ignorance to the calendar wasn't like her. He took off her shoes for her before he retreated into the kitchen.

A tempting smell travelled through the house and woke Ginny up. She stretched and yawned.

"I'm having dinner, and there is enough for two, but there is no room service," Severus declared. Grudgingly, Ginny stepped over and took up a spoon. She ate little, and her enthusiasm in the kitchen was so poor that he sent her back to bed instead.

Severus stayed up a little longer, reflecting the term. The lessons he had prepared, including Duelling, had been adequate in pace, but others had overloaded their charges. Remembering Barnes' request to keep Ginevra the refreshingly natural girl she could be, Severus vowed to himself that he would make sure she was fresh and regenerated in three weeks time. *Not an easy task!* He frowned. Already now, he knew of three or four social obligations a week they would have to fulfil. There were dinners or other events with the Dark Lord. He also had two invitations from colleague sadly not those he could have found an interest in visiting.

Retiring himself, Severus noticed how narrow their bed was. He didn't mind spooning and feeling Ginevra all night. Now that they need not avoid mouth contact, it was even easier than before. But he had to admit his back felt better with the freedom of turning around. He would take their new bed from the school home during summer break.

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A/N:

I'm very sorry for the long silence. It's been busy over here, and my muse just wasn't flowing. Trying to get into a rhythm again, and hoping you're still willing to follow with me.

My gratitude goes once again to my beta and Britpicker team, Soprano-in-Shadow and MagicAlley.

In GoF a girl named Laura Madley is sorted into Hufflepuff. I created Lisa and Linda as her elder sisters. Lisa is in Ginny's year, whose sorting Ron and Harry missed. Linda is even older and got married together with G&S.

Easter

Chapter 35 of 35

The holidays throw Ginny fully into the role of a Death Eater's wife. The Order analyses Ron's memory.

Easter

Severus woke with the first rays of sun and, as was his wont, wanted to work out his kinks. This morning, though, he found himself unable to move. Not only was his right arm detained by his sleeping wife but his back was stiff and aching.

After tossing and turning for hours, Ginevra was now sleeping on her side, her mouth slack and her features softer than in weeks. Dried perspiration had baked her hair to her face, and she was holding to his arm as if it was a lifeline. With his free hand, he gently peeled off a strand from over her eye. She barely stirred, only clutched his arm even tighter.

Her face hardened with no outer reason, and she mouthed words of anger. Severus placed his upper arm on her shoulder and stroked up and down. When she relaxed again, her knees curled up, leaving him barely any space in the narrow bed. Severus suppressed a groan but didn't push her knees back down. Then he carefully worked

his shoulder deeper into the mattress and circled his ankle simply because these were joints he could move freely. *I will relocate our new, fabulous bed from the Academy to home for the summer*, he promised himself.

For minutes he lay like that, listening to the birds outside and watching Ginevra, his wife. When her brows weren't furrowed in a dream, she looked even younger than she already was.

She shifted again and wrinkled her nose when the sun hit it. Her warm brown eyes, with their endearing blue flecks, opened, sending Severus' heart into a somersault. Dumbledore's words hit him like a bullet to the brain. "Love, Severus, the emotion that Tom will never understand, will be his downfall."

Whatever you say, old man, he thought. *Consider the company she's forced to keep and the choices she's had to make! Even you have to admit that my personal feelings for her are utterly irrelevant. I cannot even console her with details on the few pieces I could turn to our advantage.*

A very worried Urquhart had delivered a wreck of a girl to their quarters and given Severus a blow by blow account of the flying examination. The boy was a simpleton, but brought up in the noble, old ways to honour one's elders and to protect the fairer sex...no matter what. Severus had easily enlisted him to watch out for his teacher's wife in his stead. It had been harder to drill the necessary caution into him so that neither Ginevra, nor anyone else, would suspect him of doing so. *If he was discovered, Ginevra's indignation might be as hard to bear as any rumours or open investigations*, Severus thought with a mix of dismay and pride.

For the boy's benefit Severus had addressed his wife with "my love" for the first time. He had never imagined the spark it had ignited in her tired face.

Then there were the preparations for Beltane, including a ceremony of *inauguration*, read: branding the next year of recruits with the Dark Mark. Cold sweat ran down Severus' back as he recalled Brenda Nott's slip of the tongue. The woman had complained about the tricky spells to reveal a magical signature, as she was enlisted to sort out pregnant girls. *Which, in turn, makes me shag her like a randy Manticore, no, make that a narcissistic, prurient scoundrel*! Severus raged. He imagined how the news would be interpreted: *The bat of the dungeon is determined to get Ginevra up the duff and bequeath a child his fabulous genes*! His situation filled him with disgust.

Severus could not risk her knowing any of this. What she did know was their obligation to produce three magical children before they were allowed to part, and she experienced the hardships at the *blasted Academy of Our Dark Lord's blessing*

The sun had wandered, and Ginevra squinted in the sunlight, closed her eyes and stretched like a Kneazle. Severus placed his upper arm once again on her shoulder and asked how she was feeling.

Stiffly Ginny manoeuvred herself onto her back and to her half of the narrow bed. She furrowed her brows and took her time to answer. Finally she lifted her hand and counted her thoughts with her fingers. "Let's see. I've had a delicious dinner, escaped from cleaning the kitchen and had a long night's sleep. I wake up in sunshine with the prospect of three weeks' holiday. And I'm in the arms of my beloved husband. How would I feel?"

Severus stiffened at the word *beloved* and elaborated his concern. "You were hardly yourself last night. Do you remember what we had for dinner?"

Severus felt tension build up next to him, and the little colour vanished from her face. Had it been the wrong words to say? The wrong tone? He had tried for genuine concern, but his voice was raspy from the night.

"I'm a lot better now," she started, her hand tentatively moving to his hips.

Severus rapidly stalled her move and covered her hand with his, saying, "Ginevra, no. It's not that I don't want to sleep with you, but we're in no condition to enjoy it as we should.

"Everyone in the Academy was chained to their wands with all the exams crammed into just one week. The support our master sent wasn't exactly helpful for conducting them, to put it mildly. All hell broke loose once you were out."

"Those questions were pure hell, too...whatever Draco says about fifth years getting off lightly. May they be as excruciating to grade as they were to answer!" She propped herself on one elbow. "It would mean you have less work than other teachers." As she looked into the bottomless black of Severus' eyes, a shiver ran down her spine.

"Oh, I'm honoured; however, I have got to fear your wrath in addition," Severus countered. He sat up, discouraging her still wandering hands.

"I don't know about wrath, but I'll sure send you off with a long shopping list. You can finally demonstrate the benefits of a Muggle bike."

However, Severus smirked. "Upon Brenda's recommendation we're getting our main supplies via Hubert's Household Hauling from now on. You should keep check of my choices, though."

"Hubert's? They're expensive!"

"They are known for reliable quality and a vast selection." He landed a light kiss on her mouth and made for the bathroom. Under his breath he added, "and they take Galleons."

Ginny stretched and reflected over this last comment. The Dark Lord had finally arranged for the teachers' salaries, but it all landed on their Gringott's account. He would never pay his vassals in pound sterling...were they running low? Severus received interest on some Muggle money that he had invested. She knew where he stored the neatly printed, bluish paper slips and even how to withdraw money without irritating the little automates, but she hadn't followed up on their spending.

After a hearty breakfast that included the last beer porridge from Orkney, Ginny was sent off to see Maud. The girl was moody and tired, and so Ginny dragged her out into the sun. "I need a present for Severus. Imagine, I missed his birthday! So, Easter it has to be. Maundy Thursday might be the last day to get something, and nothing costly."

They strolled through the town centre when someone called, "Maud, what a surprise!"

The caller was about to enter a narrow café Ginny hadn't paid attention to so far. It looked nothing like her mum's favourite haunt in Diagon Alley with its overstuffed loveseats and dusty wall décor. It had none of Madame Puddifoot's frilly, dusty draperies or Fortescue's cosy booths that required expansions to hold the assembled Weasleys. To Ginny's relief, Maud's friend cut the conversation short.

"What an odd place," Ginny commented when they parted. "Everyone was staring into their own computer screen. Can't they do that from home? Don't Mug... you go to a café for talking to each other?"

"It's an Internet café," Maud offered. "Patrons want to access the internet, see. They may hire the PC or bring their own." While she went on why her friend, Malcolm, needed to do so, Ginny's thoughts galloped ahead. *There is a place in town where I can enter this internet-thing without a computer of my own. The Grangers have it, too...we've found them already! Uh, I've forgotten how that went, but according to Maud's volleyball friends, I can probably play the dumb lady in distress without raising suspicion.* The idea was exhilarating!

In a second-hand bookshop, Ginny stumbled upon a book on poisonous fish and other venomous sea life. It explained their habitats and how modern medicine (of the 20s) retrieved and used the poison. Its anecdotes on myths around the topic read like a book for Care of Magical Creatures or Potions of the time Hogwarts was founded. With a grin of anticipation, she paid for her find. She grubbed a bit in her bag to shuffle her wand into her hand and cast a feather-light charm on the weighty leather-clad tome.

Maud's steps slowed down again, and they stopped for a drink. It wasn't like Maud to run into cafés, but Ginny humoured her without questioning. They marvelled about the sunny weather. "It's only fair after the year we went through!" Maud declared. "Hey, we should take the bike tomorrow, Good Friday. What do you think? Yes, yes, you have to ask your strange guardian, but even he should understand a little fun, or doesn't he?"

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Ron had once again driven Harry away and was feeling miserable about it. "There's a war going on, we're on a quest, and I'm no help at all. I can even understand Harry, for it is quite unbelievable...maybe I am cocking it all up?"

"Nothing of this is your fault." Hermione sighed and looked towards the door where Harry had left. "Harry is the one being difficult. I'd like to say he is as unstable as you are, or maybe more so because he doesn't accept any help."

She let the implication sink in before asking, "Ron, may I see a certain part of your memory again? I mean the last minutes you were with Malfoy. May I apply Legilimency on you?"

"Do you know how to do that?"

"I've read about it. You did it on him, and it worked because he wanted to. It's like with Ginny...oh, please, Ron!" Hermione rubbed her boyfriend's back to get over the awkward moment.

"Legilimency and Occlumency are tightly related, see? Knowing one, you've got the key to the other. In *Be the Master of your Mind*, page 32, it says..."

"All right, all right, you won't harm me, I get it. Go ahead, just try it. Do I think about this scene, or do you search or what?"

"Please think about Malfoy making you look into his mind. Got it?"

Malfoy had Apparated them to a sort of place Ron had never visited before. Aggressively lit advertisements, some steady, some flickering, had surrounded them. The patterns and pictures had reflected in Draco's retina.

By now Ron had learned that these brightly illuminated shopping centres were nothing strange for Muggles. Hermione knew of several similar places right here in Britain! If she knew of such places, then at least the scenery wasn't a creation of his befuddled brain, as Fred, the twat, had proposed.

The strongest impression Ron recalled was how Malfoy had looked at him: disappointed and desperate, which was thoroughly unbecoming to his aristocratic manners.

"Ron, I want you to remember the scene as it felt that evening. You were feeling sorry for your rash actions. Recall this scene with the original emotions!"

"All right then."

Draco was relaying to Ron how Ginny was suffering from being cut off from her family. He quoted details he could not have known if she hadn't told him. Ron was feeling bad, but at the same time grateful to the blond boy for keeping an eye on her.

"*Legilimens!*" Hermione's command resonated with the memory of himself chanting the word at the blond boy, who had stood but inches away. Draco Malfoy, whom he wasn't sure he should hate or love.

A small sitting room appeared. A haggard-looking, dark figure was sitting in a worn-down, greenish armchair. The shelf-covered walls were packed with heavy leather-clad tomes and quartos, with ancient vellum codices as well as cheap Muggle paperbacks. A moody gloom hung in the air.

The books are certainly the same as in Ron's own memories, Hermione thought.

The Snape in this memory, however, was a haunted, gloomier version of their former teacher. His eyes sat in deep, dark sockets, and his skin was too large for the face it covered. One by one, Hermione detected more differences. Snape's dull clothes matched the lacklustre appearance of the high, greenish armchair, although it was shaped like in Ron's other memories. The saggy sofa opposite with its curled red-brown backs and arms didn't match the armchair, other than that it was equally ugly and more worn than even the sofas in the Burrow.

The curtains were drawn closed, adding to the gloom, but Hermione recognised their pattern from Ron's own memories.

Then Malfoy had changed the scene. He and Snape were now having a simple meal: The table held nothing but the pot with soup into which they dipped their spoons. They had crumbly bread in their left hands and ate in silence.

Suddenly a harsh voice cut through the scene. "Goodness boys, get yourselves a room!"

Draco and Ron parted and looked irritated in the bright neon lights. Likewise, Hermione's and Ron's connection broke.

"Draco simply snorted at the thought," the Ron next to Hermione recalled. "He didn't go for his wand or appear disgusted."

Hermione lifted her hand absent-mindedly to ask for silence. After pacing twice back and forth, she stated, "Malfoy wanted to make a point, didn't he?"

"I believe so, but I can't fathom what. Snape looked more sorry than ever at Hogwarts. This was Snape's room, too, and yet it wasn't."

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Severus exhaled deeply when the wards announced Ginevra's safe return. Soon she potttered around noisily with the tea service. He could use a break, too, but wanted to first finish this abomination of an exam paper and forget the dunce who wrote it for three weeks. If his charming colleague, Professor Flank, ever again complained about students in his colour not knowing their spelling and punctuation, he'd gladly rub this particular paper from silver colour under her nose. He'd even lend her the drills he had used on his Slytherins at Hogwarts to get out of Minerva's hair.

The tea kettle whistled before Severus's ink had dried. Steps on the stairs announced that, instead of being called down, he seemed in for room service in his crammed, little office.

Ginevra peeped in carefully first, and upon his nod she opened the door as far as it would go. "Wow, have you slogged through all this pile already?" she asked, pointing at the desk.

"Indeed, I have. Wait, let me stash it away. The collected contemplative incontinence of the Academy could curdle the milk in our tea even through the sturdiest of earthenware."

A wide grin on her face, she directed the tea set to the hastily cleared spot. She Summoned the old chair from the other upstairs room, artfully steering it opposite from his own while Severus filled their mugs.

Cradling his steaming mug and relaxing his eyes on his wife's happy face, Severus leaned back with a sigh. Her look was steadier than in the morning...visiting with Miss Taylor had become her.

Ginny leaned to the side to peek through the narrow window into a clear blue sky, frowning. "How come it's so warm and dry, Severus? What has happened to the Dementors? They need the grey and dreary weather we've had for months."

"Noticed it only now, did you?" Severus asked lightly, but swore inwardly he would have her go out more. "Our master is most furious. It appears the Ministry has covered the British Isles with a tight net of Cloud-Redirection-Charms. The youngest Dementor-procreation perished...they were fried alive, if alive is what they are. Mothers ran amok in their grief and killed the elder offspring of other females. In the end it was a case of dog eat dog. Now there is a ratio of four adult male Dementors to one female. They do not need Ludwig's Lust to fight over the women."

"...With more losses, I presume. This is splendid!"

"It depends on which side you are, Ginevra," Severus said seriously. "We've been called to pacify them or turn their anger against the Ministry."

Ginny waved off. "Leave it, I don't need these details. We are free for a long weekend, AND the weather is nice. That's more luck than we deserve but not more than we can bear. Even those social events you said we'd face in the holiday weeks might be a little more bearable."

"Things will change, Ginevra. I have kept you out of this, as you had a strict schedule every day. After passing your O.W.L.s, you continue to live at Salazar's Academy as my wife. When I get an invitation, so do you. Whether teachers allow you into their courses or not is entirely their decision."

He glared into his mug, adding, "And it is a matter of... your condition."

There were, however, no objections against a little tour by bike on the following day.

"It only means you need to get your Easter egg early," Severus told her and stood to rummage in his shelf. He produced a small parcel from behind the year books. A few flicks of his wand later, he presented her with a foot-long, egg-shaped parcel.

Ginny gasped and was doubly glad to have bought the book for him. To honour the artful Muggle wrapping and to keep herself curious, Ginny opened it by hand. Knot after knot she undid the ribbons, enjoying immensely how Severus fidgeted and went for his wand when it took her too long.

In a thick bowl of oddly light material, she found a chocolate bunny. She lifted out several chocolate eggs with different fillings. "Mmm, nougat and raspberry!"

Black flat ropes with gadgets she had never seen before remained. They were fixed to the rims of the... helmet! For this is what the egg was: a bright green biker's helmet! It clearly meant that he had always wanted her to use the bike!

"We will rework your Quidditch gloves to padded bikers' gloves too. I have checked the models...we will manage."

After thoroughly snogging her husband, Ginny nearly tumbled down the stairs to retrieve her gift for him. "This has to cover your birthday as well. I hadn't known of it until mid-February, and five weeks overdue was far too late," she declared decisively.

Severus was nonplussed. "How do you know at all?"

"Your boss certainly has your personal data filed. My face when I noticed I had missed it seems to have been worthwhile her effort of letting me know. Open it already!"

Severus perused the book with great concentration. "There might always be aspects I don't know that could even go into potions. Thank you!"

"Oh, but potions are described in the last chapter," she quipped lightly.

He arched his eyebrow. "Potions?" He then read the first sentences and smiled in amusement. "Muggles do have a way to know and still ignore us, don't they?"

Ginny's heart raced. She had chosen a gift that pleased him. A book, nonetheless!

Aloud she said, "It's what fascinates dad so about Muggles." Dad! She longed to see him, of course. However, for the first time, the thought did not uncontrollably flood her eyes with tears.

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Ginny happily rode her bike on forest walks and field ways with Maud and a friend of hers, passing through villages next to their town. Several families passed them, chatting happily, clearly enjoying the spring sun. Maud's friend challenged them to a race and got a bit grumpy when Maud pulled a face. Ginny's bike, being the smallest, meant she had to pedal furiously. Especially uphill she was soon jealous of the children frolicking as they overtook her. Pedalling heavily left, once more right, and then her bike suddenly stopped. With a huff of annoyance, Ginny dismounted just before she'd topple to the side.

Maud was behind her, but expended much less effort! How did she do that? When she caught up, she happily jumped off to save her breath. They continued pushing, and Maud used their time alone to explain the gear system once again.

Their companion stowed away her camera, asking, "Slowpokes finally made it? Goodness, looking at you, one could think we were in the Pyrenees."

Ginny continued more easily now, impressed by the Muggles' cleverness. The whole idea of a bicycle had an appeal to the young witch, even if shifting gears in a timely manner was still a challenge.

With red cheeks and sparkling eyes, Ginny returned from their little romp, bursting to tell Severus about it. He listened silently, observing his wife. She so deserved these little escapades. It had been worth his Apparating and waiting for her every mile or so. He had enjoyed the outdoors more than he had anticipated, even if he would not admit it openly.

Severus Snape didn't know digital cameras existed in the Muggle world. He knew nothing about a 3½ inch floppy disk holding three snaps of his wife that was hidden in the dilapidated house next door.

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Over their second mug of tea, he opened a severe topic. "There's a dinner with the Inner Circle tonight, and I cannot possibly leave you out of it. Ginevra, you have two hours to switch into the role of a Death Eater's wife...a middle-aged Death Eater's wife, mind you."

"Pah," was all she said, but she was unable to concentrate on anything in the following hour.

When Ginny left the bathroom, intending to dress, Severus held her back. "There is still my Christmas present." He produced a small, reddish box with a snapping lid. It was from a Muggle store. She found a golden belcher chain bracelet matching her necklace. "Severus, you should not..."

"Yes, I certainly should. I should have given it to you a long time ago. Let me fasten it."

Ginny hadn't realised before that fixing a bracelet required so much tenderness and kissing. Each finger, the wrist, and her arm till the elbow pit were given attention. Well, she certainly didn't complain.

Severus looked up, his eyes boring into hers. "Ginevra, listen now. The event today is similar to the one you have... experienced in November. This time you will sit next to me and close to the Dark Lord, very close probably. Someone will serve you, and you know what will happen after the feast."

She swallowed, and Severus laid his hands on her shoulders.

"I do not know whom they have caught. It might be someone you know. Ginevra, love, this is what we have to go through, and you know it."

She was trembling now, and Severus pulled her tight.

"Harden your face. Occlude your mind. You need not be rude, but don't appear friendly either. Neutral acknowledgement will already be more than most others will offer. You will appear in a positive light to him or her. If the person ever remembers this day, that is."

Her knees buckled, but Severus held her in his arms.

Into her heavy breathing Severus said, "Albus used to ask me, *Are you prepared, are you ready?* I used to answer with *yes*. The truth is you can prepare yourself and you must. But you are never really ready. Albus found this a positive sign."

Ginny took longer to dress than she had assumed. The prospects were too appalling. Severus left her on her own for a while. He then helped her with her last preparations, starting with an ointment on her red-rimmed eyes.

Finally she was dressed to go. "We're late, aren't we?"

"We are not. I lied so that you would have this extra time. We still have ten minutes. Let me see your eyes again and your hair." He removed the remainders of the ointment and brushed gently through her locks. "You are beautiful, my love. And you are strong. I have full confidence in you. I will apply the mask spell, and then let's go."

::*:*:*:

"A renovation!" Hermione screamed. At Ron's irritated look, she elaborated, "The Snape and the room Draco showed you were from last summer or autumn. Now, however, Snape has relaxed and filled out, and the room has been renovated. It looks so much cosier now, friendlier!" For a while they contemplated why this would be important.

"Renovating overstuffed furniture might be a hobby for some, but it requires skills and tools. Most Muggles seek out a professional." Hermione said. "It is a lot of work."

"Weird," Ron said. "We use spells for that. Mum refreshes the sofa according to...*Hermione, that's it!* Draco showed me that it had been Ginny renovating the room."

"Why is it important, though?"

"Hey, aren't you a woman? Think what Fleur does half her time... Bill always jokes that another room 'shouts out Fleur' whenever he enters.*Yes!*"

More energetic than she'd seen him since the incident, he dragged her to the door. "We have to see the others."

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To a larger public Ron explained, "Snape declared that his *wife* was to stay *home*, and I taunted him that the house has nothing that could make it Ginny's home. There were no pictures, none of her knick knacks.

"However, he was taken aback more than I'd have thought possible. At the shopping centre Draco showed me what the room looked like before Ginny came to live there. So, for Severus...oh, stop it, Fred...the whole sitting room 'shouts out Ginny' wherever he looks."

Arthur and Bill nodded in recognition.

"Well, this room 'shouts Ginevra', 'cause he uses her full name," Ron added. "I accused him of that, too."

Remus stood and paced. "I cannot imagine Severus living in bright colours. The old room is much more like him."

"Like the greasy, ill-tempered git that spread malice wherever he went." This was George.

"The man fussing over Ginny wasn't like that at all." Ron noted. "Dinner was really luscious, although not Hogwarts style. Maybe... yes, it was quite close to Mum's cooking."

"Well, the dishwasher for a soup that Malfoy and he forced down in the other scene can't have been tasteful or inviting."

"This moment where he brought up the onions," Tonks piped in, "reminds me of my dad's attempts at cooking when Mum was out. He would frequently utter doubts, and I vigorously declared it was great...and tucked in again to prove it. Did Severus coax Ginny into eating a little more?"

Bill shook his head. "Are you saying that the change in the, ah...*cuisine* at the Snapes' was another way of showing you that Snape is really... hm... making an effort, let's say?"

George snorted, but Harry stomped off, annoyed.

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The hall was similar to the one Ginny remembered vaguely. A U-shaped table was laid out. Severus' place was directly to the right of the Dark Lord. Next to Ginny an unknown couple by the name of Pritchard took seats. The man was sportive and extroverted while his wife's jaw was so tightly clenched the sinew became visible along her throat. Ginny forcefully reminded herself not to let her inner turmoil show in this manner, but how to go about it?

As she turned away from Mr Pritchard's boisterous greeting, her left elbow contacted with Severus' steady and warm arm. The reassuring sensation crept up to Ginny's shoulder and down into her pinky. She inhaled deeply, and more tension left her as she slowly exhaled. Turning to Severus meant looking into their master's direction, too, and she stalled for a moment.

"You recognise Rodolpho LeStrange, the poor widower." Severus noted, pointing to the other side of the Dark Lord. Ginny swallowed hard and nodded. Next to him sat a woman and the sneaky man who had brought Severus home on Christmas Eve, Sinclair Boston. Turning back, Ginny found the Notts only a few places further down on the right. The Mulcibers sat a similar distance from the Dark Lord on the other side. Next to Paul Nott, there was Avery, his left eye missing and scars sprinkling his face. Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy sat at the far end, which so obviously didn't please the man, while Narcissa made a more composed face than recently. When dinner was about to start, Ginny saw Lucius Malfoy retreat for the bathrooms. She smirked inwardly while his wife's look followed him in disgust. The Dark Lord glanced dangerously at the man when he arrived together with the servants.

Neither Draco nor Theodore nor anyone else of her age were invited. Ginny searched for couples that might remind her of her school pals, but none were obvious, and she could not ask. To her relief she didn't see the mundane faces of the Crabbes or Goyles either.

An elf and two captives, a middle-aged man and an elderly woman, served. With shock Ginny recognized the man from one of her father's parties. Severus set his lower leg touching hers for a few seconds, and his warmth seeped through their robes. The spoon insinuated itself into her hand, and Ginny focussed on the bowl in front of her. It held a light-coloured soup that melted away a little of her anxiety. She didn't ask for a second helping, and she didn't recognize its taste either.

A high-pitched voice woke her out of her dreamy state. "Anything to drink for you, madame?"

Addressing the elf, Severus placed his arm on her back. He ordered for them both and let his arm linger just a moment before he had to revert to decorum. When their drinks came, Ginny was relieved it was the elf serving them. The hustle and bustle around her threatened to unnerve her, and she imagined herself as a blinkered horse with earplugs.

A harrumph broke her stupor. The plate in front of her now held a sirloin steak and mixed spring vegetables. Collecting her thoughts, she could not afford weakness! She sat up straighter and stabbed her fork into the meat.

"How is your steak, Ginevra?" Severus asked after two bites.

"Tender, as it should be, Severus," she answered firmly. Reaching for a sauce-boat without a tremble, she added, "The rosemary potatoes and these rich gravies make it a splendid meal, don't you think?"

"Indeed. I'm very glad you like it."

"Our youngest member enjoys her meal, I'm happy to hear?" the voice to Severus' left asked.

"Yes, my Lord, it is excellent," Ginny managed, but didn't look up at him for fear he'd break her resolution.

After pudding, of which Ginny had not eaten much, their master stood and clapped his scaly hands. The servants cleared the tables, and the show was to begin.

Ginny concentrated on her drink, a blend of cider and water. She remembered Severus' words. *You can prepare yourself...* So she did. *Occlude your mind, set up a neutral face.* Like a mantra, she repeated the instructions. She saw the bracelet and concentrated on his tender kisses and nice words, but when a scream seared the air, she almost lost her mind. Severus' hand supported her elbow for a short reassertion. She turned her mind back to the memory of Severus fixing the bracelet. Her left index finger retraced the trails his mouth had taken.

Re-Occluded, she lifted her eyes and looked along the line of faces to her right. Bored faces alternated with such staring straight ahead, and there were those vividly commenting on the display in the centre. Brenda Nott might have developed a technique similar to herself, and their looks locked for a while. Ginny remained attentive anyway; even the Notts could still represent a trap. With a nod she looked further down.

Severus leaned over when the noise ebbed down. "To the left of Paul Nott is Mr Avery. You've already heard about his accident." A little later he provided, "To Brenda's right we have the Bullstrodes. Then the Hunts. It is their son Bernhard in your year. Mrs Bullstrode and Mrs Hunt are sisters, as you might have guessed."

"Avery, Nott, Bullstrode, Hunt," Ginny repeated, playing with her bracelet. She would do good to be able to memorize names and faces of these people *Bernhard and Millicent are cousins*. Squinting, she searched for their features in their fathers.

Suddenly the hall fell silent. A heap of limbs and rugs lay in the far corner. On the left blood dripped into a puddle, and on the right a light green cloth took on the dark colour of blood as well.

"Lucius is not well, it appears," Severus remarked, and Ginny's eyes left the centre of the room. She imagined him nervously debating between another session in the restrooms or the agony of sitting it out. Finally Narcissa nudged him, and he left before causing attention to his doings under the table. The revealing smile that threatened to form around Ginny's eyes died with another look at the unmoving form on the floor.

The Dark Lord gave a flaming speech, and the man from the Ministry was brought in. He answered with a steady voice, not looking left or right. Most of his replies did not contain value, and the Dark Lord felt he had to prod him further. The man withstood the pain of the first teasing curse, although his body twisted and turned. He focussed on a corner. The next stabs of pain made him lose control over his moves again. He now focussed on a spot behind Ginny. Or was it her face? Ginny saw how his eyes opened wide, and she could read the secret he didn't want to reveal before the man flopped down in another bout of agony.

When it ebbed off, a sharp command, "Take him," brought Avery and another man into action. They gripped the captive under his armpits and hauled him to the Dark Lord. "LEGILLIMENS!" For an endlessly long time, their master searched through the man's mind. Then he nodded. "Release him."

"Well, that was a show," Mr Pritchard, the man next to Ginny opined. "Almost like..."

"We want to hear the verdict, Hubert," Severus cut him short. Ginny didn't want to hear a verdict at all, and she didn't hear it either. She only realized that suddenly chairs were scrapping, and Severus lifted her chair to prompt her up and help her out.

They Apparated to their normal place. Not yet half the way home, Ginny stopped. "Back! We need to get back to the trees!"

Concerned, Severus led her back, holding her around her waist. She appeared determined rather than close to being sick, as he had first assumed. Out of earshot Ginny asked, "Did you see anything in their eyes, Severus?" He denied. "Well, I did. This man, he knows a place, a safehouse of the Ministry, a hideout of sorts, I don't know." Severus gripped her upper arms. "I pried deeper to see a lake and a railway station, Hawtholst. I can find the way from the station to this house."

He considered her. She was impressively composed, overloaded with adrenaline as well. "We would need more people though. And I don't want you to..."

"Severus!" She cut him short. "I'm supposed to watch that show, but I'm not allowed to act?" He wanted to argue, but she pounded on his chest. "Go over and convince Draco to come. Then the Notts?" Severus nodded. He had his doubts still, but the chance was too good. Ginny said, "I will change and then Portkey to Notts. We meet here." Off they went.

Brenda had been to Hawtholst before and Apparated Severus there. Together they returned, and she took her family while Severus took Ginny and Draco along. Paul addressed the three young people. "Look around, remember the place. It is essential that you learn places. These Geography lessons were not misplaced, but too theoretical." Severus nodded. He had been thinking the same.

"What is it we are searching?" Theo asked.

Brenda explained in a calm steady voice, "The Death Eaters have caught a Ministry member. He knows this place and has revealed it to us. They have headquarters there. People in hiding, maps, plans, a lab... I could not deduce more from the Dark Lord's questions."

Ginny looked up. Brenda?

Severus nodded slowly. "I cannot tell either whether our master has found the place. The man was adept. He might only have slipped to us. These people can be warned. We need not even be seen." He turned to the Notts. "Ministry?"

Brenda nodded and asked back, "Order?"

They all three nodded, but Severus added, "Draco is not known to anybody, though. He is at most risk." With pride Ginny noticed that he didn't treat her as an appendix anymore but as an Order member.

They decided to pair Brenda with Draco. She could bail him out. She declared that Severus and Theo were to form a team and Paul was to take Ginny along.

With clenched fists and teeth, the elder men stared into each other's eyes, exchanging unspoken threats.

Ginny and Paul took the lead. It wasn't necessary for Theo and Draco to know who had seen into the captive's eyes. At the little pond they turned uphill. Half a mile and a hint of smoke caught their attention. To the right the outlines of a little hunting house could be made out. The two windows were covered well enough for a passerby but not for someone searching them out.

They retreated again. Brenda took command. With a quiet, clear voice, she gave orders. They were to make the inhabitants aware of a discovery. Brenda and Draco would go closest and head right for the door. She would try to be seen with him.

It was over before it had really begun. The doors opened at the first indication of noise. Ginny heard Brenda exchange an odd code of passwords with those inside. More was exchanged. The Ministry Aurors nodded. Brenda said something pointing at Draco, and the three Aurors nodded again. Brenda Disapparated them with an extra-loud Pop. Ginny heard only half of it, though, because Paul Nott had gripped her around her waist and hauled her back to their meeting place close to Spinner's End.

Mission accomplished, Ginny felt bone tired and numbly waited for the other two to arrive.

Brenda woke her from her stupor as she exclaimed, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Paul! The boy is not careless, and we've trusted Severus with him for years!"

Confused, Ginny looked up. The man was pacing, and his wand emitted tiny blue sparks of agitation. With two muted plopps Severus and Theo finally appeared, the boy panting heavily. Paul went right to Severus' throat, and Brenda had to cast a barrier between them, calling them to order. The groups quickly bade their goodbyes. Draco would go to the Snape's.

Inside Severus reported how they had made for close to the railway station first. "Three far Apparitions would have been too loud," he declared. When numerous pops announced an invasion of wizards, they had observed them. Walden Macnair was in the lead and Avery second. Unluckily a branch had hit Macnair so that he had to halt the attack for a few minutes to recover. Severus recalled with a smirk. On their ascent the last four men were hit with a few untraceable spells and fell hard. Very unluckily their heads or hips contacted with rocks, or stones hit them painfully. Only the fifth to last had taken his job seriously and looked back as it had, of course, been agreed. Not seeing anyone, he had panicked and shouted ahead. Avery had been outraged at the noise and Stunned the man. Seeing their losses, the remaining group of six had spread out, and Severus and Theo had made haste to Disapparate.

Draco asked directly, "Was it Ginny who read his mind?"

"Read his mind? Like in every second Muggle fairy tale? Have you never listened?" Severus gloated.

"Come now, Severus," Ginny said. "Legillimency, even an involuntary one, allows a glance into someone's mind. Yes, Draco, between his twists, he had a few still moments in which I saw the station, the pond and the hut."

He nodded. "Be careful with that. And how was the rest of the... party? I paced a hole into my room's carpet in worry."

Severus answered, "It resembled those you experienced in autumn. Close to the November presentation, far too close, I dare... Ginevra!"

His wife was half way to the toilet already and made it just to the tiled bathroom floor before sickness wasn't to be held anymore. With three heavy bouts she delivered her dinner. Soft arms gripped her from behind, held her head and presented a warm, wet towel when she had finished. She used it extensively and ran water over mouth and nose. With another cold towel in her neck, she returned to the sitting room, guided by Severus' arms.

"You mean to say this was your first puke the whole evening?" Draco asked after he had Scourgified the very substantial mess. He knew all too well what she had gone through. She nodded weakly, not realising Severus and Draco exchanging glances of admiration.

They had a pot of tea, with just a little sedative potion for Ginny, before Draco returned to the manor. "Father has not been interested in me lately, but you never know. I guess I was watching your house all night."

"Very well," Severus said. "Take a look at the bedroom what dress Ginevra wore and comment on it to Lucius to back your story up. Good night."

"Good night. Try to sleep...both of you!"

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They had Saturday all for themselves. Not even shopping was an issue, for Hubert's service worked most nicely with all of Severus' wands and with Ginny's short second wand. "Eventually we ought to register your first wand, too," Severus had said, but there wasn't a rush for it.

Avoiding the events of the night before, they sat in quiet communication. Severus conjured garden furniture, and they had a reading session under the apple tree. Ginny didn't lack books, and Severus had his new present.

For an hour or so, Ginny left for town with Maud. Both were exhausted enough to return quickly. Maud entered the Snapes' garden for lemonade, Severus making sure she would remember only the outdoors. There wasn't a gnome or anything else magical in sight, and the girls chatted for a bit before Maud made her way home. She was still irritated at the fact that the house was so difficult to find. Otherwise, though, Maud wasn't as alert and curious as usually, and magical details slipped her attention.

When the full moon shone in through the windows, Ginny was already soundly asleep.

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Half of Ravenclaw's table was set for lunch in Hogwarts' Great Hall. An owl nose-dived and dropped a letter into Hermione's salsa. Gingerly she picked up the formerly white envelope, addressed to her in biro, and wiped the splatter of salsa off with her napkin.

"My mother informs me that they're not home for Easter and declares I'm expected the weekend thereafter. No excuses, she writes." She looked at Kingsley and Jocey, the Aurors in service, feeling desperate. "I've not been there for five months. They reason that if they are kept safe by *these so-called wards from your ominous Ministry*" she made quote marks in the air, "which severely restrict their lives, as mum points out, then I'm safe there, too."

Jocey nodded. "It is very hard to explain to the Muggle parents. I can accompany you."

Hermione quietly consulted with Ron. "Do you think Harry needs a change?"

Ron thought it over. "He needs a change, yes, but not that. Maybe we can do an all-boys event here. Remus and Neville, both Boot boys, my brothers..."

Hermione grimaced. "I guess I will have to save Clara from that sort of weekend!" She gave him a peck. "Cheer up yourself, too. I'm not giving up on you!" she ordered.

He nodded. While improving, he still wasn't the attentive boyfriend she deserved, and he knew it. He still didn't feel like a whole person. Important hours of his memory were lost and several others in such a state that he'd rather have lost them as well, if he could not get them confirmed soon.

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Brunch at the Notts on Easter Sunday was not too large a gathering. Severus was the last to arrive, but with Ginny being visible quite early, they had pretended he had been caught by a book in the library.

Theodore had asked to invite the Brookhursts, and he and Ginny had a long talk with Heather. She was to select a husband in the following week, and the thought left her

and her parents desperate. The Dark Lord had given them a few names and would force one of these upon her if she could not decide. He had already rejected one proposal the Brookhursts had made because the boy was to continue schooling at Salazar's Academy. Another young man had himself rejected. "Albert Flint being dead, Frank Drillstrand disgraced, it is between Crabbe, the murderer, and Goyle, self-declared sex god.

"Well, there is also Avery and other, older widowers whose first wives found a most questionable end."

Ginny shuddered. She could not tell her that Albert Flint wasn't someone to miss, or how he had died. "You could ask Draco about... Vincent and Gregory." A huff was all the reply she got.

"Do stay in contact with me, Heather! Make clear you will visit me regularly and that I will visit you." Heather nodded weakly. "I'm wife of Severus Snape, member of the Inner Circle. I can be the chief bridesmaid, or," she blushed a bit, "no, matron of honour. I'll do whatever to strengthen our relationship. Anything, Heather, just ask me!

"But now it's probably better we mingle."

Theodore ranted in agitation, "If only I could..."

Ginny smiled sadly. "They would not let you, Theodore. Not your parents, nor the other Death Eaters." Ginny reasoned. Quietly she added, "You are to be admired for your thoughtfulness!" He looked at her in utter bewilderment. "Theo? Something the matter?"

"N... no, nothing, what did you say?"

"There is nothing you can do, and Heather knows it. We should check on her and arrange it so that her husband is present." He nodded sadly.

Heather's family left the party early. Ginny felt like retreating into a silent corner, and this is exactly why she forced herself to go to a group and have a talk. Some made excuses to dissolve when she approached but a couple stayed. It was Tom and Denise, who had married with them. They had lost a child a month ago. He was more attentive to his wife now, but they didn't seem overly happy with each other. *I'm in one of the few happy pairings*, Ginny reminded herself, thinking again how odd this was.

Their small talk turned serious, addressing the other pair that had married with them, Edwin and Linda Suller. Ginny had heard about his arrest. For a week people had taken little interest in the matter but then Linda, who had been very happy with him, had miscarried and lost her baby. In grief and fear over his capture, Denise whispered.

Both women were appalled when loud laughter erupted from another corner of the garden. Ginny quickly regrouped and reminded herself as well as Denise, "We're at war. If we let everything touch us, we cannot continue living."

"Quite right," Tom said in an ice cold tone. "Get it together now, Denise, and DO stop whining." Eyes widening, Denise turned to go. Ginny could curse herself.

A surly looking Severus approached. "Professor," Tom greeted in an overly polite manner and retreated rapidly pretending to follow Denise.

Severus approached Ginny with a questioning look. "Can we just walk a bit, Severus?"

"That would be a pleasure." He put his warm hand on her waist, and they strolled leisurely, each hanging on their own thoughts. They initially sought out the warming sun, but his frock and robe made Severus retreat into the shadow of a large tree. "Cherry, if I'm not mistaken," he said. "Ah, a magical variant," he continued, "self fertile, of course. Yellow, knubbly cherries grow here, dark red, juicy ones over there. Cornelian cherry, and isn't this a branch of Morello Cherry?"

Spy that he was, Severus also took the chance to scrutinize the fence and wards the Notts had set up. "The place is quite secure," he approved. "I will check with them for firewall wards, though."

Suddenly he held his breath, and his eyes watered. Ginny heard sounds of irritation from every corner.

Severus walked her over to the others, rapidly giving directives. "We need to go. Check who stays here. Remain with someone. It is safer here than all alone in our house."

The first Death Eaters made for the exit. Already in pain, Severus still took his time to kiss her thoroughly before he joined them. A series of "pops" was the last they heard.

Silently the rest of the guests turned to leave. Denise was still there, white and trembling, not able to Apparate just yet. Brenda was nowhere to be seen. "I'm supposed to stay here," Ginny said. "Severus considers it very safe. Aren't you living somewhere remote, Denise? Why don't you stay, too?"

Seeing the woman's questioning eyes, Theo nodded. "I don't mind another pair of hands to do the washing up," he declared.

Magical facilities or not, it was a lot of work. Theo preferred the carrying duties, and the women handled the watery part. They worked in silence for most of the time, but Denise had a question on her lips. Ginny sent Theo to check all the garden furniture. "What is it, Denise?"

"I... well, I saw you with him. So you are actually quite... satisfied?"

Ginny smiled. "Didn't believe Severus could be the caring husband, did you?" Already the first name of her old Potions teacher sent a shudder through Denise's body. "We came to terms well enough," Ginny continued. "I've passed my O.W.L.s and even finished the year. Now I'm supposed to have a baby soon, I suppose." She would not reveal anything personal to this woman.

When nothing was forthcoming, she returned the question directly. "What about you, how's Tom to live with?"

"Not bad, exactly. Only so distant... I knew nothing about him, and this hasn't changed." They exchanged a little more conversation before Theodore reported the garden was done. The shadows of the trees pointed east before they relaxed with a jug of cooled pumpkin juice and a few remainders of the brunch.

Brenda was the first to return, panting. "Ginevra, could you check the lab for medical supplies? Who of you can help her?"

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Severus made her leave with the ointments half whipped-up. They appeared irresponsibly close to their house, and a shell-shocked cat darted off. His eyes glinted with an unknown fierceness when they finally arrived at their house. Their wards were up in seconds, and he gripped her tight, demandingly pressing his erection on her thighs, growling, "Ginevra, love. Don't deny me now."

A/N:

Honeyduke's best chocolates to my fabulous betas, SopranolnShadow and MagicAlly. They worked hard to make this chapter readable. You have no idea what they saved you from.

Big thanks go to Clairvoyant from TPP who repositioned all of my errant commas. I really should ask Severus for one of his punctuation drills.

The kettle in the Snapes' household is from the 1960s, and it looks that old too. However, I'm rather sure Severus has changed the whistle into something like this one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVcUO87yA6M>